

Will the real *Salome* please stand up

Some clever literary detective work by Flinders University's Professor Joost Daalder has established that, contrary to belief, there are not one, but two, quite different English-language versions of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* currently in print and widely used. Surprisingly the two translations are the work of different people.

Salome, Wilde's best-known play after *The Importance of Being Earnest*, was inspired by the Biblical story of the death of John the Baptist. Originally written by Wilde in French, the play was first published in 1893.

Although they had never been previously observed by Wilde scholars or the play's publishers, Professor Daalder became aware of many significant differences in the text of modern editions of the play. His curiosity aroused, he delved into the historical editions to find that, for much of the 20th century, editions of *Salome* have been based on two separate versions, one of which was published in 1894 and the other in 1906.

The translation of *Salome* from its original French has always been attrib-

uted to Lord Alfred Douglas, whose name appears as the translator in the dedication by Wilde in the 1894 edition. But in the later version no mention is made of him, and Professor Daalder has concluded that the heavily revised 1906 text is actually the work of Wilde's literary executor, Robert Ross.

Supporting evidence for the Ross attribution has come from Adelaide University PhD student Angela Kingston, who has recently found a reference in a contemporary letter by Ross to the removal of Douglas's name from the 'new translation'.

Ross did not attach his own or any other name to the 1906 edition, most likely in the hope that the changes would escape the attention of Douglas, who was still alive and highly litigious. Ross himself is the obvious candidate as either translator or supervisor of the later edition.

Professor Daalder believes that, in overhauling Douglas's text, Ross would have been honouring Wilde's wishes.

'...Wilde was obviously unhappy with the translation from the start, and later made a disgruntled reference to Douglas's

'schoolboy French'. ' he said.

Professor Daalder said the failure of both Wilde scholars and literary publishers to notice the disparities was surprising, particularly because obvious differences in the texts are visible from the very first stage direction.

'But once the two editions were presumed to be one and the same, the mistaken attribution of the 1906 translation to Douglas was a natural enough development,' he said.

His research has yielded an unexpected bonus — the existence of a third 1912 version of the play, again thought to be the work of Ross, but not reprinted since then. Professor Daalder believes that this last version promises to be the most authentic of the three.

'It is clearly the most authoritative text, as it is a far better translation of Wilde's French and in that you can link it firmly with Wilde because it is done by his literary executor...'

Professor Daalder's findings have been published in a recent edition of the *Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand*. ■

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