

## PERFORMING IDENTITIES: ACTRESSES AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Through their theatrical performances and other public acts, the most successful actresses at the turn of the last century established a set of commodified images by which they were “known”; theatrical audiences, like the reading audiences for autobiography that Sidonie Smith describes, were prepared “to expect a certain kind of performativity that conforms relatively comfortably to criteria of intelligibility” from actresses, on and off the stage (110). When, for example, Eva Moore’s publishers advertised her memoir, *Exits and Entrances* (1928), as “a light, witty, merry volume of reminiscence by one of the most fascinating and popular actresses the stage has ever known,” the blurb captured precisely both the tone of the book and the signature keynotes of the actress’s career. A different repertoire, composed of different parts, would no doubt have resulted in another sort of book.

While her entry into self-writing thus activates the actress’s public image—comedian or tragedian, New Woman or *femme fatale*—autobiography too invokes its own conventions for performance. The playwright J. M. Barrie exhorted Irene Vanbrugh as she drafted her memoirs, *To Tell My Story* (1948), to take up the writing of her life as if it were a part to play, a role to study: “If you were to act a woman writing memoirs how superbly you could do it—the pen nib getting so sharp at once. Well, concentrate on this chapter as if you were acting it” (qtd. in Vanbrugh 27). Beyond the impact of both her theatrical parts and her popular profile on the ways she represents herself, then, the actress’s experience of preparing a part has a determining effect on the “I” that autobiography brings into textual being. But Barrie’s advice frames the issue still more precisely: the actress’s autobiography not only narrates her career, but also requires her to enact a role given in advance, a role she has not herself “created”—that of “a woman writing memoirs.”

Whatever sorts of roles it may recount, an autobiography or memoir is less an originary act of self-expression than another formally constrained or determined mode of performance. This point in and of itself is not that startling: all representation operates by reference to prior signifying acts, so that even as the generic criteria for the intelligible textual performance of subjectivity alter, new criteria will arise in relation to the old. To take up a rhetorical position as “a woman writing memoirs” in 1948, however, also puts the writer in a very different relationship to the life as it was lived—that is, to the “woman” of 1888 or 1898 that the memoir purportedly takes as its subject. And when we consider as well that the 1880s and 1890s witnessed a tremendous flux in arguments about what constituted “woman,” with the late Victorian theatre serving as a primary cultural site for debating the parameters of the category, we can begin to investigate how the changing construction of womanhood might alter the very terms by which “a woman writing memoirs” would come to represent late Victorian femininity fifty or more years later.

The acting career of someone as innovative as Elizabeth Robins—who “spanned the paradigm shift from eighties ingenue to Ibsen heroine” and whose “mutability and power to metamorphose” were the hallmark of her style—provides an important site in this respect (Marshall 140, 141). Along with others like Janet Achurch and Marion Lea, Robins is credited by theatre historians with helping to initiate the new dramatic vocabulary for womanhood by figuring the performative conventions of the unconventional woman. I will consider aspects of Robins’s self-representations in some detail before I conclude. First, however, I want to look to one effect of Robins’s theatrical work, as experienced and reconstructed by Vanbrugh, who paid comic homage to the new actresses in the very first part she ever “created” on stage. In 1891, Vanbrugh successfully parodied “the timid, shrinking manner” of Lea’s Thea and Robins’s “cynical defiant” Hedda in the premiere of Barrie’s burlesque *Ibsen’s Ghost*, which was produced just a few short weeks after the Lea-Robins Joint Management opened its sensational *Hedda Gabler* (Barrie 70, 69). The new parts and performance styles—and along with them, the paradigm for New Womanhood that Ibsenism helped to promote—thus readily and rapidly achieved a certain currency, became reiterable, even in parody, as part of a public conversation about femininity. In Vanbrugh’s discussion of her “creation” of these imitative parts, we can see an important convergence of theatrical and autobiographical discourse around the question of performance.

Although Vanbrugh describes her creation of this composite role as different from her previous experiences of playing “characters [that] had all passed through other hands before I had the fingering of them,” which Vanbrugh portrays as something like being “dressed up . . . in old garments”

(24), this first “creation” of hers differs only slightly from the well-worn roles she had not originated during her first three years on the stage. Despite a professed distaste for imitation in acting, she learns from her theatrical training that no part is really her own: “what was expected of me was to reproduce the style of my predecessors, to be so like them . . . that if their parents were in front they could still think they were gazing on their child” (24). And, according to the reviewers, her achievement rested in her ability to imitate Robins playing Hedda and Lea as Thea; the very nature of the play mandated mimicry, not only or even especially of Ibsen’s characters, but of the acting styles of the women who performed them.

Having at first misconceived the nature of the parts she was to play in *Ibsen’s Ghost*, Vanbrugh represents her youthful self imagining her first “original” role in the stereotypical terms of stock drama: “here then was a great emotional part—tears—sorrow—recrimination—the misunderstood wife beating her hands together, sobbing into a cushion as she lay on the sofa” (27). Refining that mistakenly melodramatic conception once rehearsals began, Vanbrugh not only “watched [*Hedda Gabler*] once or twice” to prepare for the dual role, but also talked with Robins “to see if I could catch something more of her personality in this way” (23). Performing Robins performing Hedda, but in a comic context, Vanbrugh’s first created part, like her role as “a woman writing memoirs,” depends both on recognizing the conventions of representation—even as they differ from Ibsen to Barrie—and on adapting or reproducing them as the part requires, taking Robins as her model.<sup>1</sup>

More than most, Vanbrugh’s memoir self-consciously plays on how the genius of imitation, rather than originality, presides over both the “creation” of a role and the writing of a memoir. She asks archly, for instance, “am I writing [this book], or am I only playing the part of a writer?” and engages in a good deal of reflection on the “double life” the actress supposedly leads, a rhetorical device recommended by both her literary advisors, Barrie as well as George Bernard Shaw (102).<sup>2</sup> In her theatrical and autobiographical performances, then, Vanbrugh demonstrates a thorough awareness of convention, conforming to the dominant narrative Sandra Richards assigns to theatrical memoirs of her generation, in which actresses “present their lives . . . as a series of necessary stages they had to pass on their journey to full professional status” (164). *To Tell My Story* discusses the famous people Vanbrugh has known, advises potential actors of pitfalls to avoid and practices to emulate, and retells anecdotes that illustrate the vagaries of theatrical fame and fortune. In this light, Vanbrugh performs the role of “a woman writing memoirs” with self-conscious regard for the typical parameters of her part, working within an established vocabulary for the actress autobiography. To put it differently, Vanbrugh’s textual “I” achieves subject status in a generic framework

that, in Sidonie Smith's terms, mandates "the inclusion of certain identity contents and the exclusion of others; the incorporation of certain narrative itineraries and intentionalities, the silencing of others; the adoption of certain autobiographical voices, the muting of others" (110).

Appropriating Judith Butler's notion of performativity for theorizing autobiography, as Smith does, makes particular sense if we consider the entry into genre as in some important respects analogous to (but not identical with) theatrical impersonation: not as the "creation" of an "original" part, but as the imitation or mimicry of other autobiographers or actors, who have also played the roles that one now performs and that Vanbrugh's text describes and enacts. Using a theatrical metaphor to describe the assumption of gender, Butler argues that "actors are always already on the stage, within the terms of the performance" ("Performative Acts" 277): to play convincingly the part of "a woman writing memoirs" entails, at the very least, knowledge of the terms one reproduces, which in my view potentially implies—perhaps especially for a professional actress—an awareness of one's performance as performance. By invoking that awareness, I do not mean to fall back into the humanist fiction that a stable or coherent self underlies the parts one plays, that roles are something a subject simply chooses or rejects at will. If we think in terms of Butler's argument in *Bodies That Matter* that performative acts entail "productive constraint" (x), we might say instead that while the conventions on which both theatrical and autobiographical acts depend establish the scope and limits for self-representation, the performance of the conventions themselves can have a determining effect on the subjects who enact and are enacted by them.

One strategy of reading, then, might be to regard theatrical performances as in some sense constitutive of the subjectivities of those who portray them. Theories of identity-as-performance can help us to recognize, for example, that feminist consciousness is something made—or performed—both in and out of the theatre, and so to conceive a more fluid relationship between theatre and politics, rather than assign a wholly determining power to one or the other. For example, in *Ibsen and the Actress* (1928), in which she describes her experiences with Ibsen theatre, Robins asserts that "the general bearing of Hedda's story . . . so little concerned" her and Marion Lea "when we were producing Ibsen that we never so much as spoke about it": "if we had been thinking politically, concerning ourselves about the emancipation of women, we would not have given the Ibsen plays the particular kind of whole-hearted, enchanted devotion we did give" (31). Taking her at her word, we might say that for Robins, in this instance, "thinking politically" arises not from a feminist consciousness constituted in advance ("offstage," or in "real life"), but from theatrical performance itself, from the experience of playing Ibsen parts.

What insights into the politics of “womanhood” might careful reading of those parts by Robins and other actresses reveal? One critical claim is that Ibsen actresses staged his work in such a way as to put bourgeois femininity on display as performance rather than essence. Gay Gibson Cima argues that “for late nineteenth-century audiences accustomed to the conventional codes of melodrama, [Ibsen’s] realism made those codes seem strange, for in realism the female actor exceeded the womanly characters or styles of performance behavior the audience had grown to expect” (12–13). Aligning melodrama in part with what Butler calls the “mundane reproduction of gendered identity . . . in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence” (“Performative Acts” 275), Cima proposes that such Ibsen actresses as Robins recognized and enacted the melodramatic mode as part of the performative repertoire of the characters they played, since “even in Ibsen’s most realistic plays his characters sometimes behave as if they were characters in a melodrama” (44). Actresses in the theatre of realism thus stage the operation of the melodramatic as a constitutive feature of “gendered existence” for their audiences: congruent with Luce Irigaray’s description of mimicry in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, it is the performer’s own self-consciousness about this normative construction of femininity—educated, perhaps, by the very staging of femininity as performance—that enables her strategically to foreground and to ironize the melodramatic by showing that the character she plays is herself playing a role. In this way, femininity is represented as always already, in some sense, theatrical.

While this reading of the work of the Ibsen actress has been contested by other feminist critics, most notably Elin Diamond, Cima’s analysis helps to explicate the impact that the theatrical performance of “an unconventional part” may have on an actress because of its ability to call into question what is taken as the “real”-ness of “real life.”<sup>3</sup> In her diary of the years 1888–1890, which provided her with an important contemporary textual source for her first theatrical memoir, *Both Sides of the Curtain* (1940), the young Robins explores the effects of ladylike convention on theatrical performance by pointing to “the difficulty of the modern woman of education doing powerful emotional or tragic acting. *That* requires capacity for *abandon*—of letting yourself go, which comes to be impossible to the well-bred” (262). Being schooled in modesty, self-control, or repression to perform a lady’s part off-stage, Robins implies, may disable the “well-bred” actress by stunting her very “capacity for *abandon*.” But repudiating one’s internalized performance of ladylike behaviors, so much a facet of how gender has operated historically to constitute intelligible female subjects, is not as simple as casting aside one part in favor of another. Those everyday performances, to return to Butler, that help to compose one’s identity as a lady also exclude or abject that

which does not fit, those “othered” non-identities one cannot be without ceasing to be, or to be intelligible as, a lady (*Bodies* 2–4).

We can see something of this at work in Robins’s narration of her own first encounters with Ibsen, whose plays arrived on the London stage around the same moment as she did, which provides a useful if conflicted site for analyzing how what Robins sometimes calls the “real self” is constructed through performative conventions of respectable femininity such as the one cited above. A chapter of *Both Sides of the Curtain* entitled “First Rift in the Lute—Ibsen” reports Robins’s “enthusiasm for [A] *Doll’s House*” (195), in which she saw Janet Achurch perform in June 1889, an event she also recollects in some detail in *Ibsen and the Actress*. In expressing her early enthusiasm for the production to Genevieve Ward—among the well-established women of the theatre who most interested herself on Robins’s behalf—she was dealt a sharp check by this eminent actress of the old school. “If I hadn’t read *Ghosts*, so much the better,” according to Ward; “*Ghosts* wasn’t a play, it was ‘a piece of moral vivisection,’” “fit only for an audience of doctors and prostitutes”—“a word,” Robins adds, “that took Miss Ward’s courage to pronounce in those days” (*Both Sides* 198). Ignoring the warning to steer clear, Robins did read *Ghosts* for herself, and “received full in my face the piercing blast . . . shrank, and shuddered. I found it terrible and revolting” and “turned from [it] with horror” (*Both Sides* 208, 209). While *The Pillars of Society*, one of “his least unconventional plays,” in which she played her first Ibsen part in 1889, “stirred and pleased” the young actress (*Both Sides* 209), *Ghosts* only repelled, presumably for something of the same reasons that it horrified Ward: it produced and conveyed a knowledge suited only to medical professionals or sex workers, a knowledge that the New Women of the 1880s and 90s were increasingly to appropriate and promulgate for their own purposes. Once more perplexed when offered the leading part of Mrs. Alving in the same play the following summer, Robins consults her friends: “as strongly as a year ago,” Ward “disapproves of having anything to do with *Ghosts*,” while the actor-manager George Alexander says “Don’t touch him.” As for Robins, “the only thing I was clear about was that when I read the play last Summer I had been awed and revolted” (*Both Sides* 258).

Given the reputation Robins later achieved for both her Ibsen productions and her feminist activism, her hesitation, even “horror,” seems to require explanation. Subsequently trying to account for her reluctance and disgust, Robins takes herself to task:

With all my perorating on the theme, *No Great parts for Women*—when the great chance came my way I could not recognize it. *Ghosts* gives me the outstanding, if not sole instance, in my personal experience of the power of evil inuendo [sic] to corrupt the imagination. Whether the horror excited in other minds lead [sic] me

to find in the play a horror greater than Ibsen gave warrant for, on second reading I found the play 'too dreadful for words—far worse than memory painted. I could never play *Ghosts*'—but the pretty confection in blank verse, that Dr. Dabbs had written for me—yes I will p[lay] Nina in *Punchinello*. (*Both Sides* 258)

Further negotiations later that summer notwithstanding, Robins never did play this particular Ibsen part. What the episode best reveals, however, is just how deeply ingrained were the conventions of ladyhood. *Ghosts* was indeed strong stuff—“dangerous ground,” as William Archer said (*Both Sides* 263)—but Robins’s adherence to respectability and convention, as much as any failure to recognize “the great chance,” surely shaped her ambivalence about the play. Wouldn’t acting Mrs. Alving lead to being tarred with the brush of syphilis and incest, the play’s controversial, overtly sexual subject matter? If an actress could become so identified in the minds of others with the roles she played, couldn’t such a part have a dampening effect on her future career? Choosing a “costume play” like *Punchinello* over the risky waters of *Ghosts* must have seemed the safe if tame option (*Both Sides* 258). But it is a choice easier to understand once we contextualize Robins’s “power to choose” within the relatively narrow parameters of what constituted the performative dimension of feminine appropriateness. Whatever the difficulties she would have faced in mounting *Ghosts*—and there would have been many—part of what stood in her way was her own visceral resistance to taking it on, a resistance we may attribute to the “real self,” who shares the conventional horror at the play’s unseemliness and who balks at performing a knowledge no real lady can or should possess.

The actress’s performances on either side of the curtain may thus be understood as mutually determining: if being “well-bred” impedes the representation of passionate abandon, then representing passionate abandon may also imperil one’s reputation for being “well-bred.” Considering through the theoretical lens of performance this historical and discursive construction of womanhood, especially as negotiated at the level of the individual subject, we can see that theatrical performances of an avant-garde kind invited critical reflection on the gendered practices of everyday life, just as those ordinary performances of gender conventions conditioned one’s responses to the avant-garde. In this respect, the actress of the New Drama experienced and performed, in highly concrete ways, the contradictory imperatives attendant on the very concept of “the New Woman.” Moreover, reading for those contradictions within “the new” may lead us to see the postmodern discourse on identity-as-performance not as a decided break with a confident “Victorian” belief in the authenticity of natural gender roles, but as a logical extension of the gender trouble and sexual anarchy that pervaded late Victorian culture. Among other restagings of gender as act rather than essence, the complex

cultural work undertaken by women of the theatre, instantiated in Robins's mixed fascination and disgust at the prospect of playing *Ghosts*, invites us to deconstruct what may, after all, be a false dichotomy between the stable selves of a stable past and the more fluid or fractured identities of our own uncertain times. By turning to autobiography, which enacts the performative gestures that constitute a "real self" for writers and readers alike, we can better understand the multifarious effects that arise when dominant and emergent discourses about femininity are put into dialogue with one another, as well as observe the continuity between them. So, too, can we better gauge the extent to which actresses participated in remaking the norms of performativity for the New Women of the new century through their theatrical and textual self-representations.

#### NOTES

1. For a discussion of a much earlier instance of how a conventional, offstage role shapes an actress's self-representation, see Bradham; for the broader eighteenth-century context for actress autobiography, see Nussbaum.
2. For a more extended discussion of this aspect of Vanbrugh's text, see pages 145–49 of my *Representing Femininity: Middle-Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women's Autobiographies*.
3. For a sharply contrasting view, see Diamond.

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