

## Scarlet Carsons, Men in Masks: The Wildean Contexts of *V for Vendetta*

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### **Abstract:**

This essay traces Oscar Wilde's iconic presence in queer comics, beginning with the 1981-1988 series *V for Vendetta* and ending with the 2005 film version of the same, exploring in between the varied and surprising ways in which contemporary artists and filmmakers have taken up and transformed the 'Wilde figure'. I expose an undercurrent in queer activist art that has, since the early 1980s, increasingly imagined Wilde as a physically imposing and ideologically incendiary agent of social transformation. In this progressive refashioning of Wilde from martyred gay saint into aesthetic super-hero, we can observe a long-defanged aspect of the Wilde figure –Aestheticism – being re-imagined by late twentieth-century artists as a potent, even violent force for social change. Therefore, *V for Vendetta* can be understood as offering a pop-cultural antecedent to more recent critical work within Victorian and Modernist literary studies that challenges the more traditional conception of Aestheticism as politically and socially disengaged.

**Keywords:** Aestheticism, Alan Moore, queer activism, terrorism, *V for Vendetta*, Oscar Wilde.

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Suppose this aesthete made omnipotent,  
feeling there is no bar he cannot break,  
knowing there is no bound he cannot pass;  
might he not then despise the written page,  
a petty music, and a puny scene?  
Conceive a spectacle not witnessed yet,  
when he, an artist in omnipotence,  
uses for colour this red blood of ours,  
[...] his poet's fire not circumscribed by words,  
but now translated into burning cities,  
his scenes the lives of men, their deaths his drama,  
his dream the desolation of mankind,  
and all this pulsing world his theatre. (Stephen Phillips, *Nero* 1906:12)

In *The Wilde Century* (1994) Alan Sinfield observed that although late-twentieth-century readers cannot imagine Oscar Wilde “as other than the apogee of gay experience and expression,” this understanding is one constructed “after-the-effect – after [...] the trials helped to produce a major

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shift in perceptions of the scope of same-sex passion” (Sinfield 1994: 2-3). Sinfield’s study was one of the first to explore how this cultural event guided the construction of an “Oscar Wilde type” in which an “entire, vaguely disconcerting nexus of effeminacy, leisure, idleness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence and aestheticism [...] was transformed into a brilliantly precise image” (Sinfield 1994: 3). “Beautifully precise” because it offered a template for the figure of the homosexual, a “type” which, Sinfield argued, influenced and in fact limited twentieth-century attempts to define and develop “radical lesbian and gay identities”:

The key question is: if we come to consciousness within a language that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance? If deviant identities are produced by the dominant ideology in ways that police sexualities, containing dissidence, how is a radical lesbian or gay identity to arise? (Sinfield 1994: 15)

*The Wilde Century*, written against the backdrop of Thatcherite conservatism, the outbreak and explosion of the AIDS epidemic, and queer aesthetic/activist responses to both, concluded by exploring how gay and lesbian activist groups in the 1980s and early 1990s, almost one hundred years after the fact, continued to be limited in their ability to protest against homophobic social structures by this Wildean legacy.

Discussing activist responses to Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, which prohibited the use of government funds for the ‘promotion’ of homosexuality and particularly affected British funding for the arts, Sinfield writes:

The campaign was courageous, well organized and much publicized, and arts celebrities came out. Astonishingly, at first sight, this carried precious little weight with the government and newspapers that supported it; the votes in parliament were the same at the end of the campaign as at the beginning. The reason, I believe, is that people in our cultures *already know* that art is associated, stereotypically, with male homosexuals. As I have said, the association of art

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and effeminacy has, up to a point, been dissident [...] for some purposes, our society credits this. However, art starts off as the subordinate term in the masculine/feminine binary structure, and from that position, always, it is very difficult to make much headway. (Sinfield 1994: 190, original italics)

Anticipating that this position might draw critique from queer activist groups like ACT UP, Queer Nation and OutRage, Sinfield argues that any wariness on his part stems not from a reluctance to upset people, but from a sense that “we cannot upset them enough.” Citing a 1991 flyer entitled ‘Queer Power Now’, which exhorted queer citizens to “Write some books. Be Safe. Burn buildings. Shoot closets. Screw in the streets”, he observes that of the advocated actions “only the attack on property would seriously trouble the system, and when other groups try that the main outcome is an increase in state surveillance and control” (Sinfield 1994: 203-204). Therefore, for Sinfield, writing in the early 1990s, the truly radical aesthete is a conceptual impossibility. Although *The Wilde Century* acknowledges early on that “[i]n the dissidence encoded in aesthetic effeminacy, Wilde saw his great opportunity” and that for a brief time Wildean aestheticism succeeded in challenging “the manly purposefulness of industry and empire” (Sinfield 1994: 89), this study ultimately seems to suggest that because of the swift association of Wildean (or decadent) aestheticism with a ruined, policeable type, the radical potency of queer art as protest – against imperialism, materialism, and sexual conservatism – was profoundly diluted.

Yet in that same 1991 flyer’s formulation of “queer power” we find articulated the very combination of aesthetic (“write some books”) and anarchic (“burn buildings”) sensibilities that animates the aesthete anti-hero at the center of the graphic novel *V for Vendetta*. This series, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by David Lloyd between 1981 and 1987 was first serialised in the British anthology comic series *Warrior* and then by D.C. Comics. Like Sinfield’s *The Wilde Century*, *V for Vendetta* was composed against the backdrop of – and in direct response to – the conservatism and state-sanctioned homophobia of Thatcher’s England. However, *Vendetta* draws upon an alternative understanding of the aesthete figure’s importance to contemporary queer activism. By transporting a late-Victorian history of radical aestheticism, homophobic conservatism, and

queer imprisonment into a dystopian future in which the aesthete critiques society not by turning away into art, but by turning art into a kind of activist-terrorism, this text recovers (and transforms) an arguably common and equivocal understanding of Wilde and Wildean aestheticism in broad circulation during both the *fin-de-siècle* and the first decade of the twentieth century: the aesthete as terrorist. In so doing, *Vendetta* uses the “beautifully precise” image of Wilde in a way that uncovers a keen desire, emerging in the 1980s and still developing today, for a kind of queer avenger figure, one whose iconic embodiment of a queer past full of shame, abjection, and denial might fuel, rather than impede, social change.

Set in what was, in 1981, the near-future *fin-de-siècle* of the late 1990s, *Vendetta* critiques Thatcherite conservatism by imagining London as a post-nuclear dystopia in the grips of a neo-fascist regime. However, as this essay will demonstrate, *V for Vendetta* also looks backward to the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*, and to that same nexus of decadence, aestheticism, effeminacy and immorality which Sinfield argues was then consolidated into a distinct “Wilde type.” Although to some degree this graphic novel fits the generic conventions of utopian/dystopian political fiction, its engagement with the Wilde story and the politics of decadent aestheticism marks its narrative orientation as past rather than future-oriented; much as Heather Love observes of Sylvia Townsend Warner’s *Summer Will Show* (1936), its “revolutionary imagination is bound not to the redeemed world but to the damaged world that it aims to repair” (Love 2007: 132). *V for Vendetta* is, in fact, a text that, to adapt Love’s terminology, feels backwards to look forwards.

By imagining a past-oriented queer dystopia as the bedrock upon which this critical engagement with the Victorian past would unfold, Moore and Lloyd ushered in a strand of pop-cultural texts – beginning with the *Vendetta* series, extending through the 1990s in underground comics, such as Dave Sim’s *Melmoth* (1991) and Joe Lansdale’s *Jonah Hex* (1995), and ending with the 2005 Warner Brothers film adaptation of *Vendetta* – that focus upon the “dark affects that fuel social change” (Love 2007: 131), that creatively reinterpret the decadent 1890s and Wilde himself as more politically engaged, more revolutionary, more dangerous even, than could be responsibly argued by any literary historian. Yet in this hyperbolic and fantastical neo-Victorian landscape, we find vividly recuperated an understanding of and response to Wilde and decadent aestheticism from the

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late-Victorian and *debut de siècle* period, which are only now being reconstructed in Victorian, modernist, and queer studies.

In this way, *V for Vendetta* and the subsequent reworkings of the Wilde figure that its Wildean anti-hero V inspired are ideal texts to consider within the framework of Neo-Victorian Studies. By recovering, through futuristic dystopia, a radical vision of decadent aestheticism and its challenge to socio-political and cultural conservatism, such texts offer scholars and students a “different way into the Victorians”, as Mark Llewellyn argues, “not contemporary literature as a substitute for the nineteenth century but as a mediator into the experience of reading the ‘real’ thing”; they connect with the past in surprising ways that “act out the results of reading the Victorians and their literary productions” (Llewellyn 2008: 5).

This essay will trace how neo-Victorian texts recast the Wildean aesthete as destructive rather than passive, avenger rather than one to be avenged, demonstrating that in the underground British comic culture of the 1980s we find a new “Wilde type,” a figure transformed from martyred artist and gay saint into a kind of aesthetic super-hero: a physically imposing and ideologically incendiary agent of social transformation, who enacts, rather than inspires, outraged vengeance.

### 1. Aesthetic Terrorism

In the fall of 1895, after Oscar Wilde had been sent to prison for gross indecency, the *Echo* advised readers to “forget all about Oscar Wilde, his perpetual posings, his aesthetical teachings and his theatrical productions. Let him go into silence, and be heard from no more” (qtd. in Holland 1954: 268). In this brief passage we find swiftly illuminated two responses to the cultural legacy of decadent aestheticism, which in fact work in tandem: the *Echo*’s dismissal of Wilde and his work as superfluous and dated is significantly undercut by the journal’s obvious and anxious interest in rooting out these same aesthetical teachings, posings, and productions. For despite the superior tone adopted here, to publicly advocate an artist’s exile “into silence, to be heard from no more” is to paradoxically acknowledge that artist’s absolute centrality, via aesthetic and ideological threat, to the culture from which he or she is to be banished.

Of course, Wilde was never in danger of going “into silence,” even after his death in November of 1900. In the first decade of the twentieth

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century, the importance of Wilde and Wildean aesthetics to modern literature was a topic on which literary critics, artists, and theologians weighed in with great frequency. In 1907, the *Methodist Review* published a vitriolic posthumous attack on Wilde, entitled ‘The Consummate Flower of Aestheticism’. Written in response to “an effort on the part of certain intrepid champions of aestheticism to restore Oscar Wilde to public tolerance and even favorable regard” (Anon. 1907: 451), this essay sees its duty in “insist[ing] on the awful moral lessons which drip from the fate of Oscar Wilde like drops of blood from a sharp chisel’s edge” (Anon. 1907: 452). These lessons are equivocal: Wilde is shown to be unfit for critical rehabilitation because his philosophy of art is at once mere theory (entirely sterile, limp and useless) and theory-in-action (supremely criminal, anarchic, and terrorist). Lengthy harangues on Wilde’s iconic criminality, like the one below, are routinely followed up with dismissive summations of aestheticism’s complete inefficacy as a social movement:

A free community is always tolerant of mere theories, however pernicious, immoral, or destructive; but when the theorist puts his objectionable and injurious theories into practice by overt acts, then he encounters the teeth of the effective machinery which society maintains for its own protection and which does not discriminate between aesthetes and anarchists. [...] Wilde lived his principles to the full, and so he became the consummate flower of aestheticism. Usually it is some weak-minded or unbalanced disciple of destructive theories that is rash enough to perpetrate the extreme overt act logically enjoined by the evil teaching. [...] But in the case of the aesthetes, those anarchists against the moral law, it is their chief prophet, apostle, and teacher who has the nerve, the reckless daring to practice what he preaches and to live down to the principles they all uphold. (Anon. 1907: 430)

For this writer, aesthetic theory itself is mere cultural irritation, whereas a decadent aestheticism that materialises in “overt acts” negates any distinction between aesthete and anarchist; the paragraph ends imagining Wildean aestheticism as an embodied doctrine of cultural terrorism. Yet the

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very next line of this alarmist essay (which, it should be noted, imagines in the present tense a cultural threat then safely dead for seven years) veers in the opposite direction, dismissing this same public enemy as entirely limp and ineffectual: “Nothing is plainer than the superficiality and futility of aestheticism as a means of culture” (Anon. 1907: 430).

Hence, two warring conceptions of decadent aestheticism – as passive, superficial, and futile versus active, covert, and anarchic – structured responses to Wilde in the first decades of the twentieth century. Another evocative reminder of Wilde’s posthumous double identity as outmoded fop and public enemy can be found in Stephen Phillips’ 1906 drama-in-verse, *Nero*, which refashioned the famously decadent Roman emperor into a recognisably Wildean aesthete-terrorist. Produced by and starring Wilde’s theatrical associate Beerbohm Tree, the play depicted Nero as an “aesthete made omnipotent” who, realising the terrible reach of his own power, casts aside the world of art and takes as his canvas “all this pulsing world” (Phillips 1906: 12-13). Both the timing of *Nero*’s premiere in January, 1906, only months after the posthumous publication of Wilde’s *De Profundis*, and the play’s stylistic affiliation with decadent symbolist drama, ensured that Phillips’ evocation of a nihilist aesthete would be expressly associated with Wilde.

Writing for the *Saturday Review*, Henry Hodge blasted Phillips’ style as unsuccessfully affected: “this play is killed by the monotonous rhythm of the verse. Mr. Phillips has practically but one verse, a flaccid line, producing a feeble sound like an untaut [sic] string of a violin” (Hodge 1906: 136). Hodge also singled out Phillips’ decadent “purple prose” for pointed critique: “*Nero* is all purple [...] if unvaried purple be the right hue, the dye should have been better. Shabby purple has a mean effect [...] why cannot any of them speak to the point?” (Hodge 1906: 136) Although Hodge’s review does not mention Wilde directly, his obvious (and suggestively homophobic) distaste for both the artificial speech of symbolist drama and the pointless extravagance of “purple prose” carries echoes of other anxious and angry dismissals of decadent aestheticism in general and Wilde in particular.

The *New York Times* was less oblique. Its drama critic Montgomery Schuyler at once identified *Nero* with Wilde, in fact citing the very notion that a Wildean figure could be capable of assuming cultural power as the play’s chief dramatic shortcoming:

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The leit-motif of this present drama is, we will not say a rehabilitation, but a “historical synthesis,” if that be the latest expression, of the character of Nero. [...] Nero here is a degenerate aesthete, a late Roman Oscar Wilde, and the famous “Qualix artis pereio” might be the motif of the tragedy. Oscar Wilde, “Imperator” or Augustus, is in fact Mr. Phillips’ Nero. One must have his doubts. How any human community could at any time have accepted that variety of person as “serious,” let alone as a “ruler,” is one of those things that the drama omits to make plain. (Schuyler 1906: 172)

Both Schuyler’s incredulity and Hodge’s preference for masculine directness indicate the ascendance of that understanding of decadent (or ‘degenerate’) aestheticism as limply effeminate, imprecise, and incapable of action, which permeated literary modernism and arguably persists in vestigial form even today. Yet the very presence of a 1906 drama depicting a recognisably Wildean aesthete-terrorist, or an article railing against the “overt acts” that sever any distinction between aesthete and anarchist, attests to more than the growing understanding of Wildean aestheticism, during the first decades of the twentieth century, as apolitical, sterile, and ‘effeminate’, as antithetical to the progress of modern art and political thought. It also reminds us that, to some extent at least, this understanding has been retrofitted upon a movement that was just as commonly understood to be supremely – and dangerously – engaged.

Although, as Ann Ardis has persuasively demonstrated, by 1914 cultural attitudes towards decadent aestheticism and the figure of the aesthete had largely shifted from alarmist to dismissive, these examples reveal that as late as 1907 the Wildean type provoked as much outrage as condescension. Recent scholarship in Victorian, Modernist and Queer studies that recovers a “turn-of-the-twentieth century cultural landscape in which modernism did not (yet) throw gigantic shadows” offers a revised understanding of the socialist, utopian, even revolutionary politics of decadent aestheticism (Ardis 2002: 4). Elizabeth Miller’s work on William Morris, for instance, challenges critics to understand Morris not as either “a socialist trapped in the Aesthetic age, or an Aesthete mired down in socialist propaganda” (Miller 2008: 477), but instead as a figure crucial to

understanding the continuities between Aestheticism and revolutionary socialism. Similarly, Ardis argues that the conspicuous omission of Wilde in early avant-garde modernism's "creation of a usable past [as] a key means of [...] coming to terms with [...] the alleged chaos of the modern world" in fact speaks volumes about Wilde's haunting presence within the movement as "an ambiguously-gendered father figure whose paternity is dangerous to claim" (Ardis 2002: 47). Cassandra Laity too traces a Wildean genealogy of influence, observing that, as scholars begin to challenge decadent aestheticism's "alleged detachment from socio-political reality," we are increasingly able to create "new Decadent-to-modern trajectories engaging cultural studies – visual, material, popular – and/or socio-political theories of flux, nature, the body, 'utopia,' race, gender, and sexuality" (Laity 2008: 427-428). However, as the sections that follow will show, such important critical work expands rather than inaugurates this reassessment. For in the neo-Victorian landscape of *V for Vendetta* we find anticipated his very trend in critical approaches to decadent aestheticism, modernism, and Wilde himself.

## 2. *V for Vendetta: The Series*

In 1975, when Alan Moore was twenty-two years old, he entered a D.C. Thomson talent competition with what was, for its time, fairly explosive comic book material: "My idea concerned a freakish terrorist in white-face makeup who traded under the name 'The Doll' and waged war upon a totalitarian state" (Moore 1998a: 268). The competition judges "decided a transsexual terrorist was not quite what they were looking for," and Moore recounts how "faced with rejection I did what any serious artist would do. I gave up" (Moore 1998a: 268). Not for long, though. Five years later, with 'The Doll' figure still ranging around in his psyche, Moore teamed up with the artist David Lloyd to create a comic series set in the then near future of the late 1990s, in an England ruled by a fascist regime hostile to all individuals it deemed 'outsiders'. Reflecting on the process both went through to create their vigilante antihero 'V,' Moore identified the mélange of cultural and literary influences that eventually coalesced, in 1981, into this dark figure:

One night, in desperation, I made a long list of concepts that I wanted to reflect in V, moving from one to another with a

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rapid free-association that would make any good psychiatrist reach for the emergency cord [...] Huxley. Orwell. Vincent Price. David Bowie. Max Ernst's *Europe after the Rains*. Thomas Pynchon. Robin Hood. (Moore 1998a: 270)

In this list, we see artists whose work informs the kind of post-apocalyptic landscape that would emerge as the backdrop for the series, as well as figures who evoke the kind of vigilante justice meted out by the anti-hero at its center. Bowie, of course, was imagined as Wilde's affective descendant in Todd Haynes' 1998 film *Velvet Goldmine*, while Vincent Price enjoyed renewed fame for his portrayal of Wilde in the hugely-successful one-man show *Diversions and Delights* in the late 1970s. Both retain the elements of radical androgyny and dandyish aestheticism that Moore first envisioned for his "freakish terrorist" (Moore 1998a: 268).

David Lloyd responded to this surreal mix of androgynous anarchy with what would become the definitive addition:

Why don't we portray him as a resurrected Guy Fawkes, complete with one of those papier-mâché masks, in a cape and a conical hat? He'd look really bizarre and it would give Guy Fawkes the image he's deserved all these years. We shouldn't burn the chap every Nov. 5th but celebrate his attempt to blow up Parliament! ("Painted Smile" 272)

Without the Bowie/Price infusion carried forward from 'The Doll', the image of an anti-hero in mask, cape and conical hat might read fairly straightforwardly as a Fawkes reference. But with this dandified, decadent addition, the V that emerged first in the series and later in the film version of *Vendetta* also reads as a futuristic visual citation of Napoleon Sarony's 1882 portraits of the twenty-eight-year-old Oscar Wilde, dressed in his signature 'aesthetical' costume of his early career, with the addition of a stylised mask that cites and makes literal the cornerstone of Wilde's critical and aesthetic philosophies: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give a man a mask, and he will tell you the truth" (Wilde 2007: 185). And by recuperating a pre-modernist understanding of Wilde as societal threat and potent anti-hero, *Vendetta* was poised to give Wilde, like Fawkes, "the image he's deserved all these years".



**Figure 1:** Napoleon Sarony, “Oscar Wilde” 1882, reprinted with kind permission from the United States Library of Congress.



**Figure 2:** From *V for Vendetta* © 1988 DC Comics.

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**Figure 3:** From *V for Vendetta* © 2005 Warner Brothers.

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In 1981, his mask firmly in place, the character V burst on the comic book scene. Against the surreal backdrop of a post-apocalyptic London, this decadent aesthete-vigilante swoops into the narrative just in time to save the life of a young prostitute named Evey before proceeding to the more critical objective of his evening – blowing up the houses of parliament – all the while quoting Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and a familiar folk rhyme demanding all “remember, remember, the fifth of November, the Gunpowder treason and plot.” Evey is witness to this event, the pyrotechnics of which she admires as “so beautiful...” (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 11-14); thus, her series-long apprenticeship as aesthete-terrorist begins.

In these first pages, *Vendetta* announces itself as a comic series actively dismantling the common association of art and passivity,

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challenging popular dismissals of art “as the subordinate term in the masculine/feminine binary structure” (Sinfield 1994: 190). This narrative focus only becomes clearer as the series develops. In Book One, *Europe After the Reign*, we witness an anti-hero equally well-versed in literature and explosives blow up governmental buildings in an aesthetically-pleasing way, after which he transports his apprentice to a subterranean cultural archive, his “Shadow Gallery”, where he houses all works of art censored and outlawed by the regime in power. Young enough to have lived her whole life in ignorance of the paintings, sculptures, compositions and books preserved in this underground gallery, Evey must ask: “Are we still in London? [...] It’s unbelievable! All of these paintings and books [...] I didn’t even know there were things like this.” To which V replies: “You couldn’t be expected to know. They have eradicated culture. Tossed it away like a fistful of dead roses.” (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 18) The dead roses referred to here are emblematic, both of lost aesthetic cultures in general and of particular artists exterminated by the government: in the final chapter of book one, ‘The Vortex’, we find out that V, along with many others including a lesbian actress named Valerie, was imprisoned, experimented upon, and tortured at Larkhill, a “resettlement camp” for detainees deemed societal deviants.

Readers are never told exactly why V was imprisoned there; the text offers several clues based firmly in cultural stereotype, only to swiftly turn those stereotypes on their heads. A series of panels records one Larkhill doctor’s notes on the man in room five:

The man in room five is a really fascinating case. Physically, there doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with him. No cellular abnormalities, nothing. But he’s quite insane. [...] Strangely, he’s developed one of those curious side effects which seem to afflict certain categories of the schizophrenic: His personality has become totally magnetic. He says very little [...] but there’s something about the way he looks at you. He looked at me today as if I were some sort of insect. He looked at me as if he felt sorry for me. His face is very ugly. I’ve been thinking about it all day. (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 81)

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The “strange magnetism” of V’s personality, which fascinates without words and attracts with an ugliness so arresting it functions as beauty, is translated and made more acceptable to his captors through his proficiency for the domestic arts. This magnetic prisoner is allowed to work in the facility gardens, and under his green thumb crop production doubles. The same doctor observes that “Room Five” is now allowed to order his own garden materials; he has been given “a patch to grow flowers on. He grows roses, beautiful roses.” (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 81). These roses are immediately associated with cruelty and suffering, as this rhapsodic praise of V’s horticultural yield is followed immediately with the observation, “The woman in room one died this morning. The skin on her face and neck was like polythene.” (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 81) After his success at gardening, V asks to be employed as an interior decorator; the next panel records, “Sept. 18th. Garden doesn’t require much work this time of year. Room Five wants to help with the decorating in the staff quarters.” (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 81)

Here, the accumulation of cultural stereotype encourages readers to assume that the aesthete vigilante of *Vendetta*’s opening pages has been imprisoned for sexual deviance – he is, after all, both an excellent gardener and a gifted interior decorator. But if *Vendetta*’s readers understand V as a queer character based upon the stereotypes the narrative recycles to facilitate such a deduction, then as Wilde wrote in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” (Wilde 2000: 362) The woman in room one, we later find out, was Valerie – an actress imprisoned for being a lesbian, who consoled herself in the face of death by remembering the roses she and her lover grew together in their London garden. V’s foray into the domestic art of gardening served two non-stereotypical purposes: he grew roses in silent, outraged communion with Valerie, and he used his post as prison gardener to order copious amounts of garden fertiliser. Then, as Larkhill’s interior decorator, he ordered various paints and solvents that, combined with garden fertiliser, produce explosive results: “I was in the Mess. It was about half-past ten when I heard the explosion. [...] I couldn’t have known [...] the ammonia, the grease solvent and all the other stuff. He’d been making things with them. Mustard gas.” (Moore and Lloyd 1988: 83) In this complex series of panels, readers curious about V’s background are seduced into thinking that they, like the officials at Larkhill, can ‘type’ *Vendetta*’s anti-hero and thus understand his vendetta against an

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incarceratory homophobic society. But such thinking is swiftly undercut. V is revealed to have used the stereotypical association between aesthetic proficiency and passivity to his destructive advantage. Readers are placed in the shocked position of V's captors. Alan Moore, like V himself, deploys homophobic stereotypes, including the association of art with passivity, to explode them.

*V for Vendetta* ran for seven years. As the series evolved, its use of a late-Victorian affective landscape, as a bedrock upon which to stage its response to increasingly conservative policies regarding ethnic and sexual minorities, became more complexly intertextual. By Chapter 11, titled 'Valerie', the incarceration and state-sponsored murder of homosexuals is imagined as the ultimate outrage through which terrorist consciousness is created and transmitted. To transform his apprentice into a fearless enemy of the state, V creates a false prison – a virtual Larkhill – in which Evey herself is incarcerated and tortured. Just when her will is almost shattered, she finds steely resolve in a letter pushed through a hole in her cell wall. This autobiographical letter, written (so Evey believes) by an imprisoned lesbian named Valerie, records, preserves, and viscerally evokes a queer English past, one that cannot be eradicated by prison, torture, or exile. Evey emerges from her prison ordeal transformed by this letter, as did V before her – for she learns that although her imprisonment was an elaborate trick, the letter was real. The letter V passes to Evey is the same that was passed to him at Larkhill, the one that inspired him to plant roses and explode Mustard gas in Valerie's honour. Thus, the same letter facilitates both characters' transformation from victim to vigilante. Valerie's letter is the decisive propaganda – a queer epistolary autobiography turned countercultural weapon.

Of course, the idea that queer epistolary autobiography can be wielded as a countercultural weapon is not new to readers of Wilde. Although Wilde began the twentieth century as a pariah, by mid-century he was beginning to be embraced as victim and martyr. This transformation was facilitated in part by the piecemeal process whereby unexpurgated versions of Wilde's letters from prison and after, including the lengthy and controversial *De Profundis*, became available to the public. It was not until 1962 that Rupert Hart-Davis published unexpurgated versions of Wilde's late letters (including a mostly-complete version of *De Profundis*), in which the writer detailed the abuses he suffered both in prison and in exile before

dying in Paris in 1900. These letters played a large role in the transformation of Wilde from ultimate pariah and public menace at the start of the twentieth century into an object of pity and the first “gay martyr” towards its end. *V for Vendetta*’s use of the queer prison letter as vehicle for political transformation can therefore be understood as a provocative echo of Wilde’s *De Profundis* and its potent afterlife in the history of queer activism – an afterlife vividly remembered in the purple gothic script of a protest badge from the early UK gay rights movement, shown below.



**Figure 4:** “Avenge Oscar Wilde”. Artist unknown. Reproduced with kind permission from the Lesbian and Gay Newsmedia Archive (LAGNA).

V’s acts of vengeance, inspired by a letter from the past, transform *V for Vendetta*’s futuristic fascist dystopia into a neo-Victorian narrative that remembers Wilde to dramatise a trans-historical queer activism, in which one aesthete’s martyrdom inspires future acts of civil disobedience.

### 3. “I’m A-Go Wilde on You!”: The Evolving Wilde Type

In the same year *V for Vendetta*’s final installment appeared, Richard Ellmann published his still-definitive biography, *Oscar Wilde* (1987), a version of the Wilde story that, despite many acknowledged gaps and misconstructions, was the first to illustrate the full spectrum of threats Wilde, his works, and his persona posed to firmly-entrenched Victorian ideological systems. For, like *Vendetta*’s V, Ellmann’s Wilde is not a Victorian victim or martyr, but an iconic harbinger of modernity. The

biography's commercial success meant that many for the first time understood Wilde as active rather than passive, vengeful rather than requiring vengeance, physically imposing rather than retiring, a man with justified resentments against the moralistic, theocratic, judicial system that destroyed his career – a man, in short, who might understandably harbor multiple vendettas. Ellmann's documentary emphasis, greater than any previous biographer's, on Wilde's physical and mental suffering during his imprisonment, exile, and painful death in Paris, viscerally depicted the consequences of legislative homophobia, transforming the Wilde story into a narrative of martyrdom with clear implications for twentieth-century activists.

Ellmann's understanding of aestheticism in this biography complements that which emerges in *V for Vendetta*. In his introduction, Ellmann characterises Wilde as having “conduct[ed], in the most civilized way, an anatomy of his society, and a radical reconsideration of its ethics” (Ellmann 1987: xvi), and in a later chapter he expands upon this characterisation of an uncompromising aestheticism:

Wilde balances [...] two ideas which look contradictory: one is that art is disengaged from life, the other is that it is deeply incriminated with it. That art is sterile, and that art is infectious, are attitudes not beyond reconciliation. Wilde never formulated their union, but he implied something like this: by its creation of beauty art reproaches the world, calling attention to the world's faults by disregarding them, so the sterility of art is an affront or a parable. Art may also outrage the world by flouting its laws or by indulgently positing their violation. Or art may seduce the world by making it follow an example which seems bad but is really salutary. In these ways the artist moves the world towards self-recognition, with at least a tinge of self-redemption, as he compels himself to the same end. (Ellmann 1987: 329)

An Aestheticism which imagines art as a form of direct action through inaction, which by implication understands the aesthete as a socially-engaged anarchic prophet, seems incompatible with the aloof ‘art for art’s sake’ soundbite that echoes in many people’s heads in response to the word

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‘aesthete.’ And it is just this sense of aestheticism’s supreme disengagement, its social passivity, that *V for Vendetta* effectively and hyperbolically dismantled.

As he was completing *Vendetta*, Moore reflected upon the England in which he now found himself working:

It’s 1988 now. Margaret Thatcher is entering her third term of office and talking confidently of an unbroken Conservative leadership well into the next century. [...] the tabloid press are circulating the idea of concentration camps for persons with AIDS. The new riot police wear black visors, as do their horses, and their vans have rotating video cameras mounted on top. The government has expressed a desire to eradicate homosexuality, even as an abstract concept, and one can only speculate as to which minority will be the next legislated against. I’m thinking of [...] getting out of this country soon [...] I don’t like it here anymore. (Moore 1988b: 6)

Rather than leave, however, Moore worked with a group of likeminded artists on a collection entitled *A.A.R.G.H. – Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia*. This 1988 publication constitutes an artist-activist response to Section 28 of the Local Government Act which, as earlier noted, Alan Sinfield also discussed. The creative manifesto interestingly echoes and expands upon the themes and imagery of *Vendetta*. Neil Gaiman’s contribution, a panel entitled ‘From Homogenous to Honey’, imagines a spokesperson for an apocalyptic “new universe” who, concealed behind a *Vendetta*-esque mask, embarks upon a systematic purgation of all homosexual culture. Standing in front of a placard announcing a performance of Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the masked spokesman pauses to observe that “the presentation of plays by mollies and tribadites encourages people to see them in a positive light, especially if they’re any good”, before turning his machine gun upon Lady Bracknell and Earnest Worthing just as they begin the famous “handbag” exchange (Gaiman 1998: 45).



**Figure 5:** Detail, “From Homogenous to Honey”.  
Reproduced with kind permission from Neil Gaiman.

Moore’s own contribution to *A.A.R.G.H.*, a long poem entitled ‘The Mirror of Love’, likewise imagines Wilde as central to queer history. Whereas Wilde is mock-denounced in Gaiman’s comic as particularly insidious, precisely because of his influential canonisation and proven staying power, he becomes an outright historical martyr central to Moore’s poem. Although in both instances, Wilde is cast as a victim of homophobic legislation, we can nonetheless note here a queer comic subculture persistently utilising an iconography of Victorian martyrdom to politicise the art and activism of the present – an iconography with Wilde at its affective center.

By the mid-1990s Wilde seemed to be showing up everywhere in popular culture. In 1991 Dave Sim, who worked with Moore on *A.A.R.G.H.*, published *Melmoth*, a graphic novel that draws upon Wilde’s own letters, as well as letters written among friends recording his death, to visualise the artist in his dramatic last days at the start of the twentieth century. In 1995, the comic series *Jonah Hex* introduced a volume entitled *Wilde’s West* in which the Irish aesthete is shown to be equally well-versed in hand-to-hand combat as in aesthetic theory:

Wilde: Art! Music! Poetry! These are the juices of our souls!  
Cowboy: Pardon me, English feller [...] But you ain’t makin no sense.

Reckon them pants of yours have done mashed your knobs  
so tight you're talkin' out of your head.

Wilde: Perhaps, sir. But at least I have the knobs to be mashed.

[Wilde-instigated, Wilde-dominated brawl ensues.]

(Lansdale 1995: 28)



**Figure 6:** Detail, from “Jonah Hex: Riders of the Worm and Such” #2 © 1995 DC Comics. All Rights Reserved.

Alan Moore also wrote storylines for several comics after *Vendetta* that use the 1890s and Wilde himself as direct points of reference, creating first the comic series *From Hell* (1991-1996) in which Wilde appears as a minor character populating Jack the Ripper’s London, and then *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999 and ongoing), the 2003 film version of which imagines Wilde’s most iconic creation, the decadent Dorian Gray, as an aesthete superhero. Such frequent invocation of Wilde and Wildean contexts on the part of Moore and other graphic artists finally inspired parody. In the June 1997 issue of *Toyfare Magazine*, an enraged Wilde accuses Moore of willful misquotation (“I never said that!”), an accusation which prompts an epic battle in which Oscar, wielding an ivory-tipped walking stick with ninja-esque dexterity, proclaims, “I’m a-go Wilde on you!” (*Toyfare* 1997: 13)



**Figures 7:** Detail, from *Twisted Toyfare Theater* 106. Reproduced with kind permission from Wizard Entertainment.

The Wilde emerging in these later comics is the Wildean persona both *V for Vendetta* and Ellmann's biography helped to create: self-possessed, aggressively strong when necessary, willing to fight to protect both his person and his aesthetic persona. Together, these late twentieth-century popular transformations of the Wilde story underscore its still-transformative cultural power and follow the general trend away from vengeance for towards vengeance *from* the Wilde figure.

#### 4. *V for Vendetta: The Film*

As the latest installment in this trend, the 2005 film version of *V for Vendetta*, directed by James McTeigue and starring Hugo Weaving, Natalie Portman, Stephen Rea, and Stephen Fry, seems to more consciously foreground the connections between the aesthetics of vengeance of *V* and Wilde. In particular, the film builds upon and further highlights parallels present in the Moore/Lloyd series between Valerie's imprisonment and

prison autobiography and the historical antecedent of Oscar Wilde's own prison experience. Although this scene forms the emotional climax of both comic and film, other key alterations made at the character and plot levels mark the film's depiction of this moment of transformation as distinctly, instead of vaguely, Wildean.

First, the scriptwriters alter the original opening in two key ways. In the comic version, V enters quoting Shakespeare, proclaims himself "the king of the twentieth century", and then dispatches with talk in favour of the business at hand: blowing up the Houses of Parliament (Moore and Lloyd 1998: 13-14). In the film version, this first scene takes pains to demonstrate V's equal dexterity with weapons and wit – his command of language and his penchant for paradox are the first elements we identify in his character. His sonorous voice flows from behind his mask, and suddenly the mask proves more evocative of the paradox-wielding Wilde than Guy Fawkes – a mask which, as V's later insists, hides "more than flesh. Beneath this mask is an idea" (McTeigue 2005).

Evey: Who are you?

V: Who? Who is but the form following the function of what. And what I am is a man in a mask.

Evey: Well I can see that.

V: Of course you can. I am not questioning your powers of observation, I am merely remarking upon the paradox of asking a masked man who he is.

Evey: Oh. Right.

V: But on this most auspicious of nights, permit me then, in lieu of the more commonplace soubriquet, to suggest the character of this *dramatis persona*. Voila! In view, a humble vaudevillian veteran, cast vicariously as both victim and villain by the vicissitudes of fate. (McTeigue 2005)

In the film's version of *Vendetta*, V – as well-versed in musical theater as in aesthetic theory – invites Evey up to a "concert" on the rooftops overlooking the Old Bailey courthouse and its motto, carved in stone, promising to "punish the wrongdoer": "A more perfect stage," he observes, "could not be asked for." In the graphic novel version, V destroys the

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Houses of Parliament in this opening scene; only later does he destroy the Old Bailey as his second, dramatic architectural decimation, leading towards the ultimate target of 10 Downing Street. The film alters this narrative progression, depicting instead a long-haired, paradox-wielding man in a mask, who chooses the site where Oscar Wilde was tried and convicted in 1895 as the perfect one upon which to unleash an impeccably-staged act of vengeance against state-sponsored hatred:

Evey: It's beautiful up here.

V: A more perfect stage could not be asked for.

Evey: I don't see any instruments.

V: Your powers of observation continue to serve you well. But wait! It is to Madame Justice that I dedicate this concerto, in honor of the holiday she seems to have taken from these parts, and in recognition of the impostor that stands in her stead. Tell me, do you know what day it is, Evey?

Evey: Uh, November the 4th? [midnight bells chime]

V: Not anymore. (McTeigue 2005)

More dramatically even than the opening chapter of the graphic novel version, this opening scene codes V as an aesthete-terrorist in the Wildean mode, committed to preserving – in his sartorial choices, paradoxical conversation, even his explosive stagecraft – the art, music, literature, and cultural traditions deemed decadent and destructive by a theocratic regime reminiscent of the worst excesses of Victorian morality.

If, perhaps, this silver screen connection between the terrorist V and Oscar Wilde still seems like a stretch, consider another change to the story calculated to recall Wilde. In the graphic novel, a morally conflicted Evey flees V and his Shadow Gallery, seeking refuge at the home of a man named Gordon. In the original story, Gordon is a minor figure, present only to advance Evey's character arch: he offers Evey refuge and the two become lovers only hours before Gordon is killed by members of an underground mafia. In the film version, however, Gordon is a character central to both plot and theme. The cinematic Gordon, played by Stephen Fry, is a closeted gay satirist who enjoys a successful career as a television personality – famous for poking fun at English culture just enough to entertain himself

and his public, yet still avoid censure. The choice to rewrite Gordon as a celebrity satirist and secret homosexual who, by keeping his own Shadow Gallery of banned books, photographs and paintings, stands as a clear double for the anarchic V, becomes distinctly rather than vaguely Wildean through casting. For this altered character, of course, is played by Fry, himself an out gay actor whose pitch-perfect portrayal of Oscar Wilde in the 1997 film *Wilde* earned him a Golden Globe nomination. Hence, the alteration to the original story draws clear parallels between Fry's outlaw Gordon and the Wilde story.

When, in the first part of the film, Evey is introduced to V's Shadow Gallery, she exclaims, "God, if they ever found this place [...]" to which V replies, "I suspect if they do find this place, a few bits of art will be the least of my worries" (McTeigue 2005). Gordon's Shadow Gallery likewise preserves those examples of visual art, literature, religion, and sexual life banned by the current regime. When Evey, seeking refuge from both the police and from V, arrives at Gordon's posh London home, she is let into his secret, Gordon reassures Evey with words that directly echo the film's first Shadow Gallery scene:

Evey: Gordon, I know every cop in the country is looking for me. I know it's horrible of me to come here, to put you in this situation. If they find me here, you could be in terrible trouble!

Gordon: Evey, if the police ever searched my house you would be the least of my problems. You trusted me [...] it would be terrible manners for me not to trust you. (McTeigue 2005)

Opening a secret passage in a back wall, Gordon exposes a room full of banned books, paintings, and photographs – some depicting naked men in various sexual situations. Evey's sudden quiet comprehension of Gordon's own criminal status, both aesthetic and sexual, is met with a brief monologue from Gordon/Fry that, in its focus on sexuality, criminality, and masks, resonates in interesting ways with the 1997 *Wilde* biopic:

You see, we're both fugitives in our own way. You're wondering why you were invited here to supper in the first

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place if my appetites were for less conventional fare. Unfortunately, a man in my position is expected to entertain young and attractive ladies like yourself. Because, in this world, if I were to invite who I desired, I would undoubtedly find myself without a home, let alone a television show. [...] The truth is, after so many years, you begin to lose more than just your appetite. You wear a mask for so long, you forget who you were beneath it. (McTeigue 2005)

Both V and Gordon are, like Wilde, wearers of masks. Gordon is undone when he, like Wilde, uses art to push the limits of social and political critique and miscalculates both the reach of his fame and the reach of the law: after throwing out an ‘approved script’ to instead lampoon the government on national television, he is arrested in his home. His Shadow Gallery exposed, Gordon is swiftly imprisoned and executed for his multiple crimes against the state.

Evey, too, is captured and imprisoned, and told she must reveal the location of the terrorist or be executed herself. She resists. In between scenes depicting interrogation and torture, we watch as Evey reads and is transformed by a letter she finds hidden in the walls of her prison cell. This letter, written (as in the comic series) by a lesbian actress named Valerie, juxtaposes memories of artistic triumph and romantic fulfillment with visceral descriptions of a tortured, imprisoned present. This rhetorical structure is underscored by the images that accompany the letter: we watch Valerie’s past unfold in soft, golden focus, only to have the scene shift back to Evey, dressed in prison garb with her head shaved, tortured and interrogated before being thrown back into her cell where she recommences reading Valerie’s letter. This back-and-forth movement between images of a beautiful past and a horrible present amplifies what this essay has already shown to be the significant connections between *Vendetta*’s use of the letter from prison and Wilde’s *De Profundis*.

Wilde’s letter, like the film’s depiction of Valerie’s story, veers wildly between memories of past artistic and romantic triumphs and present ignominious suffering, and finally coalesces into a spiritual autobiography of sorts, in which one finds shame, anger, and hatred replaced with a poetics of suffering, humility, and ultimately, love:

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I have lain in prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair; an abandonment to grief that was piteous even to look at; terrible and impotent rage; bitterness and scorn; anguish that wept aloud; misery that could find no voice; sorrow that was dumb. I have passed through every possible mood of suffering. [...] Now I find hidden somewhere away in my nature something that tells me that nothing in the whole world is without meaning, and suffering least of all. That something hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, is humility. It is the last thing in me, and the best: the ultimate discovery at which I have arrived, the starting-point for a fresh development. [...] Of all things it is the strangest; one cannot give it away and another may not give it to one. One cannot acquire it except by surrendering everything that one has. It is only when one has lost all things, that one knows that one possesses it. (Wilde 2005: 96)

Of course, Wilde's new life after being released from prison in 1897 was not the *Vita Nuova* he hoped for; disgraced, impoverished, forcibly separated from his wife and children, depressed and unable to write, Wilde lived only three more years before dying at the age of forty-six in a small Paris hotel. It was his *De Profundis* (originally entitled by Wilde before his death as *Epistola: in carcere et vinculis*), initially published in a highly expurgated form by his closest friend and literary executor Robert Ross in 1905 but not revealed in its entirety until 1962, that became the gateway through which Wilde's literary reputation could be rehabilitated – a posthumous, martyred voice 'from the depths', perfectly packaged to entrance and galvanise future generations.

In the film version of *V for Vendetta*, Valerie's letter is put to exactly this same purpose. As in the graphic novel, here too the epistolary autobiography Evey reads turns out to have been placed there by V; the prison itself is an elaborate illusion constructed to facilitate Evey's transformation from victim to vigilante. The film further amplifies connections between Valerie's prison letter and Wilde's writings by imagining a lengthened version of Valerie's autobiography, in which we find clear structural and rhetorical echoes of *De Profundis*:

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It seems strange that my life should end in such a terrible place. But for three years I had roses, and apologized to no one. I shall die here. Every inch of me shall perish. Every inch but one. An inch [...] it is small and it is fragile, but it is the only thing in the world worth having. We must never lose it or give it away; we must never let them take it from us. I hope that whoever you are, you escape this place. I hope that the world turns, and things get better. But what I hope most of all is that you understand what I mean when I tell you that even though I do not know you, and even though I may never meet you, laugh with you, cry with you, or kiss you [...] I love you. With all my heart, I love you. (McTeigue 2005)

When viewers learn, through this dystopian, neo-fascist *epistola, in carcere et vinculis*, that the rose Valerie cherishes from her past is a varietal called ‘Scarlet Carson’, the same rose V himself cultivates in her memory and leaves behind as a calling card after exacting revenge upon his oppressors, they might think nothing more of the name. Yet readers convinced by this essay’s illustration of the subtle allusions to Wilde, infusing both comic and film versions of *V for Vendetta*, might view the re-named rose quite differently. For the film’s choice to replace the “Violet Carsons” (Moore and Lloyd 1998:63) of the graphic novel with this ‘Scarlet Carson’ variation links the names of precisely those men who played the most visible and central roles in Wilde’s downfall: Lord Queensberry, the man Wilde famously caricatured as the “screaming scarlet marquis” (see Shaw 1989:119 and Holland 2002: xvii) and Sir Edward Carson, the lawyer whose deft interrogation style was finally instrumental in turning Wilde’s unflappable wit against him.

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In the final pages of the original *Vendetta* series, the dead body of V is transferred by his grieving disciple to a subway car on London’s Victoria line, where it is laid out in a clear glass coffin and surrounded with lilies and explosives – twin symbols of the dangerous aestheticism *V for Vendetta* resurrected from the aftermath of the Wilde trials and retrofitted to the

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dystopian *fin-de-siècle* of 1990s London. Before dispatching this exquisite corpse to blow up 10 Downing Street, Evey offers this eulogy:

“Give me a Viking funeral” you said. That isn’t much. That isn’t much to ask. Not after all you did. You came out of an abattoir unharmed, but not unchanged. And saw freedom’s necessity. Not just for you, but for us all. You saw, and seeing, dared to do. How purposeful was your vendetta, how benign, almost like surgery. Your foes assumed you sought revenge upon their flesh alone, but you did not stop there [...] you gored their ideology as well. “Give me a Viking funeral,” you said. It’s yours, my love. Away you go, with all your gelignite and lilies. (Moore and Lloyd 1998: 260-261)

In the figure of Evey standing over the body of this criminal aesthete, her tears watering the lilies that will flower in explosive destruction, we find a powerful visualisation of how the dead can still function as agents of revolutionary action. The text’s ultimate fusion of gelignite with lilies, the aesthete’s signature flower, offers a perfect metaphor for what this essay has sought to demonstrate: that in its synthesis of aestheticism, decadence, and terrorism the character V recalls an early twentieth-century understanding of Wilde as anarchist and decadent aestheticism as cultural terrorism to galvanise a new generation of queer artists and activists.

In the epilogue to *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love notes that the queer figures that populate her own inquiry into queer historiography are ones “characterized by damaged or refused agency.” Yet, she asks, might such damaged figures from the past still retain the capacity to effect social change? “What kind of revolutionary action can we expect from those who have slept a hundred years?” (Love 2007: 147). I conclude by suggesting that in *V for Vendetta* we find a text profoundly engaged with this question. *Vendetta* restores to the Wildean aesthete its early-twentieth-century aura of criminality, and mobilises this aesthete-anarchist aura (along with broader aspects of the Wilde story) to craft its dystopian critique of England at the end of the twentieth century. In its rich, allusive dialogue with the Wilde figure and its iconic shift – from the early 1980s to 2005 – from avenged to avenger, *V for Vendetta* resurrects the *fin-de-siècle* figure

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of the decadent aesthete-terrorist, dead for a hundred years, to stand as the iconic lightning rod of a new aesthetic revolution.

### **Note**

The author has made every reasonable effort to contact holders of image copyrights.

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