

## WHICH IS THE MOST AUTHORITATIVE EARLY TRANSLATION OF WILDE'S *SALOMÉ*?

Oscar Wilde originally wrote and published his now famous and highly regarded play *Salomé* in French (Paris and London, 1893). A very inaccurate translation of it into English, by Wilde's beloved 'Bosie', Lord Alfred Douglas, led to much wrangling between Douglas and Wilde, who was profoundly disappointed with Douglas's work. However, it was, with some alterations, duly published nonetheless (London and Boston, 1894), with a dedication by Wilde 'To my Friend Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas the Translator of My Play'.

So far, it has been assumed that this translation, which appeared while Wilde was still alive (he died in 1900), must despite all its faults be regarded as in essence 'the' English translation – the one to which scholars and others must inevitably turn if they want to know the play in an English version of which Wilde at least partly approved. What has not been realised, however, is that Robert Ross, Wilde's literary executor, ensured that, a few years later, a more accurate translation of *Salomé* was published in a small volume called *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde* (London and New York, 1906), and one much better again under the title *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde with Sixteen Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* (London and New York, 1912). The 1912 text provides by far the best translation of Wilde's French, and was published under the authority of Wilde's literary executor and life-long friend, who had been on the scene when Wilde and Douglas quarrelled about the *Salomé* translation. For these reasons, it should be regarded as the most authoritative translation of *Salomé* available. An important feature, moreover, is that the 1912 text is a very drastic, comprehensive revision of Douglas's 1894 translation. Thus, while it introduces a vast amount of newly translated material correcting faults in Douglas's rendering, it also preserves phrases and words which perhaps Wilde endorsed when the original translation went to press.

Robert Ross was most likely himself the person to revise Douglas's translation, first for the 1906 publication, and then, much more thoroughly, for that of 1912. He was thoroughly acquainted with Wilde and the troubles surrounding the publication of Douglas's 1894 text, was an ardent admirer of *Salomé*, knew French well enough, and as Wilde's literary executor no doubt believed that he was in the best position to publish a translation which Wilde would have sanctioned. Yet Ross never declared himself to be the new translator. In 1906, and again in 1912, he simply omitted the dedication to Douglas as the translator of Wilde's play: no new translator was mentioned, perhaps because he feared Douglas's irascible temperament and litigious bent, and no doubt also because there was, in fact, no other translator than Ross himself.

We can gain some idea of Ross's attitude to these matters, and of the rela-

tionship between the French text and the translations of 1894, 1906, and 1912, by turning to an intriguing passage which Ross wrote for Frank Harris, the notorious author of *My Life and Loves*, who also produced, and self-published, a controversial biography of Wilde under the title of *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (New York, 1916). Early editions of this book – all those preceding the version known simply as *Oscar Wilde*, published in London in 1938 – contain various bits and pieces lumped together as a final 'Appendix'. Close to the very end of this 'Appendix' is an item entitled 'Criticisms by Robert Ross'. Ross's contribution consists of a series of notes referring to passages in Harris's book and offering comments on them. One of these notes, concerning *Salomé*, is worth quoting in full:

Do you [i.e. Frank Harris] happen to have compared Douglas' translation of *Salome* in Lane's First edition (with Beardsley's illustrations) with Lane's Second edition (with Beardsley's illustrations) or Lane's little editions (without Beardsley's illustrations)? Or have you ever compared the aforesaid First edition with the original? Douglas' translation omits a great deal of the text and is actually wrong as a rendering of the text in many cases. I have had this out with a good many people. I believe Douglas is to this day sublimely unconscious that his text, of which there were never more than 500 copies issued in England, has been entirely scrapped; his name at my instance was removed from the current issues for the very good reason that the new translation is not his. But this is merely an observation not a correction.<sup>1</sup>

It is a pleasure to acknowledge my gratitude to Angela Kingston (at present completing a PhD on Wilde at the University of Adelaide) for drawing my attention to this passage. She had come across an incomplete quotation of it in Francis Winwar's *Oscar Wilde and the Yellow 'Nineties* (New York and London, 1940, p. 213), and she realised that what Ross says in the passage is of direct relevance to what I have argued in two previous articles: (1) 'A History of Confusion: The Two Earliest English Translations of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*', *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin*, 26, 3 & 4 (2002), pp. 131-72, and (2) 'Confusion and Misattribution Concerning the Two Earliest English Translations of *Salomé*', *The Oscholars*, Vol. III, No. 2 (2003, access via <<http://homepages.gold.ac.uk/oscholars/>>).

The basic contentions of these two articles are as follows. In my view, which I support extensively with evidence, scholars and publishers have been mistaken in thinking that there is only *one* early translation of Wilde's play, namely that prepared by Douglas published in 1894. In addition to that translation, there are two others of higher authority, the first published in 1906, and another in 1912, each of them a significant revision of the 1894 text, clearly designed to eradicate Douglas's errors and to produce a translation much closer to Wilde's French. The 1912 text takes this process a good deal further than that of 1906. The first of the two articles mentioned above includes a lengthy Appendix (pp. 160-72) which aims to list all the verbal differences between the 1894 text and

<sup>1</sup> I quote from Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (New York, 1918), p. 608, which readers may find easier to locate than the first edition of 1916. Both were self-published. However, the Garden City edition published in New York in 1930 is more readily found than the 1916 and 1918 versions: it prints the passage on pp. 460-61.

the revised 1906 version. A similar list for the 1912 text remains to be compiled, but as some startling examples below will indicate, there is no doubt that it will establish the superiority of that text over its two predecessors. The literary and linguistic nature of the 1906 text is analysed in great detail in my paper for the *BSANZ Bulletin*, showing just how inadequate and perverse Douglas's 1894 version is, and how much better Ross's, when each of these two translations is compared with Wilde's French.

The great significance of the comment Ross presented to Harris is that it lends considerable support to what I argued in my two previous papers. In turn, my work in preparing those papers enables me to elucidate Ross's statement, the significance of which has so far apparently gone largely unnoticed. I shall now explicate his paragraph in some detail.

What Ross describes as 'Douglas' translation of *Salome* in Lane's First edition (with Beardsley's illustrations)' is, of course, the 1894 publication of Douglas's translation which Wilde was loath to accept, although the dedication to Douglas diplomatically acknowledges him as 'the translator of my play'. In Stuart Mason's *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London, 1914), which is more informative on early editions of *Salomé* than any subsequent book, this volume is listed as No 350. Its full title is *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley*. It was published in London by Elkin Mathews and John Lane, and in Boston by Copeland and Day. Corroborating Ross's claim towards the end of his passage, this 1894 publication contains the information that 'Of this edition 500 copies have been printed for England'. (However, Ross should also have mentioned a special 'luxury' edition, Mason No 351, published in the same year, which explains: 'Of this edition 100 copies have been printed for England'.)

What Ross designates as 'Lane's Second edition (with Beardsley's illustrations)' is not actually the edition mentioned above which appeared in 1906, but one which – though it contains the identical text – was not published until 1907, viz. Mason No 355, *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde with Sixteen Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head; New York: John Lane Company). I would conjecture that Ross calls this book, not 1906, the second edition because it, in contrast to 1906, includes a preface by him, 'A Note on "Salome"' (pp. xiii-xviii), introducing the play to potential readers.

The un-introduced 1906 publication (*Salome: A Tragedy in One Act Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde*, also published by Lane in London and New York; Mason No 352) is an altogether more humble affair. It fits Ross's description of 'Lane's little editions': while the 1907 book measures 8.1/2 by 6.3/4 inches, 1906 is only 6.1/4 by 5 inches. In addition, it is, to use Ross's expression, 'without Beardsley's illustrations'. This same little book was re-issued in 1908 and again in 1911.

Neither 1906 nor 1907 contains the 1894 dedication to Douglas as translator, nor any other mention of who the translator might be. However, the text of the translation is absolutely identical in each, and textually, therefore, it is actually the 1906 publication which Ross should have called the 'Second edition'.

In the first sentence of the passage Ross wrote for Harris he in effect wonders whether Harris happens to have compared the 1894 text with that of either 1907 or 1906 (or a reprint of 1906). Had he done so, Ross clearly implies, he would have found the 1894 text very different from that of 1906-7. Indeed, we may at present add, if *anyone* had proceeded, during the last eight decades or so, to take up Ross's invitation, we would not still be talking about 'the' English-language version, as e.g. Ian Small does in *Oscar Wilde: Recent Research* (Greensborough, 2001), p. 116. And let us here note, too, that Mason in 1914 made plain that a later revision existed, as he writes about the 1907 publication: 'The English translation is founded on the text of the edition of 1894 with revisions' (p. 384). I cannot fathom why both Ross's statement and Mason's have gone unheeded, but that is not a question I am seeking to answer at this juncture.

Ross wonders in his second sentence whether Harris has ever compared Douglas's translation with Wilde's French original, adding that Douglas's rendering is very defective, which is indeed palpably obvious to anyone who checks it against what Wilde wrote. It is true to say that very few people have actually bothered to do so; yet the clear implication of Ross's comments is that any reader who compared *both* the 1906 translation *and* the 1894 translation *and* Wilde's French would have realised that the 1906 translation offered a significant improvement over that of 1894, so much so that at the end of his passage Ross does not really exaggerate when he calls the 1906 version 'the new translation', and has a point in saying that he had Douglas's name removed from post-1894 editions because 'the new translation is not his'.

When Ross talks about Douglas's text as 'entirely scrapped' he means that, at the time he wrote, Douglas's text was no longer in print, and, of course, that he had supplanted it with the 1906 text, 'the new translation', of which he did not regard Douglas as in any sense the creator (though he should have added that 'the new translation' was a revision of Douglas's work, and certainly not wholly new).

Where does all this leave the 1912 text, which I have said should be regarded as the most authoritative translation of *Salomé* available?

Within Ross's passage there is, curiously, no reference to the 1912 version, which tends to suggest that Ross wrote the passage before he published that. I would surmise – but this is pure conjecture – that Harris provided Ross with an opportunity to comment on his biography of Wilde soon after he completed a substantially complete draft of it in 1910, as Philippa Pullar explains in her *Frank Harris: a Biography* (New York, 1976), pp. 267ff. In any case, if Ross had included the 1912 publication in his paragraph, he would almost certainly have described it as something different from the books he does mention. It presents, after all, a significantly different text of the play, and, as tellingly, would probably in Ross's eyes have been a separate, *third* edition (to use his language), for which he wrote a fairly long introductory 'Note on "Salomé"'. This new book, Mason No 527, published in 1912, should not be confused, as it often is by booksellers, with Mason No 356, which is a 1912 reprint of the 1907 publication discussed above (Mason No 355, which Ross described as the *second* edition). The publication details for No 527, as given on the title page, are the

same as those for No 356 (published in the same year), viz. *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde with Sixteen Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley*; London: John Lane, The Bodley Head; New York: John Lane Company; MCMXII. Physically, however, No 527 is different (smaller, for one thing) and the content is not at all the same. As Mason puts it: 'The "Note on *Salomé*" by Robert Ross (pp. vii-xxiii) contains a good deal of new matter. The text of the play is founded on Lord Alfred Douglas's translation, first published in 1894, but shows considerable revision throughout.'

An oddity about the new 1912 text is that, in the absence of any comment about it by Ross, we can only guess what he might have said about it in the Harris passage if he had included it. Even so, given what he does say, and given the fact that textually this comprehensively revised 1912 text takes the process of improvement commenced in 1906 much further again, Ross's purpose in presenting the new publication is perfectly intelligible. The 'new translation' (that of 1906) to which he referred in the passage written for Harris is now, in 1912, to be replaced by one yet better and newer. In his new 'Note on "Salomé"' he now says: 'In 1894 Messrs Mathews and Lane issued an English translation of *Salomé* by Lord Alfred Douglas' (p. xvi). The expression 'an English translation' has a curiously distant ring to it, and makes Douglas's version seem almost like one out of several translations now in existence, which is no doubt how Ross saw the different versions published in 1894, 1906 and 1912. He appears to hint, too, that Douglas's translation, done years ago, has now been superseded.

And it is certainly true that the 1912 text offered a far better translation even than the one Ross had published in 1906. To prove this point I should now like to offer some significant examples. Often, Ross in 1912 rightly *excises* spurious 1906 material which he had for the most part inherited from Douglas but for which there is no match in Wilde's French. Examples are: 'the perfumed garden of spices of the Queen of Arabia' (correctly omitted in 1912, p. 25; wrongly included in 1906, p. 21); 'she shows herself naked in the sky' (*om.* 1912, p. 33; *incl.* 1906, p. 27); 'He is a holy man' (*om.* 1912, p. 41; *incl.* 1906, p. 34). Equally rightly, Ross in 1912 *adds* translated material which neither Douglas in 1894 nor he in 1906 had as yet offered, for example: 'Take it away!' (*incl.* 1912, p. 36; *om.* 1906, p. 30); 'You will be reasonable, will you not?' (*incl.* 1912, p. 69; *om.* 1906, p. 56); 'I am sure that he comes from God' (*incl.* 1912, p. 73; *om.* 1906, p. 59). In each of these six instances, as is the case generally, Ross's alterations match Wilde's French and thus significantly improve upon both 1894 and 1906. All the evidence shows that 1912 is by far the most accurate translation produced by a person very close to Wilde and trusted by him. This inspires confidence if we consider the very real possibility that both the material preserved from 1894 and the departures from it may embody Wilde's wishes.

Given everything we can deduce from both the passage Ross wrote for Harris and a thorough analysis of the 1894, 1906 and 1912 texts, we can now clearly see what, textually, is required. Obviously the best version of Wilde's text is that which he himself wrote in French. Even so, the fact that he allowed Douglas to translate *Salomé* shows that he wanted the public to have access to an

English version as well, and for most people in the English-speaking world such a translation, provided it does justice to Wilde, will probably always be the main desideratum, or even the only text they can read. The 1894 translation is an interesting historical curiosity: a text showing the very inaccurate rendering by Douglas which we know Wilde did not like but reluctantly agreed to see published. It cannot and should not be presented to readers as an authoritative or adequate translation. The 1906 text is by comparison a significant improvement: a version which Robert Ross, as Wilde's literary executor, aimed to make a much closer translation of Wilde's French. However, the only text which is at once a very good translation and strongly and directly associated with Wilde is that which Ross published in 1912, designated by Mason as No 527. This text has not been re-published since 1912 and at present languishes in complete oblivion. Instead, it should from here on be treated as the most authoritative one, and as such be used in any new edition of *Salomé* in English.

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