

Joshua Adair, Murray State University, USA

Wilde Nostalgia: Queer Tradition in Beverley Nichols's Garden Trilogies

Abstract

This essay examines the long-standing and far-reaching influence of Oscar Wilde's public persona – both historical and mythical – on author Beverley Nichols. Nichols, famous during his lifetime for both his non-fiction and reportage, has sustained his fame primarily through his Allways and Merry Hall gardening trilogies. These feature a semi-autobiographical version of the author who is self-styled as a spiritual successor who pays homage to, and extends the legacy of, Oscar Wilde and his endless bon mots, serving up irony, humor, and social commentary in an engaging, urbane manner while further shaping the Wildean identity that prevailed as an iconic gay style throughout much of the last century and that endures, in some forms, even today.

Keywords: queer theory, Oscar Wilde, Beverley Nichols, Pet Shop Boys, queer identity

Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.

—Oscar Wilde

Now as a matter of pride
Indulge yourself, your every mood
No feast-days, or fast-days, or days of abstinence intrude
Consider for a minute who you are
What you'd like to change, never mind the scars

Bury the past, empty the shelf
Decide it's time to reinvent yourself
Like Liz before Betty, she after Sean
Suddenly you're missing, then you're reborn
And I, my Lord, may I say nothing?

Pet Shop Boys

"DJ Culture" (1991)

Oscar Wilde's final words as his three harrowing trials and, indeed, his remarkably verbal life drew near their close – "And I? May I say nothing, my Lord?" – serve as a potent reminder of the many forces that conspired to silence the man, his work, and the desire he came to represent, for better or worse, to so many. Nearly a century after that utterance, his words continue to resonate, as a refrain, perhaps even a plaintive cry, for the Pet Shop Boys (PSB hereafter) and many others, suggesting that Wilde, as the long-reigning patron saint of queer men, still holds sway in matters of self-styling and queer identity formation based in nostalgia. From the spectacle of his downfall emerged a mythical Wilde – martyr, champion of queer desire, arbiter of style and wit – based in the biographical as much as the fanciful, who inspires Wilde nostalgia even today. Beverley Nichols, especially in his two mid-century "gardening" trilogies, pays homage to the cultural construct we call Oscar Wilde with his endless bon mots, serving up irony, humor, and social commentary in an engaging, urbane manner while further shaping the Wildean identity that prevailed as an iconic queer style throughout much of the last century and that enjoys nostalgic revivals by artists like PSB over a century later.

Nichols, whose life started (b. 1898) just as Wilde's ended (d. 1900), achieved long-standing prominence as the author of two gardening trilogies, *Allways* and *Merry Hall*, in the 1930s and 1950s, respectively. Nichols garden trilogies stand today as the most popular volumes among his numerous novels, plays, children's books, and newspaper and magazine articles, being cited as recently as December 2006 in *Town and Country*^[2] as perfect gifts for women. Far from singular, *Victoria*, a lifestyle magazine specifically marketed to women, made a similar claim in 2001.

Despite their frequent categorization as ‘garden literature,’ Nichols’s trilogies provide virtually no practical advice about gardening. Rather, the trilogies offer a glimpse of idealized – stylized, actually – village life during the interwar years and into the 1950s, though they are populated almost exclusively with single women and queer men. This glimpse, at its most revealing, reveals a charming idyllic queer-inclusive community created, managed, and promoted by a queer narrator – a scarcely fictionalized avatar of the author himself – who cannot legally proclaim his sexuality. However, he devotes scant effort to disguising his queerness and the affectations commonly associated with homosexuality, offering a clear, if scantily cloaked, invitation to readers with similar sexual inclinations and sensibilities. Nichols’s narrator proves audacious, fearless, and forthcoming, in the spirit of Wilde. In fact, Nichols’ affinity for beauty, repartee, and the performance of a self-consciously outrageous, audacious, self-styled persona suggests a nostalgic longing for Wilde, with his declarations about life and how to live it, especially in all matters aesthetic. Droll and campy, Nichols claims frivolity as a stance, not unlike Wilde and many of his characters, understanding all the while the underlying seriousness of his assertions as part of his mission to imagine and forge a space for all people, especially queers. By striking a Wildean pose – a defiant stance rooted in queerness, an imperious sense of aesthetic authority, and a grave sense of playfulness about challenging conventionality and bourgeois morality – Nichols gains coy visibility by way of nostalgic affiliation with the queer icon. This affiliation, which is rarely overt, but evident in terms of style and delivery, connects him to queer readers already “in the know,” and endears him to anyone susceptible to such an approach.

Nichols, of course, is neither the first nor the last to practice such affiliation. I sprinkle this essay with references to the music of PSB because I see their work operating in a similar fashion at the end of the twentieth century, creating three points of reference along a continuum that could easily be populated with the names of numerous other queer artists. Wilde’s legacy casts a long shadow of nostalgia, even today, and by making this comparison I focus intently upon their similarities in self-styling as authority figures, connoisseurs of aesthetics, and masters of duality intent upon testing boundaries and challenging conventionality. Artificers all, they performed important roles in heightening queer visibility and mainstreaming queer sensibilities, and as Wilde’s devotees were embellishing his persona, they were performing the work of nostalgia which always focuses upon

ambience and impression rather than slavishly demanding authenticity and accuracy. Nichols, then, extends and further creates that persona we attribute to our queer progenitor. Neil Bartlett's *Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde*, describes this self-styling best:

There was no real Oscar Wilde, if by real we mean homosexual. He did not, like us, have an alibi for "being like that." London in 1895 had no conception of a man being "naturally homosexual." A man who loved other men could only be described as an invert, an inversion of something else, a pervert, an exotic, a disease, a victim, a variation. Wilde was an artist as well. He was entirely uninterested in authenticity. (163-64)

As Bartlett suggests, Wilde invented himself, and that invention became a very powerful narrative for a specific kind of queerness, so seductive that a significant collective of queer men have been following his cue and reinventing ourselves in shades of the original himself ever since. Matt Cook, in exploring Wilde's influence in the work of Derek Jarman, asserts,

This project ["commandeering" Wilde as an emblem of gay identity in the 80s and 90s] involved not only reclaiming the gay past and gay forebears – the gay lineage that had likewise been important to Wilde and his contemporaries – but also thinking about how we might use and deploy that history and those figures. In this intellectual environment, it became increasingly apparent that Wilde did not have to mean one thing, and thus a space opened up to claim his life and works in different and complex ways. (Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture 286-87)

In the queer imagination, collective and individual, Wilde's life and afterlife have taken on lives of their own and often in ways that have little or no connection to biography or history. As *The Pet Shop Boys* would tell us, we "decide it's time to reinvent" ourselves and at some point distinguishing between so-called reality and fiction simply lose its relevance. We submit to the palimpsest of experience, myth, and longing. In other words, I am appealing here not to strict historical or biographical scholarship, but rather asking that we meet these fabricators, these queers enamored of dramatic effect, these lovers of appearance, on their own susceptible turf where history proves malleable and one's nostalgic adoration for the past occasionally leads to the creation of a "truth" that might be rather easily deflated if one places greater value upon those historical observations we have been taught to regard as impervious and unchanging that the less

queer call “facts.” This world, where we queers are all “on trial for our lives,” demands the persuasive force of a seductive, if not altogether authentic, narrative grandiose enough to secure us our freedom when faced with an unforgiving, albeit impressionable, jury (“DJ Culture”). In their aptly named “Flamboyant,” PSB offer a string of assertions that nostalgically capture the spirit of Nichols and Wilde, as well as the mode of critique in this essay: “You live a world of excess, where more is more and less is much less”; “a question of need is a question of taste”; “you are what you do, ‘cause your life is a show.” What follows hereafter engages intuition, sensibility, and tangible, though frequently nebulous, connections which reveal the nostalgia that binds our fictional Wilde to his followers.

Philip Hoare, author of *Wilde’s Last Stand*, establishes that Nichols’s connection to Wilde transpired at an early age:

*Wilde’s legacy was strongly felt by those growing up in his shadow. When Beverley Nichols’s father discovered his son had a copy of The Picture of Dorian Gray, he reacted violently. ‘You pretty little bastard,’ he shouted, ‘you pretty little boy.’ Nichols senior – whose apoplexy rivaled the Marquess of Queensberry’s – enunciated the word ‘pretty’ ‘in a shrill parody of a homosexual voice’ as he slapped his son on the face, spat on the book and tore the pages with his teeth. ‘Oscar Wilde! To think that my son...’ Beverley protested that he did not know what Wilde had done. ‘What did he do? Oh my son, my son!’ – and he collapsed on the bed and burst into tears.’ The following morning, Beverley was given a piece of paper on which were written the words, *illum crimen horribile quod non nominandum est*. (qtd. in Hoare 25-26)*

While one may only conjecture about the effect of this scene on the young Nichols, it certainly failed to dissuade his desire or his ultimate self-patterning as a similarly droll, flamboyant figure. As a young man in London amidst the tumult of WWI, Nichols began to keep his own society, in a fashion not dissimilar from Wilde’s decades before. In this newly formed demi-monde, Nichols fashioned a life that flouted society’s rules, routinely expounded upon to him sermon-style by his father. Suddenly, among the company of the Sitwells, D. H. Lawrence, Jacob Epstein, and Ramsay MacDonald, Nichols envisaged the possibility of a life radically different from what he knew in his father’s house.

In this café society, Nichols enjoyed, for the first time, social and sexual (apart from isolated incidents at school) homosexual affiliation. This newfound freedom and affiliation came at a price, though; he frequently stirred suspicion and mistrust among his commanding officers and the London police. Biographer Bryan Connon notes,

In his autobiography, Beverley comments that it was at the Café Royal that Oscar Wilde played some of the ludicrous and tragic scenes which littered his path to destruction; he himself tiptoed along a similar path and might have suffered a similar fate if a case could have been made against him. In the event, there was no hard evidence, only his association with 'undesirable people' who held pacifist beliefs or led unconventional lives. (56)

However, were it not for these associations and experiences, Nichols might never have begun to imagine a British society that included space for unconventional and undesirables. Furthermore, these associations seemed to harden his resolve rather than diminish it.

To conceptualize the Wildean posturing of Nichols, a de facto criminal under the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, who insincerely poses as a member of the heterosexist patriarchy while simultaneously promoting a queer sensibility in his work, we must consider this strategy's necessity. Christopher Reed describes a similar approach among members of the Bloomsbury Group:

[T]he history of the Bloomsbury artists exemplifies the complexity of counter-hegemonic movements, which are never completely outside the mainstream cultural forms they challenge, but co-exist in a more complicated – less heroic – dynamic strongly inflected by the dominant culture's effort to neutralize challenges to its authority. Two basic strategies of that neutralizing strategy can be described as alienation and co-option [. . .] Alienation has the effect of reifying the identity of deviant groups, while co-option distorts the past in order to incorporate the group into consensus-driven historical narratives. (Rooms 6)

As a practicing homosexual, Nichols existed in defiance of the law as well as conventional, bourgeois morality. Thanks to Wilde, however, he could look to the past for a model to emulate: as an intelligent, able-bodied white man from a respectable family, Nichols, like his predecessor, enjoyed great privilege. His position, while not fortified by a family fortune, afforded him access to

people of power and position and his rearing instilled in him a profound understanding of the ways of the English middle class and how one might best adhere to and subvert them. In addition, he did not start from scratch; Wilde pioneered standards and boundaries. Whereas Wilde might not have fully conceived the depths to which he would descend, Nichols understood the potential danger he courted. Cook, in theorizing the connection between Jarman and Wilde, offers an analysis relevant to Nichols as well:

Both Wilde and Jarman – middle-class, highly and classically educated, Londoners for much of their lives, and also artists in the public eye – drew on remarkably similar icons and images and spatial and temporal strategies to create structures of survival and endurance – in other words, to etch out a presence and a distinctiveness for the outlaw and for vilified desires and behavior. (Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture 297).

By speaking in a common language – visual and verbal – Nichols advertised his queer identity, relieving him of the obligation to state it overtly. Queers and others “in the know,” understood the ground they trod with Nichols, largely thanks to the language Wilde pioneered. Furthermore, because his precarious position as a practicing homosexual invited preemptive dismissal by would-be audiences, positioning himself as the next in a long line of English wits and tastemakers gained exposure for his particular queer sensibility, which bears traces of Wilde’s spirit. In performance, though, it is pure Wilde: a queer who, upon the strength of his wit and taste, wins popular appeal and then proceeds to espouse ideals assailing patriarchal, hegemonic standards in a vein of wit and acid humor in a manner palatable enough that audiences could comfortably embrace the advice, never questioning its deliverer’s authority. Consider this passage from Merry Hall:

As it is with comfort, so it is with taste; to linger in the Tudors is merely a sign of aesthetic adolescence; one must move on to the eighteenth century, and if one has any sense, stay there. There comes a time, or there should come a time, in the life of every civilized man, when he realizes that the eighteenth century said the last word worth saying in absolutely everything connected with the domestic arts. (21)

Clearly, this queer knows his mind and understands the value of a confident delivery, especially in its appeals to the past.

And what, exactly, was he delivering? For the sake of clarity, I nominate several key aspects of Nichols's Wildean pose: a love of artifice, conspicuous consumption, and audacity. If the PSB were characterizing his *modus operandi* in a word, it would be "flamboyant," which Nichols evinces in statements like this: "One of my grandfathers died of a clump of iris *stylosa*; it enticed him from a sick bed on an angry evening in January, luring him through the snow-drifts with its blue and silver flames; he died of double pneumonia a few days later. It was probably worth it" (MH 17). Can we link this style of proclamation to sexuality, though? I believe we can, and I draw here from Christopher Reed's "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," in which he argues that assigning these traits to queer men illustrates historically specific expressions of sexuality, which were heavily influenced by Wilde. For Reed, queerness is not transhistorical; it is the product of social, political, and cultural influences at a specific historical moment (64). If we conceive these particular behaviors (love of artifice, consumption, and audacity) as in-group markers of homosexuality during the 1930s – and for decades afterwards – then Nichols's zeal for highlighting them publically links him in spirit to Wilde, who undertook similar practices which became the hallmark for a variety of queerness still with us today in performers like PSB and many others.

Before proceeding, let us return momentarily to Reed's idea (drawn from Foucault) about "co-option" of the historical past in order to insert alienated groups into "consensus-driven historical narratives" (6). Nichols's work, as a major foundational feature, alludes to a historical past which he distorts to lend greater credibility and marketability to his endeavors. I contend that Nichols's nostalgia for the past – particularly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – serves as a gravitas-building device employed to draw in consumers eager to take direction from an authoritative aesthetic who is better equipped – at least they assume – to disentangle the complicated indicators of style and affluence practiced by aristocrats. Rather than operating as an expression of a legitimate desire to recreate the past faithfully, Nichols, with his honed social savvy, anticipates the needs of his audience and caters to them accordingly, without ever bowing to mainstream expectations. Take, for example, this proclamation, bold as Wilde appearing on-stage after *Lady Windermere's Fan*, cigarette in hand, offered by Nichols:

Whatever opinion I may have of my talents, I have never taken them to include the power to write a love story. A normal love story, that is to say. A passionate interlude with a crocus, maybe; an

enslavement to a Siamese cat or a heartbreak over a cocker spaniel. Yes. One day I might even describe the peculiar feelings I have about a certain Chippendale chair; when anybody sits on it I feel as if I were witnessing the rape of a beloved. But normal boy-meets-girl stuff . . . no. It would all be most tiresome and embarrassing. (MH 263)

Considering this, we can easily see that Nichols understands audience's expectations, he simply confounds them by falling romanticizing, eroticizing even, animals, flowers, and furniture instead. Awareness of one's audience and appealing to the mood of the nation play a significant role in Nichols's nostalgia, though, in that the inanimate objects for which he falls are always of the right sort, like Chippendale chairs. During the inter-war period, Jonathan M. Woodham, author of *Twentieth-Century Design*, argues that Britain embraced "conservative, historicizing" tastes that placed great importance upon its past (91). Woodham also observes, "The British Empire Exhibition at Wembley (1924/25) provided an important vehicle for reinforcing or moulding contemporary attitudes since much of the imagery on display utilized archetypal symbols of power and authority and constantly evoked Britain's historical and imperial heritage" (90). More specifically, throughout his examination of British design, Woodham carefully emphasizes the importance of design based upon "historic heritage rooted in the past" (95). One possible cause of this emphasis may have been a desire to return to an earlier period in history when England was not an empire in decline (Woodham 90). A major part of this appeal to this past involved landscape architecture and gardening, pursuits which have always drawn serious interest in England and which Nichols happily capitalized upon:

Yes, the garden began with those Urns. They were destined to form the first splash of colour on a canvas that was hitherto blank. They were to have the honour of holding the first flowers in a procession which, as I grew older, was to swell into a carnival blossom. They must be found at once, without a moment's delay. They would have to be Georgian, of course. . . . So I hurried out to the kitchen to tell Gaskin that I was going out to find some urns.

'Urn?' he said, with singular lack of enthusiasm. 'Whatever for?'

'For the pillars outside.'

He sniffed. 'There's a hundred and one things we want more than urns. We've hardly got two tea-

cups left to match. There's only one coffee pot that isn't cracked. The Hoover's on its last legs. You ought to be putting first things first.'

I told Gaskin that I was very sorry, and made soothing suggestions about going up to Harrod's for the day, and then I hurried out, got into the car, and drove off. (MH 66)

Treating Gaskin, his factotum, as a figure of fun – and an ersatz beleaguered wife – Nichols makes clear once again that his loyalty lies with the aesthetic, into which he draws readers by focusing those efforts upon creating the gardens they all admire.

While the biographical features of Nichols's life may vary considerably from the "Lord of the Manor" he presents in his trilogies, the world he imagines seems no less real. He is clear to establish this self-nominated status through the voice of his female doppelganger, Mrs. M:

In the lane I met Mrs. M, a middle-aged woman with a hard jaw. I had been introduced to her on my previous visit. She lives in a very perfect cottage not many miles away. She will recur through these pages with irritating frequency. She is never ill, never fooled, never at a loss. She makes a pound do the work of a fiver, and her garden is maddeningly efficient. She despises me, in her heart of hearts, but puts up with me because I subscribe to things. She was striding down the lane with a horribly well-bred terrier, which had legs as straight as corn stalks, and a predatory look in its eyes. As soon as she saw me she halted, dug her stick in the ground, sat on it, and greeted me as follows: 'Ha! So the Lord of the Manor's arrived.' (Down the Garden Path 30-31)

Without a doubt, Nichols presents himself as a spiritual heir to Wilde: a self-styled and self-appointed aristocrat, tastemaker, and wit with an amusing sense of whimsy and a healthy aptitude for self-deprecation, which is apparent in this passage. He frequently indulges in conspicuous consumption and displays a marked affection for artifice and performance. He enjoys an unshakeable confidence in his own personal aesthetics and can be witheringly critical of individuals who fail to adopt similar opinions. Like Wilde, he loves to camp it up, lending archness and drollery to all he does.

Controversial since its appearance in 1964, Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" offers invaluable insight about camp, its execution and implications. Sontag's theories can prove problematic; her proclamation about the depoliticized nature of camp seems, at points, both short-sighted and

dismissive of its potential as a political force. Fabio Cleto, editor of *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* notes, “Sontag has been [. . .] charged by gay critics with turning a basically homosexual mode of self-performance into a degayfied taste, a simple matter of ironically relishing an indulgence in what is ‘so-bad-it’s-good’” (10). True as Cleto’s assertion may be, I would contend that elements of Sontag’s original argument remain pertinent today. One assertion, perhaps her most famous, posits, “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’”. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (56). Nichols is not Wilde; he’s a “Wilde.” He co-opts what he considers most charming and alluring about Wilde and recreates it in himself, making it pure nostalgia.

With this in mind, consider this amusing excerpt from *A Village in a Valley* (1934):

I hate trusting people. It's a coward's game. I like people I can't trust. People with knives up their sleeves [. . .] people with a life of which I know nothing [. . .] people who have dark alleys in their souls, down which they skulk when they think I'm not looking. That's the fun of friendship, the double personality of those we love. (99)

Wilde, unsurprisingly, allegedly offered a similar sentiment: “a true friend stabs you in the front.” With his droll assertion, Nichols informs his audience that duplicity serves him as a *modus operandi*, a perfectly acceptable, viable strategy for navigating the world. Duplicity, he suggests, engenders possibility, creativity. Coyly alluding to secret lives reveals Nichols’s desire to exhibit his queerness *sotto voce* and simultaneously to deny it by omission, as mandated by law. He pursues acknowledgement and visibility, but knows that attaining either frequently requires donning a mask, albeit a semi-transparent one, that implies other ambitions or intentions. He endeavors to infiltrate readers’ middle-class households and fill their minds with visions of an orderly community full of beauty and amusement, while failing to mention that it is run by a flamboyant queer.

Philip Core argues, “There are only two things essential to camp: a secret within the personality which one ironically wishes to conceal and to exploit; and a peculiar way of seeing things, affected by spiritual isolation, but strong enough to impose itself on others through acts or creations” (82). For instance, Nichols mentions, “In order to avoid damp, I used, quite shamelessly, to put

umbrellas over my foxgloves on rainy afternoons and long wet nights” (Down the Garden Path 276). As a charming, nonsensical, and downright absurd statement, its Wildean turn of phrase reveals a great deal about our narrator: it highlights Nichols’s willingness to appear cloyingly, absurdly precious yet defiantly unapologetic. Real men, even aristocratic ones, do not shield their flowers from rain and his claim lays bare a queer desire to preserve, protect, and promote beauty, even if it renders him a dandified pansy. Nichols audaciously proclaims his queer effeminacy, in turn setting the tone for the community he envisions. He issues a similar challenge regarding poppies in A Village in a Valley: “The gentlemen of the press who parody me may now draw an elegant picture of me shrinking in horror from the thought of being alone in a room with a rampant poppy. The idea is, as they say, ‘a gift’” (106). Nichols parodies himself – with an underlying sense of seriousness – because he trusts his own aesthetic vision and willingly exposes it to the world’s derision so long as the rendering proves “elegant.”

In note fifty, Sontag argues,

Aristocracy is a position vis-à-vis culture (as well as vis-à-vis power), and the history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste. But since no authentic aristocrats in the old sense exist today to sponsor special tastes, who is the bearer of this taste? Answer: an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste. (63)

Nichols effectively cements this notion in Laughter on the Stairs (1953) as he describes acquiring four Daniel Marot chairs:

The vow was that somehow or other, cost what it may, I would try to live up to those chairs. Again, that sounds like the ‘nineties, and again I am unrepentant. To try to ‘live up to’ anything beautiful, whether it is a Greek vase or a slow movement by Mozart, is a most worthy and moral aim; if beauty is in your head, if even a fragment of perfection abides in you, it acts as a standard to which you may constantly refer, even if the reference is subconscious. The lines of the vase, the lines of the music – they are a corrective to excess. (129)

Campy as Nichols’s vow might seem, this passage highlights his devotion to the aesthetic as a transformative, even redemptive force. In addition, it also establishes his affiliation with Wilde – whose reputation operates for him as “fragment of perfection” – and who made similar comments

about 'living up to' his blue china. His unabashed reference to the "nineties" further connects Nichols with the aesthetes of the last three decades of the nineteenth century, including Walter Pater, who eagerly pursued similar varieties of redemption. Nichols's position challenges convention; he willingly (and perhaps willfully) links himself to Wilde despite the potential danger of such a linkage in a world that had yet to decriminalize homosexuality. While such a linkage may have proven obscure to some readers, it is safe to assume many understood, and appreciated, the connection, if only because they recognized the stylistically similar *joie de vivre* and *elan* shared by both luminaries.

For those willing to be drawn in, Nichols colors his assertions with self-deprecation and false modesty to attempt to convert them to seeing the world through his lens. Changing the way one looks at the world and creates beauty, he suggests, leads to new, different ways of living. Core identifies a similar strategy among Nichols's peers:

In Somerset Maugham, Cecil Beaton, the dilettante actor Ivor Novello, and Noel Coward, we can pinpoint the sort of camp the English upper classes adore: an outrageous but unprosecutable arbiter elegantiarum who bullies the world of married society into accepting a homosexual's view of how it should dress, act, entertain and sometimes think. (83)

Nichols performs as an arbiter elegantiarum in his trilogies, proclaiming in *Sunlight on the Lawn* (1956), "One must be ruthless in the cause of Beauty" (66). Far more than an off-the-cuff declaration, Nichols issues this edict as both his personal mantra and the law for the queer-inclusive fictional community he creates. Published in the 1950s, the Merry Hall trilogy depicts Nichols's purchase and rehabilitation of the eighteenth century mansion and its grounds. While the Merry Hall trilogy represents Nichols's most forceful version of a nostalgic Wilde-influenced narrator, many elements of this voice manifest in the earlier *Allways* trilogy which recounts the renovation of a Tudor cottage. In both series, Nichols rejects patriarchy and the status quo and embraces flippancy, even absurdity, as an undermining strategy:

I wanted my garden to bloom like the gardens of the Arabian nights. When my father, who comes from a long line of gentlemen farmers, adjusted his eyeglass, glared at the kitchen garden, told me that the soil would need to be turned in the autumn so that the frost could get into it, and that after

the frost had got in, we could plant cabbages, I said that I did not want cabbages. I wanted gourds.

‘Gourds?’ he said. ‘What the devil for?’

‘I want gourds,’ I repeated. ‘I can’t tell you why I want gourds because you are my father and you would not understand.’ (GP 47)

While Nichols’s father, accustomed to position and privilege, pontificates here about cabbages – even if we might agree that his assertions sound practical – Nichols refuses to acquiesce. His queer response about wishing to plant gourds instead of cabbages underlines his refusal to be dominated or directed by a representative of the traditional order, calling to mind the assertion of Lord Goring in Act IV of *An Ideal Husband*: “Fathers should neither be seen nor heard. That is the proper basis of family life” (Collected Works 649). Whereas Nichols’s father presents cabbage planting as the only practical course of action – privileging utility over beauty or personal desire – Nichols proudly proclaims a desire to produce gourds, presumably for decorative purposes. The ensuing discussion entertains, if only because gourds, so far as I know, rarely serve any practical purpose. In this short exchange we witness a shift from long-standing, supposedly sensible, values to a new sensibility guided by aesthetics and personal desire, rather than submission to tradition or even masculine logic.

Nichols’s desire to subvert the established order, underscored with a sense of the danger inherent therein, reappears frequently in the *Allways* trilogy:

That was why I loved all this early work, because the garden was the first thing I had ever really owned. It took ages to realize it . . . to this day the realization is not complete. I still stand before a hedge with a pair of shears in my hand, saying ‘I can clip this hedge exactly as I please. I can make it round or square or like a castle. If I choose, I can clip it away altogether, and nobody can arrest me.’ (GP 36-37)

Nichols’s sense of ownership and repeated allusions to the potential legal difficulties related to his vision of community reveal his persistent awareness of Wilde’s fate and the danger he courts by presenting himself openly, protected by the thin veneer of fiction. As a result, one of Nichols’s primary self-protection strategies involves forming strong alliances with women, perhaps because of their shared sensibilities and desires. Nichols, in fact, offers wonderful glimpses of his genuine

understanding and admiration of women throughout the trilogies: he sees them as creatures not unlike himself and worthy of sincere admiration. One of the most poignant examples of his concern centers upon Miss Hazzlitt, Nichols's favorite woman, and her ability to keep afloat in the difficult 1930s economy. Miss Hazzlitt falls on hard times, lacking any way to earn income to support herself, but pride disallows her accepting assistance. Nichols ignores that pride: "But I was in no mood for protestations. We were all one family at Allways, I said. We were not going to let anything horrible happen to anybody. The rest of the world might be cold and heartless but at Allways, somehow or other, we would see that things were all right" (Village in a Valley 115). While Nichols discounts the Christian faith Miss Hazzlitt embraces in order to endure her fate, he desires only to help her. He accepts viewpoints and beliefs different than his own and continues to behave kindly, charitably. Fully realizing his role, akin to that of a magistrate or laird, Nichols marshals community forces to ensure Miss Hazzlitt will receive the help she needs. A fundamental difference in beliefs does not exclude or marginalize individuals here; Miss Hazzlitt continues to be valued and admired – perhaps for, not in spite of, her adherence to her values. In this particular case, Mrs. M. (Nichols's chief rival), Nichols, and several others donate the capital to set up a general store for her and then promptly commence supporting it. However, Nichols's awareness of and concern for women and appreciation for their own performativity does not stop there:

For most of the women of Allways show a bright face to the world, even when their hearts are heavy. Their lives are like their gardens. Even the poorest of them, who can only afford a handful of bulbs, and cannot possibly pay to have an odd man, even once a week, always manage to have the little strip of garden, in front of their cottages, bright with flowers all the year round, and as tidy as if it were run by the most efficient gardener. They are like those women living in mean streets whose front windows are draped with the costliest lace curtains they can afford, while the rooms those curtains shadow are almost bare.

It is very easy to sneer at the women who have this passion for 'keeping up appearances'. Very easy indeed. But neither very clever nor very kind. (Village in a Valley 187)

In this and numerous other instances, Nichols makes perfectly clear that he is not sneering, but rather good-heartedly ribbing individuals he consider his equals. He demonstrates that he

understands the psychological benefits of “keeping up appearances,” too. Their veneer, he suggests, is at once artificial and protective, like armor, and completely familiar to him and others of his kind. Constructing a strong, appealing face eases their navigation of the world and offers some defense, particularly when one inhabits a vulnerable position like a single woman or a queer man at the time.

Nichols assumes the campy, catty, bitchy attitude of the best Wilde characters when it comes to Mrs. M., especially, but also many of the other women in the trilogies. At points he could easily pass for Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: “Everything is, of course, a miracle. I am a miracle, and so, I must reluctantly allow, are you” (GP 132). Nichols’s particular sensibility derives from a well-nourished – some might even suggest overfed – sense of self-confidence. He presumes comparable self-confidence in others: one which withstands – even welcomes – rivalrous tête-à-têtes which, rather than psychologically harming their target, reinforce one’s own sense of superiority. Readers may fail to realize that nearly all the characters in both trilogies share a similar outlook – embracing difference, they all value the domestic and the picturesque – and the same desire and respect for primary affiliation with like-minded persons.

If, as Wilde asserts, “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” Nichols took the role of acolyte to an entirely new level. As Elisha Cohn, author of “Oscar Wilde’s Ghost: The Play of Imitation,” asserts (paraphrasing Sedgwick), “Wilde is an object of identification and imitation, even for critics who read him as an enemy of authenticity and depth” (476). For Nichols, a queer man warned from an early age to eschew Wilde’s allure as a legendarily flamboyant, audacious, aesthetically minded queer pioneer, he still assumed an iconic status that invited emulation for those “who follow their instinct and are told they sin” (“A Red Letter Day”). Both men won followers and influence through their demonstrations of self-appointed authority, deploying artifice as a feature of humor and beauty, and an appeal to beauty, sometimes as a commodity, sometimes as an intellectual conceit itself. Nichols may have realized, either consciously or subconsciously, that his presentation of the idealized, inclusive community he created could impact the way that readers think about their personal space and the social arrangement therein. Fortunately, Nichols was not afraid of being a bit deceptive about this belief; he sent his trilogies out as Trojan horses to do his will. What was marketed to middle-class readers, particularly women, as lighthearted fluff about gardening and

village life turned out to be, ironically, rather like a rose bush whose blooms were advertised as pure white at the garden shop and then turned out to be flamingo-pink upon first bloom. If Nichols's readers sought a comforting depiction of traditional English village life, they were met by a narrator who must have seemed at least vaguely reminiscent of the Victorian literary giant who despite allegedly having encouraged listeners to "be yourself; everyone else is taken" ended up inspiring many, Nichols included, to fashion at least some part of themselves after the notoriously queer Wilde man, and to find "a place for us" ("Somewhere").

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[2] Nichols' gardening trilogies have been almost exclusively marketed to women – by way of periodicals, primarily – despite their potential appeal to anyone in reading about gardens and English village life.



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