

BETTER SUNG

Oscar Wilde's one act play, *Salomé*, is better known as an opera by Richard Strauss. The same is true of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the play by Maurice Maeterlinck that became an opera by Claude Debussy. Why should two plays which have inspired not only Strauss and Debussy but many other composers too be so rarely performed? Why are they not celebrated as masterpieces in their own right?

Wilde wrote his play in French during a stay in Paris in 1891. "I have one instrument that I know I can command," he wrote later, "and that is the English language. There was another instrument to which I had listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see whether I could make any beautiful thing out of it." He made the mistake of asking Lord Alfred Douglas to translate it into English instead of translating it himself. Douglas is still credited as the translator, even though he made such a poor job of it that Wilde himself had to improve it before he could allow it to be published. He should have known that the young man wasn't up to it, but love clouded his judgement.

In the play, Herod can't take his eyes off his wife's daughter and later regrets the promise he makes to persuade her to dance for him. It is a play about infatuation and uncannily prefigures everything that was to follow in Wilde's life. By the time it had its first performance, in the city where it had been written five years previously, Wilde was in prison. Performances in England had been banned by the Lord Chamberlain. Nothing to do with the dance of the seven veils, just that it was illegal to depict biblical characters on the stage. There was no public performance in England until 1931. Wilde, had he lived to see it, would have been seventy-seven. Few have been given since.

Salomé can be seen either as a stylistic exercise in the manner of Maurice Maeterlinck, who was then very popular in France, or as the real Oscar Wilde. "A great deal of the curious effect that Maeterlinck produces," he went on to say in the piece quoted above, "comes from the fact that he, a Flamand by grace, writes in an alien language. The same thing is true of Rossetti, who, though he wrote in English, was essentially Latin in temperament." The distinction between a writer and his voice has a peculiar relevance to Wilde, who saw art, not as a representation of life, but as an alternative to it.

Nothing that Wilde ever said or wrote should be taken at face value. Perhaps when he wrote about an instrument to which he had listened all his life and wanted to touch once to see if he could make something beautiful of it, we should understand him to be referring not only to the French language but more widely to himself, his life and his art. What he says about himself, Maeterlinck and Rossetti is, to say the least, tenuous with regard to their native languages, but undoubtedly true with regard to their sense of alienation from the societies in which they lived.

He said it in another way when he wrote, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, that 'each man kills the thing he loves'. It explains perhaps why he and many other writers of that era wrote stories for children. The world of childhood, for Wilde, Barrie, Milne, Carroll and others, was a world free of the constraints that the grown-up world imposed on them. That is not to say that what they wrote for children can be decoded to reveal hidden messages about themselves and their psychology, just that writing for children took them into a world of pure imagination, unhindered by conventional views of reality. Whatever it is to be 'a Flamand by grace', to be 'essentially Latin in temperament' is to be a law unto yourself, to be ruled only

by your passions and not to give a damn. To kill the thing you love is a crime of passion, like the killing of Jokanaan in *Salomé*.

There is too much of Maeterlinck in *Salomé* for there to be much doubt that Wilde had seen at least one of his plays while he was in Paris and read others. The cumulative effect of the repetition of words, phrases and whole sentences is a feature of all the plays by Maeterlinck that Wilde might then have seen and of his own *Salomé*, in which the phrases most often repeated, with meanings and implications that change subtly from person to person, refer to the beauty of Salomé and/or the moon, looking at Salomé and/or the moon and the feeling that something terrible is about to happen.

The first lines of the play are spoken by two young men on a balcony in Herod's palace, one talking about the moon, the other about Salomé.

"How beautiful is the Princess Salomé tonight!"

"Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things."

"She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. You would fancy she was dancing."

"She is like a woman who is dead. She moves very slowly."

This works better in French, which has the same pronoun, 'elle', for both the moon and the princess. In English, it would be more natural to refer to the moon as 'it'. The identification of Salomé with the moon is achieved effortlessly in French, but depends on phrasing that sounds artificial in English. The same thing happens when 'elle est' is translated as 'she is' instead of, as would be more natural, 'she's'. Wilde's French is very plain, almost conversational in tone, but in English it becomes more formal. There is more variety of tone and register in the original than in the translation, which has a self-conscious air of being deliberately poetic even in the most mundane exchanges. Two soldiers watch Herod from the balcony. Their exchange in French translates literally as:

"He's looking at someone."

"Who's he looking at?"

"I don't know."

In Lord Alfred Douglas's translation, this becomes:

"He is looking at someone."

"At whom is he looking?"

"I cannot tell."

English readers suffer in the same way from Maeterlinck's first translators, who for most of the plays are still all we have. The unfortunate consequence is that neither *Salomé* nor *Pelléas et Mélisande* are appreciated or understood as they should be, Oscar Wilde is known only for his comedies, Maurice Maeterlinck is hardly known at all and two of their best plays, in the absence of new translations, are better sung.