**Hans Wallrath - *William Sampson’s Vow Breaker* (1914)**

My edition of Sampson’s play is the first and only modern edition of *The Vow Breaker*. The only other critical writing on the play is a dissertation written in 1913 by Hans Joseph Wallrath for which he was awarded a doctorate in the Philosophical Faculty of the Westfalian Wilhelms-Universität, Münster.[[1]](#footnote-1) Wallrath was born in 1890 in Oberlahstein to a hotel owner and his wife and, after leaving school in 1909, studied modern languages for the next four years at the Universities of Münster, Munich and Berlin. He acknowledges his debt to Professor Dr Keller of Münster who suggested that he write a dissertation on Sampson’s play.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The introduction and notes to Wallrath’s edition of *The Vow Breaker* have been translated for me by Dr John Bowden of Sheffield Hallam University, and it is this translation to which reference will be made.[[3]](#footnote-3) Wallrath himself refers to a dissertation written by Hans Wolfgang Singer, ‘Das bürgerliche Trauerspiel in England (biz zum Jahre 1800)’, Leipzig 1891 [trans: The bourgeois tragedy in England (up to 1800)], and considers that ‘Singer discusses the main plot in great detail but hardly mentions the very important secondary plot’. Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace and examine a copy of this dissertation.

Wallrath writes a comprehensive and well-researched introduction to Sampson’s play, but has not modernised his copy text which is that from the Dyce Collection held in the Victoria & Albert Museum. He does suggest scene divisions, however, and changes some entries and exits. He also incorporates some staging directions - most of these suggesting that the scene be Clifton or outside Leith, and sometimes he gives specific details, for example, ‘in Old Bateman’s/Boote’s house’. Wallrath also footnotes some of the differences between his text and two now in the British Library: presumably this is why he writes that his new edition is based on these London editions (p. 2), although it is clear from the spellings of his text that he has actually used the Dyce copy. There are so many textual differences between the Dyce and the British Library texts that it is easy to identify Wallrath’s copy text, even taking into account typographical errors in his dissertation that are not seen in any of the texts that have now been examined.

Wallrath describes his work as a new edition of Sampson’s play but although he has inserted some footnotes to the original text, he has actually written an informative criticism, covering many themes. My own introduction to *The Vow Breaker* supplements that of Wallrath: there is inevitably some overlapping of information, but this has been kept to a minimum.When possible, I have confirmed Wallrath’s findings and, where repetition is considered useful for clarity of the text, this is usually only recorded in the Commentary

I have been able to confirm that the dates suggested by Wallrath are correct as to when Sampson is known to have been alive, although my research would lead me to question his assumption that Sampson was probably a member of the South Leverton family of the same name (p. 7). There are parish records of Sampsons in different areas of Nottinghamshire, also in Lincolnshire, but no evidence of an appropriate William Sampson, poet and playwright, known to have been employed in Derbyshire from the early 1620s. I would also suggest that Wallrath may be incorrect in referring to Sampson’s ‘daughter Hanna’ (p. 8), as Henry Willoughby’s will appears to refer to only one Hannah, and she is described as ‘Hannah Sampson, the wife of my servant William Sampson’.

Wallrath refers to Sampson and the influence of Shakespeare on his work by suggesting that Sampson had learned to admire this ‘admirable dramatick poet’ and had read his works so assiduously that many of Shakespeare’s words found their way into his own drama (p. 35). It may be assumed that Sampson moved in literary circles: he had worked collaboratively with Gervase Markham, his employer was a patron of the arts, and Phineas Fletcher also lived in the household. Sampson had, no doubt, watched many dramatic performances and remembered many speeches: he may even have acted in the plays himself. We do not know. What we do know is that Sampson was unashamed of poaching the words of others – it is only necessary to take a cursory glance at Holinshed to see this. While not disputing that some of Shakespeare’s words are to be found in *The Vow Breaker* (and, no doubt, in the works of Sampson’s contemporaries), most of the themes used by Shakespeare, and others, are well known and well used and it is unsurprising that Sampson also availed himself of them.

In his criticism of comedy in the play, of which many examples may be found, Wallrath refers specifically to the scene in which Artemidorus Daldianus, interpreter of dreams, is mentioned throughout the childbed scene by the women caring for Anne, describing it as ‘almost unbearably fatuous and corny’ (p. 28).[[4]](#footnote-4) Wallrath suggests that as the quotations cannot be proved as being from Artemidorus, it is possible that Sampson introduced them just to provide humour ‘in the midst of Mother Prattle’s twaddle, as the genuine extracts are not humorous in the original’ (p. 32). Wallrath considers that Sampson has failed in his intent, ‘this comic scene in the play is thus unsatisfying to us’ (p. 32). Although Sampson does not use Artemidorus’s explanations, it is clear that he had some recollection of them and, for the purpose of this scene, chose to give his own interpretations. Perhaps a modern audience would accept at face value the comedy that may be found in this and the other comedic scenes in the play.

Wallrath concludes his introduction by expressing his views of the play and, although he qualifies his thinking, it is clear that he has a low opinion of Sampson’s literary ability: ‘a mixture of scenes . . . which no longer appeals to us today’; ‘the characters do not develop any more than the plots do. They are not human beings, but mere stereotypes’; Clifton ‘is the only . . . three dimensional [character]’; ‘the play is a pathetic verse drama’; [the speeches] ‘become really monotonous in the longer passages’; ‘prose is used in all the places other than the pathetic ones’ (p. 55).

Although Wallrath could be considered persuasive in his arguments and it may be difficult to disagree with his reasoning, I would argue that he is mistaken in his views that the play would not be appealing. For today’s audience this play could be most entertaining: it has many emotions and situations in one short drama – love, hate, forgiveness, revenge, birth, death, comedy, tragedy, war and peace. Wallrath does admit that the ‘poor’ verse ‘is easy for the actor to speak . . . and effective on stage’ (p. 57). As the play would not have been written specifically for reading, however, but to provide a printed copy of an already successful production, known to have been received with

‘great applause’, I would suggest that its success on stage is surely more important than being ‘easy to read’.

1. Wallrath, Hans. *William Sampson’s Vow Breaker*. [Löwen [=Louvain] : n.p. ?Materialien zur Kunde des älteren Englischen Dramas, [= Materials for the study of the Old English Drama] 1914. [Page references refer to Wallrath’s dissertation.] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am indebted to Elisabeth Sawatzky of the Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, Münster, for this information. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am indebted to Dr Bowden for undertaking this task, and thank him. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Artimedorus’s *Interpretation of Dreams* is discussed in the Commentary. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)