Farewell, Victoria!
Weintraub, Stanley

Published by ELT Press

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Oscar Wilde and *The Green Carnation*:
Narcissus Exposed

In the pages of the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 2 October 1894 appeared a curious letter to the editor:

Kindly allow me to contradict, in the most emphatic manner, the suggestion, made in your issue of Thursday last, and since then copied into many other newspapers, that I am the author of *The Green Carnation*.

I invented that magnificent flower. But with the middle-class and mediocre book that usurps its strangely beautiful name I have, I need hardly say, nothing whatsoever to do. The flower is a work of art. The book is not.

I remain, sir, your obedient servant.

Oscar Wilde

No one had taken seriously the suggestion that Wilde had written the book. It satirized him just within the laws of libel and was hardly the kind of publicity he needed at the time; but swelled by the megalomania of success Wilde arrogantly called attention to it himself. Privately he was of a different mind. To Ada Leverson, the audacious “Sphinx” of his circle to whom he first attributed *The Green Carnation*, he telegraphed more angrily: “The doubting disciple who has written the false gospel is one who has merely talent unrelieved by any flashes of physical beauty.” Afterwards he confessed to her that there were “many bits” which were “brilliant,” and that “Hichens I did not think capable of anything so clever.”

The press reaction had not taken Wilde by surprise, for once review copies had circulated several weeks before publication, literary London had been speculating about *The Green Carnation*. The book’s target was obvious, even if the jacket art suggested it only at several removes. The three costumed figures echo the male trio in Gillbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado* (1885–1886). Their broad hats are typically Japanese, but imply a floral origin, and at the
feet of the lead figure is a small carnation. Wilde had been parodied by Gilbert in an earlier comic opera with Sullivan, *Patience*, to which a reference would have been too direct. Yet to aficionados of comic opera, some lines sung in *The Mikado* by Ko-Ko refer daringly to his...

... little list
Of society offenders who might well be underground,
And who never would be missed....

It remained a mystery as to who had written the novel, as no author was identified, and guesses ranged from the self-advertising Oscar himself to Ada Leverson, Marie Corelli, and even to the popular (but mediocre) poet Alfred Austin, who became Poet Laureate two years later on the death of Tennyson. As soon as Oscar had learned the truth about its authorship he treated it as a huge joke. “He sent me a burlesque telegram about it, though it came anonymously,” Hichens recalled, “showing that he had guessed I had written it. Alfred Douglas at the same time sent me a comic telegram, telling me I was discovered, and had better at once flee from the vengeance to come.”

To say that Robert Hichens never saw Wilde after *The Green Carnation* was published could imply a close friendship sundered by treachery. Actually, he only met Wilde four times, all in 1894, after he had begun his book. The idea for it had come in Egypt during the winter of 1893–1894. Hichens had put up at a hotel in Luxor where meals were served at long tables, where he sat opposite E. F. Benson and Lord Alfred Douglas. He knew Douglas slightly, having met him earlier in Cairo. Although he had never seen Benson—a son of the Archbishop of Canterbury—he had heard about him in London; Benson had just published a satirical novel, *Dodo, a Detail of the Day*, the heroine of which had been drawn from Margot Tennant, a brilliant young woman who was later to be Mrs. Asquith and—after her husband’s years as Prime Minister—the Countess of Oxford and Asquith. Benson, between books and on vacation from a British Archeological Society dig in Athens, was the object of Hichens’s awe, for he had taken a famous figure in smart circles and drawn her from life into an instant best seller: “So young a man and already the author of a book which everyone was reading, laughing over and talking about! And I was merely an unknown journalist, a ‘nobody.’...” Nearly thirty, he was still looking for his first literary success in a decade when success generally came early.

Hichens became certain that there was more water to draw from the well of smart London society when the chance meeting with Douglas and Benson led him also to another young English tourist, Reggie Turner. “Bosie” Douglas was already a well-known figure in the admiration society which had formed around Oscar Wilde. Less so was Turner, whom Hichens never-
theless knew of as “one of the most amusing conversationalists of the time, a friend of most of the young wits in London, and witty as any of them.” Both young men—Oxford undergraduates then—had been guests of Oscar on the first night of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, 20 February 1892. It was Wilde’s most impertinent appearance in the theatre, for after the curtain fell on his first successful comedy he greeted the calls for “author” with an indolent stroll onstage, cigarette drooping from his fingers. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he began, smiling blandly and leaning against a proscenium arch, “I have enjoyed this evening immensely. The actors have given us a charming rendering of a delightful play, and your appreciation has been most intelligent. I congratulate you on the great success of your performance, which persuades me that you think almost as highly of the play as I do myself.” The audience cheered.

Wilde had stipulated that for the role of the “green carnation” young man in the play—the dapper, insubstantial Cecil Graham—he had to have “someone beautiful.” Ben Webster, who would have rather played the more important part of Lord Darlington, reluctantly agreed to take it, although it amounted to little more than the spouting of paradoxical epigrams, mostly aimed at shocking puritanical consciences while titillating those too fashionable to have any. “Dear Mr. Webster,” Oscar wrote to Ben about how to handle his lines, “‘What should we men do going about with purity and innocence? A carefully thought-out button-hole is much more effective!’ Of course arrange your button-hole as you talk.” The curious flower in the button-hole attracted even more attention offstage. On the day before the play opened, so the story goes, Wilde had asked a friend to go to a particular florist’s shop in Covent Garden and order green carnations for his claque to wear at the first performance. “I know there’s no such thing, but they grow them somehow at that shop. I want a lot of men to wear them tomorrow—it will annoy the public.” The friend was skeptical but Wilde assured him: “It likes to be annoyed.” Wilde had thrived on that psychology for a decade.

For weeks in Luxor, and later on a post boat up the Nile to Aswan, Hichens pressed his companions for such Wildean anecdotes, and absorbed what Bosie, Reggie, and Dodo Benson had to say about the smart set in London. Back home some months later he read to Reggie Turner and Max Beerbohm chapters of the novel which the success of *Dodo, a Detail of the Day* and the personality and writings of Oscar had suggested to him. Neither told Oscar.

Reggie had a flair for Wildean conversation and Wildean affectation; and if—as Sir Compton Mackenzie declared—“all the best cracks in *The Green Carnation* were noted down by Robert Hichens from Reggie Turner’s conversation,” it becomes less of a coincidence that the Lord Alfred Douglas figure in the novel is thinly disguised as “Lord Reggie” and bears some of the
The Green Carnation

Wilde Sporting His Green Carnation 1889
hallmarks of Turner as well as Douglas. To the public, however, the private joke passed unnoticed. When the book appeared Reggie Turner remained unknown outside the Wilde coterie, while Lord Alfred Douglas was immediately identified. “The book did me a lot of harm,” Douglas confessed, accurately, “and the writing of it,” he added petulantly, “(and the appropriation without acknowledgment of a large number of my ‘good things’ and jokes) constituted a piece of perfidy.”

In the public mind no identification problem existed either in the case of Lord Reggie’s mentor, Esme Amarinth, whose “gently elaborate voice” produces polished paradoxes and gemlike epigrams about aesthetics and society which, when not deliberately echoing Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist,” or The Picture of Dorian Gray, sound suspiciously like a Wilde play, including the two then unproduced. There was nothing uncanny about the latter phenomenon, for Wilde borrowed his dialogue from dinner-table conversation with friends at Kettner’s in Soho or at the gilt-and-crimson Domino Room of the Café Royal. Hichens had edged into the charmed circle briefly, Douglas having offered, before leaving Egypt in March 1893, to introduce him to Wilde.

Even before Hichens had an opportunity to meet Oscar he knew him well, not only by what he had learned from his new friends in Egypt but by his memories of Wilde’s plays, which he had seen as they opened, and an experience of having heard Wilde give an amusing lecture that had been so memorable that he could still recall “the sound of his luscious voice, his ample and suave appearance, his elaborate, condescending manner…, his thick hair parted in the middle, his large shoulders and softly gesturing hands.” Hichens remembered Oscar’s flamboyant attire, too, as is obvious from the dictionary definition of “amaranth”: “any plant of the genus Amaranthus, certain species of which are cultivated for their showy flowers or for their colored foliage.”

Douglas made good his promise, and Hichens met Wilde for the first time at a London restaurant. Wilde asked for his address, offering to visit and adding generously: “And when I do, ask any of your friends if you care to.” Hichens did, and soon played host to the most brilliant party in his hitherto modest life in his unprepossessing room in Buckingham Palace Road. Max Beerbohm, Reggie Turner, and Lord Alfred Douglas were there, and the evening began and ended in hilarity, for “it was impossible to be dull, and even difficult to be stupid” in Wilde’s company, Hichens discovered, as Wilde inspired others to rise briefly above themselves as raconteurs and wits. The third meeting was more disconcerting. Wilde turned up unexpectedly one night with a youthful male companion, accepted a whisky-and-soda and a cigarette, chattered briefly, and went on his way, very likely to a hotel where he spent his nights when in such company. If Hichens had
been aware of this subterranean aspect of Oscar’s lifestyle before, it had not been at such close hand.

The next time he saw Oscar, the great man arrived unexpected and alone, at ten one evening when Hichens was quietly reading. Oscar sank into a deep armchair, smoked, and meditatively sipped a drink. Finally he confided that he was thinking of several future writing projects, which Hichens incorrectly remembered to be a play in French for Sarah Bernhardt and two stories in English, to be called “The Sphere” and “The Holy Courtesan,” both of which Oscar explained at considerable length. (The French version of *Salomé* was published in February 1893, when Hichens was still in Egypt.) When Wilde left, it was for the last time. Hichens never saw him again.

Whatever Turner and Beerbohm thought of *The Green Carnation* as Hichens read the rapidly developing manuscript to them, they apparently had no anticipation of its damaging implications to Oscar. Although the green carnation was a symbol of homosexuality in Paris, and worn there to deliberately advertise the fact, it caused no preliminary disquiet in Wilde’s two friends, even when Hichens parodied the premiere of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* in the observation of a young woman new to London:

“I only saw about a dozen [green carnations] in the Opera House to-night, and all the men who wore them looked the same. They had the same walk, or rather waggle, the same coyly conscious expression, the same wavy motion of the head. When they spoke to each other, they called each other by Christian names. It is a badge of some club or some society, and is Mr. Amarinth their high priest? They all spoke to him, and seemed to revolve round him like satellites around the sun.”

“My dear Emily, it is not a badge at all. They wear it merely to be original.”

“And can they only be original in a button-hole way? Poor fellows.”

Amarinth, we learn, has affected the green carnation “because it blended so well with the colour of absinthe.” Not really as wicked as his reputation, he complains to Lord Reggie: “I wish one could feel wicked; but it is only good people who can manage that. It is the one prerogative of virtue that I really envy.” The clues to Amarinth’s identity are not obscured by scattered—and judicious—references to Wilde as if he were yet another character, and Amarinth’s own aspersions about *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for Wilde’s published and familiar remarks, especially the duologues about literary personalities in *Intentions*, are given to Amarinth in versions distorted and parodied just enough to make the implications plain while making the Oscarisms themselves more absurd than they actually were. In some cases the suggestions are direct, as when Wilde’s famous “disappointment” with the Atlantic after his crossing to America becomes, of Amarinth: “He had
ruined the reputation of more than one eminently respectable ocean which had previously been received everywhere."

The novel, which has the sketchiest of plots, revolving about an attempt to get the reluctant Lord Reggie—who is clearly not of the marrying kind—married to an eligible lady, uses the narrative almost entirely for the display of paradoxes of a Wildean cast. But if the laughter at Oscar’s expense were only in such lines as “I invented a new art, the art of preposterous conversation,” or that he proposed doing “a revised version of the Bible, with all the inartistic passages cut out,” the novel might have been little more than an entertaining publicity release for Oscar as a logician of the absurd. The satire, however, becomes mordant, and suggestions are made that Amarinth’s much-boasted-of “sins” are not mere conversational foci. Amarinth’s acolyte is even described in terms of the Master himself, for Lord Reggie’s life had never been a cautious one. He was too modern to be very reticent, and he liked to be wicked in the eye of the crowd. Secret wickedness held no charm for him…. His social position kept him in Society, however much Society murmured against him; and, far from fearing scandal, he loved it. He chose his friends partly for their charm, and partly for their bad reputations....

It was saying what could not be said in respectable places any other way, nor savored by the respectable any other way. Wilde had become more and more incautious and indiscreet with his motley collection of young gentlemen and younger guttersnipes, but Hichens made only the vaguest references to the nature of the sins—only that Amarinth defended his behavior by pointing out that “his sins keep him fresh,” that “prolonged purity wrinkled the mind as much as prolonged impurity wrinkled the face.” The informed did not need to be told in a *roman à clef* what was meant when Amarinth boasted:

To sin beautifully, as you sin, Reggie, and as I have sinned for years, is one of the most complicated of the arts…. To commit a perfect sin is to be great, Reggie, just as to produce a perfect picture, or to compose a perfect symphony, is to be great…. He improves upon the sins that Nature has put, as it were, ready to his hand. He idealizes, he invents, he develops. No trouble is too great for him to take, no day is too long for him to work in. The still and black robed night hours find him toiling to perfect his sin…. The passion of the creator is upon him. The man who invents a new sin is greater than the man who invents a new religion, Reggie....

If the initial impact were merely satiric, the cumulative effect was something more grave. The hilarious concluding lecture by Amarinth to a group of unsophisticated village children, a perverse parody of Wilde’s platform style as well as of the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, becomes more than funny in the perspective of the whispered rumors about Amarinth’s prototype. “There is nothing good and nothing evil,” he tells the students
solemnly. "There is only art. Despise the normal, and flee ... from the seven deadly virtues. Cling to the abnormal...." From the first review to the last, lines such as these were quoted, and scandalmongers drew their inferences. The first of the notices, a lengthy and anonymous one in the Daily Telegraph on 24 September 1894 (written by Beatty Kingston), declared that the book "will ere long be read by 'everybody who is anybody,'" particularly those who were worried over being scoffed at in it; Kingston noted that "many readers of the book will readily recognise" not only Amarinth and Lord Reggie, but "a cynical lady" as well, probably a reference to the insouciant Mrs. Leverson.

Some critics refused to take the book seriously, the Athenaeum even suggesting, facetiously, because of lines such as "I love drinking Bovril in secret. It seems like a vice," that The Green Carnation was "apparently an elaborate advertisement" for the beef soup base (29 September 1894). In a later issue the Athenaeum reported, "The Bovril Company informs us that it had nothing to do with the writing of 'The Green Carnation,' so that the object of the writer in producing so silly a book seems unexplained" (13 October 1894). In the much-read Pall Mall Budget appeared a letter from the Bovril firm itself, disclaiming that the novel was written "to puff our commodity." The Budget, meanwhile, was taking the personal innuendo in the book extremely seriously, perhaps inadvertently doing more harm to Wilde than if it had not rushed out to protect him. In the Speaker, Arthur Quiller-Couch, attacking The Green Carnation, called the genre it represented, the roman à clef, a "compound of treachery and vulgarity," and the anonymous Budget critic, while agreeing, declared that the book was less vulgar than it was "distressing":

The author has not contented himself with an attempted caricature of a prominent man. That is vulgar, perhaps—certainly vulgar as it is done here—but possibly a prominent man is fair game. But he has gone further than this; he has taken another person who has appeared in no way before "the public," and, employing such coarse means of identification that no acquaintance of the victim can be in doubt as to who is meant, endeavours to make him (in the eyes of a majority of people) odious. When I add that the victim is a very young man who (even on the assumption that the picture is in any way correct) may very likely be another person altogether ten years hence, I think I need put no adjective on the conduct of the author.

In case anyone were in the slightest doubt as to the identity of the chief figure parodied, the Budget critic helpfully added:

*The Green Carnation* is likely to be popular. People who know nothing of Mr. Oscar Wilde will rush to read the thing, because it is about him, about a living celebrity, for such is the public. But it is not good satire; it imitates the vein of Dorian Gray with a good deal of cleverness, and that is all. And it is the worst-bred performance I have ever seen. (4 October 1894)
It was a remarkable conclusion to a remarkable commentary, in effect con-
demning the author of *The Green Carnation* as no gentleman because he had
implied that two other gentlemen, one young and impressionable, the other
mature and cynical, were no gentlemen at all.

In its regular review columns the *Speaker* had a similar (and its second)
notice of *The Green Carnation*, in the process reluctantly conceding its mer-
its. It was “the most impudent work of fiction we have ever met with. That it
is clever and, to a certain extent, amusing, is not to be denied.” But it went
on to warn the anonymous author about discussing living people “with a
freedom that might easily lead to the invoking of the law of libel.” The “bad
taste of the thing,” it went on, “will seem to all fair-minded people to be
execrable,” although the book would doubtless appeal “to a certain class of
readers” (6 October 1894).

The inferences of its innuendo continued to be conceded, the *Academy*
commenting that

> the brilliant narrative runs on, wearisomely brilliant sometimes, but never ceas-
ing to be smart, cutting, and absurd. You enjoy it, you cannot lay the book
crown; but when at last you close it, you ask yourself: To what end? It is but a
caricature of an affectation in life and literature, of an abnormality, a worship
of abstract and “scarlet” sin, which must of its very nature pass away with the
personality that first flaunted it before a wondering, half-attracted, half-revolved
world. Was this worth caricaturing? Only the cleverness of the performance
saves the answer from being emphatically—No. (3 November 1894)

According to Frank Harris, whose veracity is suspect and whose recorded
correspondence with his contemporaries make them all sound like Frank Har-
riss, he went to his friend for an explanation after he realized that “malevolent
doubt” of Oscar’s morality was “insisted upon again and again” in the book,
and after he had heard rumors that *The Green Carnation* was “true in every
particular”—that all Hichens had done was record Wilde’s conversation eve-
ning after evening and reproduce it in his book. “True enough, Frank,” said
Wilde, “with a certain contempt in his voice which was foreign to him…. I
thought him rather pleasant, and saw a good deal of him. I had no idea that
he was going to play reporter; it seems a breach of confidence— ignoble.”

“It is not a picture of you,” said Harris equivocally; “but there is a certain
likeness.” “A photograph is always like and unlike,” Oscar answered, and
spoke of being traduced rather than reproduced. Harris was certain it was
so, finding that everywhere he turned the book “was referred to as confirm-
ing the worst suspicions” (*Saturday Review*, 10 November 1894). Following
the line of the *Speaker*, Harris—who had recently purchased the *Saturday
Review*—invoked empty threats of the law in a protective column which very
likely helped Oscar far less than the additional publicity further damaged
him. There were, said the *Saturday Review,*
Oscar, meanwhile, seemed determined to continue in his usual style, not only appearing at the premiere of a new play at the Haymarket, where the “bows and salutations of the lower orders who thronged the stalls were so cold” when he sat in the conspicuous splendor of the Royal Box with Lord Ribbesdale, Sir Henry White (Private Solicitor to the Queen), and H. H. Asquith, the Home Secretary. This “exasperated the wretches,” he wrote Douglas. He had more elaborate counterattacks in mind, while two plays he had already written awaited production early the next year. If Hichens could make a success out of parodying Wilde, Oscar might as well issue a collection of his genuine quips and aphorisms, and pressed an idea he had had in mind since September for Oscariana. “After the *Green Carnation*,” he wrote the prospective publisher, “this book of ‘real Oscar Wilde’ should be refined and distinguished.” In the *Saturday Review* of November 17 Oscar even tried out, anonymously, a preliminary collection of new paradoxes and aphorisms, “A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated.” It should have been obvious by their nature that they were either by Oscar or another parody of his style. One of them was prophetic: “Friendship is more tragic than love. It lasts longer.” Thirty-five additional aphorisms, this time under Wilde’s byline, appeared as “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young” in the *Chameleon*, an Oxford undergraduate magazine that published only one issue in December 1894. The publication was suffused with homosexual implications, Oscar’s contribution much less so than other parts of the magazine; yet it was clearly another act of Wildean nose-thumbing at respectability. Several months later the *Chameleon* was used as evidence against him in court.

By early 1895 *The Green Carnation* had gone into its fourth impression. Since newspapers had got hold of the author’s name by then, Hichens’s name was printed under the title for the first time, confirming that the writer was a young man who had been known in London only since the autumn, and then only because he had succeeded Bernard Shaw as musical critic on the *World* when Shaw moved (as dramatic critic) to Frank Harris’s *Saturday Review*. How much Douglas’s father, the eccentric Marquess of Queensberry, was inflamed by the bad publicity *The Green Carnation* continued to point in the direction of his youngest son is unknown; yet the *succès de scandale* of the book can only have added insult to the injury he already felt about Douglas’s relationship with Wilde. He attempted to leave a contemptuous
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Illustrated Police News  4 May 1895
“phallic bouquet” of vegetables for Oscar at the opening of *The Importance of Being Earnest* in mid-February, but Oscar, forewarned, had the theatre refuse him admission; and when Lord Queensberry reacted by leaving a card at Wilde’s club accusing him of homosexuality, Wilde felt no recourse but to sue for libel. The trial—the first of three that destroyed Wilde that spring—opened at the Old Bailey on April 3, by which time William Heinemann, Hichens’s publisher, had withdrawn *The Green Carnation*, agreeing with the author that however well it was still selling, it was in doubtful taste to continue to publish it.

Without having intended to produce anything with so spectacular an effect Robert Hichens had written not only the finest satire of the Nineties, but a satire almost unmatched in its immediate and devastating effect, and he had done it in his first book. He had intended to parody Narcissus, not pillory him; but he had done both. He had exposed Wilde in fun, but Wilde had reacted, when he reacted at all, with the increasing arrogance of his public conduct. Wilde—not *The Green Carnation*—had brought down the temple of Narcissus.