# CARNIVALESQUE DAZZLE IN *WISE CHILDREN*

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*Abstract*

This study focuses on the spirit of the carnivalesque, which permeates Angela Carter's last novel. Although carnival is problematic to women with its male-dominated tendency and inherent limits, it is employed as a major form for subversion in *Wise Children*, a novel structured in five chapters, in a self-conscious nod to its dramatic source.

**Keywords: carnival, high/low culture, mask, performance, subversion**

Theatre and performance represent a means of cultural encounter, in which the shift from comedy to tragedy occurs in different styles and registers, in view of helping us to acknowledge that the past is filtered through clashing discourses, whose values we should question before we adopt. Angela Carter stressed the significance of Shakespeare's theatre in many interviews, aiming to reclaim him from what she regarded as the confines of high culture, as well as stressing the various ways in which alternative ages and cultures have adapted his work:

> "The extraordinary thing about English literature is that actually our greatest writer is the intellectual equivalent of bubblegum, but can make a 12 year-old cry, can foment revolutions in Africa, can be translated into Japanese and leave not a dry eye in the house." (Sage, 1994:187)

She pays homage to him in her last novel, *Wise* Children, where he becomes the symbol of capital with his presence on "not just any old bank note but on a high denomination one" (Carter, 1992:191), and, above all, the subject of interpretation in music-hall, vaudeville, television, advertising and Hollywood productions.

The themes of style and theatricality flood Carter's fictions. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin states that carnival is an event that liberates participants from social restraints, and stresses the materiality of the body by celebrating a grotesque image. Carnivalesque writing is that which "has taken the carnival spirit into itself and thus reproduces, within its own structures and by its own practice, the characteristic inversions, parodies, and discrownings of carnival proper" (Dentith, 1995:65). The issue women have against the model outlined by Bakhtin, is that carnival is well-suited to masculinity but ill- fitting to femininity. Owing to the masquerading nature of femininity, in Carter's view "to be a woman is to be in drag" (Sage, 1994:304), so women are already impersonating in the 'real' world. The idea of transgressive carnival which seems to presuppose "a monistic world" (Webb, 1994:304) as its base, is incompatible with the decentred experience of the female gender performance.

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In a Cockney narrative voice, Dora Chance joins the carnival of pleasure. In view of Dora's cautioning against the limits of carnival, Linden Peach reads Dora's narrative voice mainly from the "down stage position" of the "Renaissance stage bastard" (Peach, 1998:152), emphasizing the theatrical element as the primary writing position in Carter's late fictions:

> "If there is a single position from which Carter writes in *Wise Children*, it is not the carnivalesque*per se* but the theatre. …she appears to write from the theatre conceived as a location of illegitimate power, pursuing the creative possibilities in the way in which in the Renaissance 'illegitimacy' and 'theatre' were often linked. From this vantage point of view, she is able to explore different sites of illegitimate power associated with the theatre, such as the carnivalesque, the mask, the brothel, and the social margins. Indeed, the source of the carnivalesque element in *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* was undoubtedly Shakespeare rather than Bakhtin…" (Peach, 1998:145)

The source of Carter's carnivalesque is seen as Shakespearean, for the combination of both "the solemn canonical words and the vernacular counterparts" in his plays is also pursued in *Wise Children*: "the interest in the coexistence of two strands – the solemn and the carnivalesque – mirrors the coexistence of the illegitimate with the legitimate" (Peach, 1998:148).

The bastard daughters' story of *Wise Children* is an allegory of how women appropriate the male-centered cultural legacy and find a language to speak their experiences. The result is given a deliberately parodic kitsch effect by Carter with the hybridization of high cultural forms with the popular ones. She also examines the relationship the carnival daughters have with their paternal culture. The figure of Shakespeare as the supreme metaphor for English culture is used to illustrate the tragicomic game of attraction and oppression played by daughters and sons.

Female desire inspires the daughters to participate in the father's carnival and also releases the daughter from the tragic grip of a history troubled by problematic fatherhood. In order to assign meaning to herself, outside the male structure, the woman has to look for a new basis for personal identification. Being other in a group that is already marginal becomes a means of self-identification. In *Wise Children* the pairs of identical twins are a key method the female characters exploit to insure the blurring of the self.Once the differences are covered, they have the power to direct the course of events.

The mistaken identities, the inversions and the twists that follow as the twins and their metaphorical equivalents, become better defined in the story, give way to chaos and laughter and spice up the carnivalesque elements of the novel.

> "We're stuck in the period at which we peaked.… All women do. We'd feel mutilated if you made us wipe off our Joan Crawford mouths.... We always make an effort. We paint an inch thick. We put on our faces before we come down to breakfast...." (Carter,1992:5-6).:

Carter deeply alters the definition of woman by distancing her central female characters from the standard roles and stereotypes, especially marriage and motherhood.

On a closer examination, the carnivalesque space Dora presents in her narrative is more a feminist parody than an inheritance of the patriarchal carnival of Shakespeare. In Shakespeare's theatre, the comic low is placed alongside the legitimate but it ends up in being reabsorbed into the patriarchal order. Dora's 'vulgar' narrative voice moves the story on mimicking the tones of high culture. Prospero initiates a wind to disrupt the illegitimate order and re-establish the legitimate one, whereas in Dora's narrative the tempest invoked by Peregrine brings no real change without her intervention.

Dora has absolutely no reverence for the more exalted characters in the novel. The Lady Atlanta Hazard, first wife to Dora's father, Melchior, becomes "Wheelchair" after her daughters try to kill her. And even when she is at her height of beauty and glory, Dora describes her as "a fair-haired lady with a sheep's profile," (Carter, 1992:56) and "a sheep in a tiara" (Carter, 1992:70).

Saskia and Imogen are also described as resembling "sheep with bright red fleece" (Carter, 1992:74). Dora bluntly refuses to pay homage to her social "superiors", and is more inclined towards taking off their masks: " 'The lovely Hazard girls', they used to call them. Huh. Lovely is as lovely does; if they looked like what they behave like, they'd frighten little children," (Carter, 1992:7).

She is always ready to laugh at the absurd, no matter how elaborate its disguise. In her eyes and consequently in the story, social class divisions make no sense. She brings out everybody's flaws, including hers, backed up by shame and few regrets.

Dora's subversion can be analyzed in two stages, first in her youth and later in her old age. When she was young, she seemed engrossed in performing the sexy dancer role; when she grew old, she learned to see things as Grandma Chance did, coming to the conclusion that "nothing is a matter of life and death except life and death" (Carter,1992:215). Her illegitimate, old-hag position gives her a vantage point to see through the theatricality of the tragic pose of the failed father figures.

Sharing the same popular cultural space as Shakespeare's, the Chance sisters inherit its comic subversion with a sense of alienation. But in this ambiguous state of both inheriting and disinheritance, the overlapping paternal and maternal strands in the family tradition complicate the situation. The family history, reconstructed by Dora, can be traced back to their Victorian grandparents on the paternal side, Ranulph and Estella Hazard, the two most distinguished Shakespearean players of their generation. Their acting career, beginning from the mid-nineteenth century, spans the period of the rise and fall of the British empire. The grandparents represent two distinct performing traditions which sum up Carter's observation of sexual subjects as masqueraders. One totally identified with the sexual role he/she plays, the other, seeing through the 'make-believe' of the act, played it with laughter.

In the family's theatrical tradition, the maternal Estella stands for the subversive laughter whereas the paternal Ranulph, wearing the mask of the tragic hero, is unable to take it off. "Shakespeare was a kind of god for him' and he thinks, as Dora notes, 'the whole of human life was there" (Carter, 1992:14). His belief in Shakespeare is so intense

that the dramatic personas he had played on stage became more real than real life to him while he became a live puppet of them. The tragic scenarios run so deep in his character that they eventually substitute for his life-story.

In contrast, his wife Estella could not help but "giggle" (Carter, 1992:14) during the tragic scenes, a comic indication of her seeing through its theatrical sense. Ranulph plays heroic, patriarchal roles, while Estella is a gender performer. She can play Hamlet as well as Cordelia. They make up contradictory lines of life as performance in the family's theatrical tradition.

Dora is not the sole female carnival player in the novel. Nora, Daisy Duck (the Hollywood sex star) and Estella feature significantly in the show. If we take their play collectively, we can find a linking point in their separate acts, as they all play out a daughter's transgression against patriarchal rule. The female subversion of the male carnival takes the form of tragedy turned into farce and bawdy. Estella gives her Lear a paper crown to mark his display of royal dignity. Dora, Nora and Daisy Duck share a common symbol for their transgressions – Melchior's Shakespearean casket. It is a container made in the shape of the playwright's bald head, filled with the sacred earth from Stradford-upon Avon, completely fouled by Daisy's cat, which uses it as a piss-pot. As the Shakespearean pot becomes an empty container, Dora and Nora fill it with Hollywood dirt at Melchior's opening ceremony of his film adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The episode is farcical, pointing out the vulgarization of high art by mass culture, while implying a female satire on the worship of the father figure, Shakespeare.

Dora's reconstruction of the family history in terms of the paternal/maternal, tragic/comic theatricality is a cultural allegory. If in the theatrical family the patriarchal tradition has always been the dominant one, there is a subversive force of boundary-crossing in the figure of Estella, the irrepressible wife murdered by Ranulph. The two directions pass on to their twin sons Melchior and Peregrine, with Melchior continuing his father's tradition, Peregrine the mother's celebration of life as carnival. Following his father's faith in the transcendent greatness of Shakespeare worshipped beyond categories of gender, class and race, Melchior dedicates his life to impersonating Shakespeare's heroes. His identity, like that of his father, is occupied by the theatre's royal figures. In contrast to Melchior's "all for art" Peregrine is "out for fun", "a holy terror and couldn't keep a straight face, just like his mother" (Carter,1992: 22).

Another difference also sets the two brothers apart. Different from Melchior's princely charm, Peregrine is endowed with a charm of "pulp romance" (Carter,1992: 30) which links him to pop culture. He also continues his mother's talent for sexual transgression and celebration of light comedy in defiance of the tragic hero's death. He is a magician who can summon doves out of handkerchiefs (Carter,1992:31), make a full set of china and cutlery disappear after an afternoon picnic (Carter,1992:62), snatch a couple of cream buns from Grandma Chance's cleavage (Carter,1992:73) or, best of all, extract a scarlet macaw from Melchior's tights.

Perry is like a travelling carnival, turning sudden disappearances into an art. When he finally reappears, he brings fun and revelry with him. It is he who first introduces Dora and Nora, at an early age, to the magic of the phonograph, and the joy of song and dance (Carter, 1992:33). Yet, beyond his conjuring talents and his ability to raise the spirits of those around him into a celebratory state, events themselves often take up an aura of magic when Perry comes to visit. On one occasion, Perry suggests that they dance: "As I remember it, a band struck up out of nowhere.... Or perhaps it was Perry on his harmonica, all the time, who provided the music, so that we could dance for him"(Carter,1992:68). Later, even stranger things ensue:

> "Peregrine spread his arms as wide as wings and gathered up the orphan girls, pressed us so close we crushed against his waistcoat, bruising our cheeks on his braces' buttons. Or perhaps he slipped one of us in each pocket of his jacket. Or he crushed us far inside his shirt, against his soft, warm belly, to be sustained by the thumping comfort of his heart. And then, hup! he did a back-flip out of the window with us, saving us" (Carter,1992:72).

He is monumental – "the size of a warehouse, bigger, the size of a tower block" (Carter, 1992:206) and as far as he's concerned "life's a carnival"'(Carter,1992:222). As Dora says, he is "always the lucky one, our Peregrine, even in his memories, which [a]re full of laughter and dancing; he always remember[s] the good times" (Carter,1992:18).

Peregrine is apparently presented as the embodiment of male-dominated carnival, but he is also a key figure in showing Dora the fantastic exchange between illusion and reality. He is not the only carnival player, and, more importantly, he is unable to transgress his own sexual role. Dora is the one playing the tigress to seduce him on his centenary birthday as she is the other key carnival player. If carnival is a site of the cultural low subverting the high, the illegitimate other overthrowing the legitimate center, then Dora's position is closer to the carnivalesque than Peregrine's. He may be the male force mocking patriarchal authority, making his father Melchior jump for the paper crown, but it is Dora who subverts the male carnival as she joins the game.

Carter's critique of the imperialist use of Shakespeare appears in Dora's satirical narration of the Hazard family's ambition to tour and enlighten the world with the Bard's words. The satire is directed at the national cult, not at the dramatist, and Carter's message is that the spreading of the Bard's words has become a family mission paralleling the British imperialistic enterprise. From the novel's feminist point of view, the Hazard's dream of spreading the 'seeds' to the world indicates a patriarchal desire to Anglicize the globe or educate it with great Shakespearean heroes.

Dora and Nora's rise to fame includes their participation in *What? You Will?*, a musical revue with crazy numbers, such as the Hamlet sketch, where the twins, dressed as bellhops, question whether a package should be delivered "2b or not 2b". The dazzling collection of sketches mentioned addsto the allure of the production whose title is punctuated differently for virtually each usage in the novel.

Secondly, the twins play Peaseblossom and Mustardseedin *The Dream*, a full-fledged, classical-Hollywood production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, rife with a water

ballet, "kaleidoscope effects", a cascade, all the requisite aspects to turn the work from classical to kitsch. The film is an extravagant example of a shameless commodification of Shakespeare, as Dora's regretful voice suggests:

"What I missed most was illusion. That wood near Athens was too, too solid for me […] there wasn't the merest whiff about the kind of magic that comes when the theatre darkens, the bottom of the curtain glows." (Carter, 1992:125)

All the Shakespearean-style villainy, comic relief and intricate plot elements are revised and re-enacted and they shape a new story, whose love triangles off set literally blow up the production.

The ultimate carnival transgression Dora commits is her and Nora's dressing themselves up as their seventeen-year-old selves when they are seventy-five. They appear at their father's centenary party as female impersonators inviting and defying the public gaze:"we painted the faces that we always used to have on to the faces we have now. From a distance of thirty feet with the light behind us, we looked, at first glance, just like the girl who danced with the Prince of Wales" (Carter, 1992:192).

Nora's remark shows how femininity and masculinity are both theatrical performance, as well as the anxiety that lies behind the play: "'It's Every woman's tragedy that, after a certain age, she looks like a female impersonator,'" and it is "Every man's tragedy" that "'*he* doesn't'" (ibid.).The theatre becomes thus the Lacanian 'scopic field', in which the subject performs for the public gaze. Dora has sex in the father's bedroom, Grandama goes naked in the boarding house, Melchior invokes his father's role.

No matter how problematic the theatrical tradition is, what the Chance sisters have inherited from their paternal line falls within the popular cultural realm to which Gorgeous George belongs. The site they inhabit is, however, a female one. The power is shown through their legs, linking them to their grandmother, Estella: "'We've got the legs from her', Dora asserted" (Carter, 1992:12) and to her carnival power.

The maternal, the low-cultural and the illegitimate are three equal terms in the high cultural realm. In the modernist imagination, female performative art, be it dancing, singing, sewing or cooking, was considered unoriginal. On the other hand, the figure of woman is elevated to the status of the muse, inspiring male artists. This paradoxical approach is exemplified in Dora's relationship with the depressed playwright Irish, a writer whose talent is crippled by his involvement with the Hollywood industry. Coming to him as a muse who made the world look "like a benediction" (Carter, 1992:120) to him, Dora represents a split image of femininity. She both inspires his writing, the *Hollywood Elegies*, and emerges as a "vulgar", "painted harlot" from his stories. To him, Dora illustrates vulgar mass culture, the Hollywood he "loved to hate". Although Dora's "vulgarity" needs Irish's "philanthropic" (Carter, 1992:13) education in order to find a language and tell her story, she does not allow his vision to substitute for hers. "That California sunshine", portrayed as "insincere" by Irish, is regarded by Dora as "the most democratic thing" (Carter, 1992:121) shining on everyone.

Dora and Nora, the two perfect dolls on stage, seem absorbed by the forces of mass culture, hitting rock bottom as *Nudes* in vaudeville. They are however able to counter the power of mass culture to objectify their body, and the disdain high art has for their art, with the help of Grandma Chance's lesson in survival "Hope for the best, expect the worst" (Carter,1992:168). Whether treated as the inferior other or as the inspirational muse, Dora and Nora choose the vulgar comedy of love, measured in number of lovers, to resist the tragedy of love and death. Music-hall dancing becomes a manifestation of sexual and cultural assertion.

While this type of manhood loses its appeal, the carnivalesque type Peregrine embodies maintains its transgressive power. The carnival side of Shakespeare is, in my opinion, what fascinates Carter, a fascination voiced through Dora as narrator.

Dora allows her vision of events to slip even further from the bonds of realism and shift into a magical realist perspective. Anything can, and does happen. And so it is that during the party following the filming of the movie *The Dream*, the set of the Athenian wood can be transformed:

> "The tin roof over our head seemed to have cracked open and disappeared, somehow, because there was a real, black sky above us... And I no longer remember that set as a set, but as a real wood, dangerous, uncomfortable, with real, steel spines on the conkers and thorns on the bushes, but looking as if it were unreal and painted, and the bewildering moonlight spilled like milk in this wood, as if Hollywood were the name of the enchanted forest where you lose yourself and find yourself, again; the wood that changes you; the wood where you go mad; the wood where the shadows live longer than you do." (Carter, 1992:157-8)

Here, we catch a glimpse of the ambivalence of the carnivalesque since the magical aspects of the revelry are also reminders of mortality. The celebration of life may be ongoing, but the individuals are transient. The carnivalesque celebrates the cycle of birth, life, death and transformation, drawing our attention to mortality at the same time.

The revelry of the carnivalesque displays its darker side as well. This darker side is as intriguing an aspect as the brighter one, and it fuels the excitement of the protagonists (Danow,1995). The climax of all the wild, surreal celebrations can be found at the end of the novel, during Melchior's 100th birthday celebration, a party jazzed up with monumental laughter. There are shadows of death and betrayal, but also relief, once the reports of both Perry and Tiffany's deaths are invalidated.

The heterogeneous collection of characters in *Wise Children* marks the novel as carnivalesque, a site of grotesque realism that, in Bakhtin's words, "discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world" (1984:48). Dora adopts a comic vision on life, although the tragedy of the two sisters pondering on a childless old age is evident. But she fights off the tragic sense with a comic mask "I refuse point-blank to play in tragedy" (Carter, 1992:154). Three-month old twins, "brown as [...] quail[s], round as [...] egg[s]" (Carter, 1992:226), are presented to Dora and Nora, courtesy of Perry, so that the novel

ends with the marvellous, utterly carnivalesque image of the laughing hags, serenading their new babies as they head toward their home on Bard Road.

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