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Performing (and) Identity In
Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*
and *Wise Children*

by

Janine Root © B.A. B.Ed

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Abstract

In her last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, Angela Carter examines some of the complex factors involved in the construction of identity, both within the fictional world, and for readers in their interaction with the world of the fiction. Of these factors, gender is of primary importance. The thesis shows that identity is a product of the interaction between individuals and their audience, informed by the multiple contexts surrounding them. Individuals create identities through performance and are simultaneously created by the reception/perception of their performances.

The thesis also argues that the relationship between performer and audience is similar in many ways to the relationship between the texts and their readers. Through a number of different techniques, Carter's novels make readers aware of the ways in which the story is told, and draw them into an active relationship with the texts. In these ways, Carter's novels question authority and destabilize meaning, both through narrative technique, and the questions about the nature of identity posed by the fictional characters.

The first chapter examines identity in *Nights at the Circus*, particularly the ways in which Fevvers disrupts the category of Woman and resists having her identity reduced to

appearance only. The second chapter looks at the narrative, examining the rhetorical strategies used by both Fevvers and Carter to keep readers actively engaged with the text.

The third chapter turns to *Wise Children* and the way in which Dora comes to understand herself in relation to her status as a twin and her position within her various families. The final chapter demonstrates that Dora blurs genre boundaries and distinctions between high and low culture in order to give voice to her biological and artistic illegitimacy.

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Introduction

The ways in which individuals understand themselves and their relationship with the world around them is an ongoing concern in the fiction of Angela Carter. Joanne M. Gass claims that the focus of Carter's

entire oeuvre, from her first published novel, *Shadow Dance* (1965) to her last, *Wise Children* (1991), was the material world, its representations, and the effects of its representation upon the body -- particularly, but not exclusively, woman's body. (7)

Much critical attention on Carter has focused on either her method of representing the world, or her treatment of the female body, especially the female sexual body. Because of her conscious examination of women and the construction of femininity, Carter's work has often been discussed from a feminist perspective. Her fiction has also been discussed in terms of its relationship to postmodernism, Marxism, magic realism, the carnivalesque, the picaresque, the grotesque, pornography, psychoanalysis, and fairy tales, to name but a few approaches. Although some have commented on the "mythic quality" of her work, Carter rejects that label:

I become mildly irritated (I'm sorry!) when people, as they sometimes do, ask me about the "mythic quality" of work I've written lately.

Because I believe that all myths are the products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice. I'm in the demythologising business.

I'm interested in myths . . . just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree. (Notes 70-71)

In order to go about her "demythologising business," she investigates "certain configurations of imagery in our society" in order to discover "what they really mean, underneath the semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them" (Katsavos 12).

The configurations of imagery with which Carter interferes most are those based on binary opposites. In Western culture, we have traditionally relied on binary opposites in order to derive meaning. The central binary is male/female; all other binary pairs eventually relate back to this pair. In her discussion of Hélène Cixous, Toril Moi lists binary "couples" to show that "the hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as the underlying paradigm" (105). Cixous's interrogation of binary logic works from Jacques Derrida's critique of it, which demonstrates that meaning "is not produced in the static closure of the binary opposition. Rather, it is achieved through the 'free play

of the signifier'" (Moi 105-6). The assumptions underlying binary logic result from/in a naturalization of the hierarchical system that it supports/creates. The system functions only as long these assumptions are not questioned. Carter's fiction questions these assumptions in order to draw attention to the artifice behind what we perceive to be natural.

By examining the ways in which gender is a social construction, a "system of meaning, rather than a quality 'owned' by individuals," (Robinson 1) Carter also calls into question traditional notions of identity and subjectivity. Rather than positing individuals who are either subject, actively defining themselves in opposition to a voiceless Other, or object, passively defined through the gaze of the subject, different elements of Carter's fiction combine to make space for a continuum of positions that fall between the two extremes. Individuals exist within a complex network of ever-changing relationships, in which they are simultaneously created by others as they (re)create themselves in relation to how they are seen and what they see.

Recognizing that identity is fluid, that we exist in a space between being the author of ourselves and being at the mercy of the perception of others, is only the first step, however. It is necessary to examine the elements of this

network that restrict possibilities and keep certain "types" of individuals in positions of limited agency. Identity and gender are both understood in terms of their articulation as narratives which are made up in, and made sense of through, their location within specific contexts.

Carter's main focus regarding identity, especially in her last two novels, *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children*, is to reveal the fictional nature of gender, which is the crux of identity. Destabilizing gender as a natural, inviolable category is one of the ways that Carter accomplishes her work as a demythologiser in these novels. The protagonists of both novels disrupt the category of Woman in different fashions: Fevvers through her unique biology, and Dora through her identity as a twin.

An examination of the way in which Fevvers embodies contradiction, and thus acts as a force which disrupts binary logic, will begin Chapter One. Not only does Fevvers herself demonstrate the complexity of individual identity, through her we are presented with multiple stories of other women, demonstrating the diversity of women that exists despite attempts to restrict their identities to appearance only. The danger of identity being reduced to appearance is demonstrated by the clowns. Chapter Two examines the rhetorical strategies of the various voices within and of the text. The meaning of a text is compared to individual

identity; it is shown to be a process created by the intersection of the text and its readers. Identity emanates from individuals, but they do not have complete control over the way in which they will be read. Similarly, the meaning of a novel begins with the words on the page, but will ultimately be different for each reader. "Objective" reading becomes impossible if there is no correct position from which to read. The boundary between fact and fiction is blurred by both Fevvers and the narratives presented by and around her.

Chapter Three turns to *Wise Children*, and illustrates the similarity in strategies used to disrupt binary logic. The focus in this novel is gender roles within the family, specifically those of father and mother. Questions of legitimacy and illegitimacy are also central, and lead to a revisioning of the notion of family. Issues relating to narrative are taken up again in Chapter Four. The narrative style is very verbal, and works to blur distinctions between written and oral communication, and questions the different values placed on high and low culture. This is yet another way that Carter goes about her demythologising business. Rather than treating certain aspects of "official" culture with reverence, she "regard[s] all of western Europe as a great scrap-yard from which [she] can assemble of sorts of new vehicles . . . bricolage." (Haffenden 92).

One aspect of "low" culture that particularly interested Carter was film. Feminist film theory has done much work to examine the ways in which gender is presented visually, and how certain types of representation function to reinforce and reproduce the naturalization of two distinct genders. In classic Hollywood cinema, women are displayed for the visual pleasure of the viewer, and the gaze of the camera assumes the viewer is a heterosexual male. Out of gaze theory and the close examination of the representations of women in cinema, there arose the theory of masquerade, which suggests that a deliberate flaunting of oneself as a knowing object of the gaze can transcend the limitations and restrictions inherent in the gaze:

Masquerade, Doane argues, is a mode of "flaunting femininity," of a woman producing *herself* "as an excess of femininity" (81). Doane suggest that, since patriarchal culture constructs femininity as masquerade in the first place, self-consciously assuming that position can lead to its deconstruction. . . . The masquerade, conceived as a double strategy of acceptance and denial of femininity, is, thus, a means toward subverting all notions of a "natural" femininity. If one can both take it and leave it, then gender becomes a performance rather than an essence. (Robinson 119-

120):

Both novels clearly subvert notions of "natural" femininity by revealing the costuming necessary to appear a "natural" woman. As to the question of what exists beneath the masquerade, Robinson positions herself in opposition to the Lacanian notion that femininity masks nonidentity:

The most satisfactory answer to the question of what the masquerade masks is *nothing* -- not the nothing that women are granted within a phallic psychoanalytic conception of sexual difference but, rather, a no-thing in the sense that there is no feminine being prior to the performances of gender, whether those performances be through masquerade or any other (self) representational strategy. As Judith Butler puts it, we might then conclude that the masquerade "may be understood as performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearance that makes itself convincing as a 'being'" -- with the consequence that "all gender ontology is reducible to a play of appearances"

¹ Robinson is quoting from Mary Ann Doane's article "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator." *Screen* 23 (Sept / Oct 1982): 74-87.

² For Lacan, "the mask . . . is seen as feminine (for men and women), rather than something that hides a stable feminine identity. Femininity is a mask which masks nonidentity" (qtd in Russo 69).

(47). (Robinson 121)³

The issues relating to identity raised by and in relation to the protagonists of *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* clearly indicate that a stable and easily quantifiable identity is mythical.

Michael Hardin observes that gender identity is based primarily upon "superficial and substanceless signifiers such as clothing, makeup, hair style, and even occupation" because the biological signifiers of sex difference, the sex organs, are concealed (79). He asserts that all acting suggests the possibility of cross-dressing and the instability of identity attendant with it. Cross-dressing disrupts the signifying chain through a refusal to conform to "the socially constructed external appearances for male and female" (79), and therefore "exposes the fragility of the entire signifying system" (80).

Both *Nights at the Circus* and *Wise Children* take place in explicitly performative spaces. Of the latter, Hardin suggests that "Carter places all her characters in overtly acting and performing environments; this encourages the reader to look at the entire novel as Bakhtinian carnival" (80). He quotes Russo on the nature of carnival, suggesting that it "destabilize[s] the distinction and boundaries that

³Robinson is quoting from Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990.

mark and maintain high culture and organized society" (80). While it is undeniable that there are elements of Bakhtinian carnival throughout both novels, Carter's relationship with Bakhtinian notions of the carnivalesque is complex. Carnival has subversive and liberating possibilities; however, it is also an outlet sanctioned by authority⁴. As well, carnival is, by its very nature, temporary. Carter herself points this out at the end of her short story "In Pantoland":

As Umberto Eco once said, "An everlasting carnival does not work." You can't keep it up, you know; nobody ever could. The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is transience. It is here today and gone tomorrow, a release of tension not a reconstitution of order, a refreshment . . . after which everything can go on again exactly as if nothing had happened.

Things don't change because a girl puts on trousers or a chap slips on a frock, you know. Masters were masters again the day after Saturnalia ended; after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind . . . (Burning 389)

⁴ "The circus provides a forum whereby society may indulge itself without, in fact, exposing itself to the dangers that the clowns represent. We must not forget that carnival is a legitimized event "allowed" by the power structure." (Gass, Panopticism 74).

Carnival does not offer solutions for transformation, and Carter does not use it as a path to redemption. She uses it because it provides another way of looking at the usually invisible hierarchies and rules of gender and identity. In pantomime, a man dressing like a woman can more clearly demonstrate the fact that the characteristics of femininity can be adopted and discarded at will.

Identity construction can be seen to parallel the act of writing and/or performing, as the process of reading the identity of others parallels the process of reading a text. There are a variety of factors which affect the way in which we read. Marxist theory indicates that art reflects economic relationships and realities, and the message(s) taken from a text are intimately connected to the material reality of the audience. The worth of the message is evaluated by the hierarchies that rule in a given context. Similarly, the reading of individual identity, and the value judgments made from a reading, are tied to the marketplace. The dominant material reality of Carter's fiction is a system wherein women('s bodies) are commodified. The complex reality of women's existence is reduced and they are granted status as sex objects and/or ideas. Women are considered props, rather than players, objects rather than subjects. Carter's fiction creates a space wherein women must be recognized as active and productive, writing their

own narratives and acting roles of their own choosing.

Like the identities of the characters within her novels, Carter's novels are impossible to pin down and confine to one reading or meaning. In her writing she tries to "present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fiction" (69). One of the most memorable and entertaining elements of Carter's fiction is Fevvers, the protagonist of *Nights at the Circus*.

Chapter 1 Fully Feathered Fact or Fiction?

The protagonist of *Nights at the Circus* is Fevvers, a woman with wings. "Is she fact or is she fiction?" is her motto. The question provides us with two options, suggesting that she is simply one or the other. It is expected that she is either fact or fiction, (ordinary) woman or freak, (ordinary) woman or symbolic woman, virgin or whore. The question is not simply one of feathered appendages; it is also one of gender. The mystery of Fevvers is not that she is a bird-person, but that she is a bird-woman. Her wings are only one way in which she deviates from the expectation of what a woman ought to be.

Gender identity is the primary constituent of human identity. As I stated in the introduction, because the reliable signs of gender difference, the genitals, are covered, we rely on factors such as clothing, posture and manner to signify gender (Hardin 79). These signifiers of gender identity are no more natural or universal than signifiers in language, but are based on social convention. Proceeding on this assumption, both feminist and poststructuralist theory is concerned with interrogating essentialist definitions of women:

For feminist theory, the deconstruction of unitary identity has meant dismantling the humanist

fiction of Western Man as universal subject and of Woman as the negative term which guarantees his identity. . . . As Teresa de Lauretis suggests, the time has come to turn attention away from *the* sexual difference, and toward differences between and within women. Such an emphasis on plural differences links feminist theory with poststructuralist theory. (Robinson 3-4)

Fevvers undeniably disrupts the category of woman. Her obvious sign of difference -- her wings -- is not a normal sign of difference. Although she is "not-man", she is not a regular woman either. She is a *winged* woman, and her status as "a half-woman, half-swan orphan . . . challenges prevailing notions of identity that are grounded in verifiable origins and binary logic" (Michael 498). Fevvers uses her difference to her advantage and makes a living by flaunting both the wings and the femininity upon which her stage persona is based. Fevvers deliberately and consciously displays herself for public consumption:

Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience. . . . LOOK AT ME! . . . She rose up on tiptoe and slowly twirled round, giving the spectators a comprehensive view of her back: seeing is

believing. (15)

This self-conscious masquerade gives Fevvers power over her representation; she is not at the mercy of the gaze of others:

While Fevvers is placed as the object of various male gazes in the text, she simultaneously places herself as the subject of her own story. Her strategy to this end is to turn the gaze on herself by actively staging her difference and by intervening into the hom(m)osexual economy that requires Woman be made into a fetish-object to safeguard male subjectivity. . . . *Nights at the Circus* disrupts [this economy] through what feminist film theorists have called the subversive potential of the feminine masquerade. This strategy is akin to what Irigaray calls mimicry; a self-conscious performance, by women, of the place traditionally assigned to Woman, within narrative and other discourse. It is by this and other strategies that Fevvers appropriates the gaze to herself as an index of her subjective agency, and simultaneously, gains control over her narrative. . . . Carter demonstrates how becoming a woman can mean becoming naturalized. But her focus on

gender as performance, rather than substance, subverts that naturalization by showing how the notion of a "universality of female experience is a clever confidence trick," and how mythologies of sexual difference are "consolatory nonsense."¹

(Robinson 23-4)

The ways in which Fevvers gains narrative control will be discussed at length in the Chapter Two. In this chapter I will examine the different strategies Fevvers uses to disrupt the category of Woman. I will also look at how the novel examines female identity through Fevvers' stories of life in the whorehouse and at the freak show to demonstrate the real material conditions of women who are commodified for the pleasure of men. The women's lives, focused through Fevvers, are shown to be more complex than normally conceived. However, since there is much pressure to remain essentially a two dimensional object, it is possible to be reduced to simply an idea. We see, in and through Fevvers, the danger that exists when one becomes defined solely by a single role, or sealed up in one's appearance. The second section of the book provides a detailed description of the clowns and sets them up in comparison with the women in the

¹Robinson is quoting from Carter's *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*. London: Virago. 1979.

novel. The clowns represent the danger of identity becoming synonymous with the mask.

Femininity is usually characterised as being removed from normal bodily functions. But Fevvers' off-stage appearance foregrounds the functioning of her body through her appetite, her size, and her discarded, dirty undergarments. The first glimpse of Fevvers occurs off-stage. Readers are immediately allowed access to the "real" Fevvers, the woman behind the wings. However, it quickly becomes apparent that Fevvers continues to perform. What readers are presented with is the incongruity of a woman who is at once a "dray mare" at close quarters and an "angel" in the air. The opening section of the novel is concerned with setting up the ways in which she physically embodies contradiction. The first couple of pages are primarily concerned with establishing her physical presence, not so much her wingedness, but the "baser" aspects of physical existence which are set up as at odds with her celebrity and (stage) femininity. She is described as loud, with a "voice that clanged like dustbin lids" (7), large, and coarse:

The blond guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open. . . .
And she was a *big* girl.

Evidently this Helen took after her putative

father, the swan, around the shoulder parts. (7)
The initial picture of Fevvers is about as far from either sex symbol or ideal femininity as it could be.

The setting contributes to the initial impression of Fevvers' overwhelming physical body, and the ways in which this contradicts femininity. Her room is described as "a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor" (9). It is strewn with discarded undergarments, and a falling torrent of "silk stockings, green, yellow, pink, scarlet, black . . . introduced a powerful note of stale feet, final ingredient in the highly personal aroma, 'essence of Fevvers', that clogged the room" (9). The description of her underwear further undermines any attempt to see Fevvers as an "ideal" woman. Whether clad in pure white cotton or black lace, an "ideal" woman would have clean undergarments. Fevver's undergarments are not decorative; they are the tools she uses to create the illusion of femininity required by her act.

The contradictions inherent in Fevvers are foregrounded again as Walser observes the difference between her stage face and what lies underneath her makeup:

Her face, thickly coated with rouge and powder so that you can see how beautiful she is from the back row of the gallery, is wreathed in triumphant

smiles; her white teeth are big and carnivorous as those of Red Riding Hood's grandmother. (18)

When Lizzie removes all Fevvers's stage make-up "Walser [is] surprised at her wholesome look: like an Iowa cornfield" (18).

It is clear that Fevvers' glamour is for a purpose and requires work. Her dressing room and physical presence display that those things which are aligned with the female -- a natural delicateness, frailty, and absence of dirt or evidence of work -- are fictions. Fevvers' physical presence enacts the grotesque in its excess -- excess of size, gluttony, farting and belching, sweating and smelling:

As her stage names indicate (and all her names are stage names) Fevvers straddles high and low culture. A woman with wings, she is no ordinary angel -- if there could be such a thing -- but rather an exhilarating example of the ambivalent, awkward, and sometimes painfully conflictual configuration of the female grotesque. Everything about this creature is sublime excess: her size, of course, and those wings which strain and bulge beneath her "baby-blue satin dressing gown;" her six-inch-long eyelashes which she rips off gleefully one eye at a time, suggesting not only

her deliberate production of unnaturalness, but also the prosthetic grotesque (a question of give and take); her taste for immense quantities of champagne with eel-pie and a bit of mash; and her over-whelming rancid smell. (Russo 159-60)

It is made quite clear at the beginning of the novel that Fevvers' stage persona has been created for economic reasons: "You did not think of calculation when you saw her, so finely judged was her performance. You'd never think she dreamed, at nights, of bank accounts, or that, to her, the music of the spheres was the jingling of cash registers" (12). As Fevvers tells her history to Walser, she relates stories of the lives of women who are commodified for the pleasure of men. She reveals that these lives are more complex than those who buy their bodies, or the idea of them, care to comprehend. She contrasts their performance to the rest of their lives to show that there is more than the restrictive view of the performer as viewed by the audience. In both the whorehouse and the freak house there is a marked difference between the atmosphere of either glamour or theatrical horror and the mundane tasks of life -- eating, keeping warm, companionship. During the

² "I would watch the shivering wretch who had hired the use of the idea of us approach [Beauty] as if she were the execution block and, like Hamlet, I would think: 'What a wonderful piece of work is man!'" (70).

interview, she describes the daily lives of the women at the brothel in which she was raised and comments that "what followed after they put away their books was only poor girls earning a living, for, though some of the customers would swear that whores do it for pleasure, that is only to ease their own consciences" (39).

When Lizzie removes Fevvers's stage make-up, Walser is surprised to find that her "real" self is different from her stage persona. While telling her story to Walser, Fevvers discusses the danger of an identity that is reduced to only appearance. When she is transformed into Winged Victory at Ma Nelson's, she is made up with wet white in order to play the part of a statue:

I existed only as an object in men's eyes after the night-time knocking on the door began. Such was my apprenticeship for life, since is it not to the mercies of the eyes of others that we commit ourselves on our voyage through the world? I was as if closed up in a shell, for the wet white would harden on my face and torso like a death mask that covered me all over, yet, inside this appearance of marble, nothing could have been more vibrant with potentiality than I! Sealed in this artificial egg, this sarcophagus of beauty, I

waited, I waited . . . although I could not have told you for what it was I waited. Except, I assure you, I did not await the kiss of a magic prince, sir! With my two eyes, I nightly saw how such a kiss would seal me up in my *appearance* for ever! (39)

Her fear of being sealed up in the wet white works in a number of ways. In this passage she compares it to an egg shell. Breaking out of a shell can be seen as a symbolic act of (re)birth which breaks constraints on identity (an egg becomes a bird for example). Within the novel, this sort of birth is also remarkable because it is abnormal in the original context: "for I never docked via what you might call the *normal channels*, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was *hatched*" (7). This revelation comes in the very first paragraph of the novel. Her hatching is what marks her as different and defies biological essentialism (Michael 497-498). The male/female binary relies on a stable sexual difference between men and women. By simply being born differently, Fevvers symbolizes a woman who may not be slave to her biology.

This difference is stated explicitly at the end of the novel when Fevvers and Lizzie come across a feverish woman isolated in a birthing hut. Lizzie speculates that

this tableau of a woman in bondage to her reproductive system, a woman tied hand and foot to that Nature which your physiology denies, Sophie, has been set here on purpose to make you think twice about turning from a freak into a woman.

(283)

The egg provides the vehicle for a different sort of rebirth, one that comes about through the effort of the one to be born, and not at the expense of the body of another. The notions of a different sort of family hinted at in this novel are explored further in *Wise Children*, which I will discuss in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

Fevvers is transformed from Cupid into Winged Victory at puberty when her wings sprout. This is another symbolic hatching: "there was a great ripping in the hindquarters of my chemise and, all unwilling by me, uncalled for, involuntarily, suddenly there broke forth my peculiar inheritance -- these wings of mine!" (24). That her wings symbolize the possible liberation of women is announced by Ma Nelson at this juncture: "Oh, my little one, I think you must be the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground"(25).

Although Fevvers may represent new hope for women,

their current condition is less than stellar:

Carter's text takes us through many positions of "debasement," focusing on the "underside of spectacle." Fevvers's vocation as a spectacle takes her to various places where "wholly female" worlds are assembled and contained solely for the pleasure of the male gaze and other forms of penetration. (Robinson 128)

By telling Walser what she witnessed in these female worlds, Fevvers gives them humanity and dignity. Many of the women are also revealed to have escaped from their "debasement," emphasizing that women are not perpetually condemned to be victims. To demonstrate the unhappy results of extreme identity reduction, Carter uses the clowns.

The connection between the whores and the clowns is made apparent as Buffo explains clowning to Walser:

We are the whores of mirth, for, like a whore, we know what we are; we know we are mere hirelings hard at work and yet those who hire us see us as beings perpetually at play. Our work is their pleasure and so they think our work must be our pleasure, too, so there is always an abyss between their notion of our work as play, and ours, of their leisure as our labour. (119)

This echoes Fevvers' earlier observation that the whores are "only poor girls earning a living". With both the whores and clowns, it is apparent that economics is the major factor contributing to their choice of performances. Those who commodify them see what they want to, what they pay to see. Of the customers at Madame Schreck's, Fevvers says "what I never could get used to was the sight of their eyes, for there was no terror in the house our customers did not bring with them" (62).

The relationship between Fevvers and the clowns is illustrated by the use of the wet white. It is the wet white which threatens to trap Fevvers in her appearance, and does seal the clowns up in theirs. The clowns cannot take off their masks, both because they are the constant advertisement for the circus³ and also because they've chosen their clown faces to mask a failed identity that they are hiding from.⁴ Clowning is a last resort: "There is no

³ "Clowns and fools, which often figure in Rabelais' novel, are characteristic of the medieval culture of humour. They were the constant accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. Like Triboulet at the time of Francis I, they were not seen as actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period, impersonating Harlequin, Hanswurst, etc., but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar midzone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors." (Bakhtin 7-8)

⁴ Buffo even mentions failed aerialist as one of the former occupations of clowns, further aligning them symbolically with Fevvers.

element of the *voluntary* in clowning" (119); like the activity of the whores, the decision is economic, and comes from having restricted options.

The clowns provide insight into the freedom that exists to choose a mask, and the restrictions inherent in being reduced to a single role:

"And yet," resumed Buffo . . . "we possess one privilege. . . . We can invent our own faces! We *make* ourselves. . . .The code of the circus permits of no copying, no change. . . . my face eclipses me. I have become this face which is not mine, and yet I chose it freely.

. "It is given to few to shape themselves, as I have done, as we have done, as you have done, young man, and, in that moment of choice -- lingering deliciously among the crayons; what eyes shall I have, what mouth . . . exists a perfect freedom. But, once the choice is made, I am condemned, therefore, to be 'Buffo' in perpetuity. Buffo for ever." (121-2)

Much of the second section of the book deals with the clowns and Walser's new identity. Buffo's lecture to him on the nature of a clown's identity becomes more disquieting as Buffo talks about what happens once the face has been drawn:

am I this Buffo whom I have created? Or did I, when I made up my face to look like Buffo's, create, *ex nihilo*, another self who is not me? And what am I without my Buffo's face? Why, nobody at all. Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy. (122)

This echoes Lacan's notion that "[f]emininity is a mask which masks nonidentity" (qtd in Russo 69).

Carter uses these (male) clowns to represent the danger of nothingness that lies behind the mask. The clowns have no value other than the one assigned to them by their viewers. By occupying a feminized position, the clowns demonstrate that a gender is indeed a power relation, rather than a biological fact:

For Carter, to become Woman means to become naturalized into a subordinate position, regardless of one's "official gender." That is, she disrupts an essentialist equation between biological sex and social gender. At the same time, however, she *foregrounds* gender as constitutive of subjectivity by tracing the processes by which "official" women -- that is, individuals sexed female -- are socially and discursively constructed as Woman according to the

needs of the dominant, "official" sex, men. For Carter, gender is a relation of power, whereby the weak become "feminine" and the strong become "masculine." And, because relations of power can change, this construction is always open to deconstruction. (Robinson 77)

In *Nights at the Circus*, women are socially constructed according to the needs of the men who use them, but are shown by the novel itself to transcend those limitations. To further emphasize the point that the "feminized" position of non-identity is not natural, but constructed, she places male figures in this position to demonstrate the dangers of being reduced to an idea, of being identified solely by a mask that hides nothing.

Although the whores and clowns are compared to each other, the novel shows that there is life after the whore house. For the clowns, however, there is no escape. They are sealed up in their identity and no longer have the option of hatching through the wet white to reinvent themselves. Destruction is the only avenue of escape. In each performance, Buffo tries to deconstruct himself:

At the climax of his turn, everything having collapsed about him as if a grenade exploded it, he starts to deconstruct himself. His face

becomes contorted by the most hideous grimaces, as if he were trying to shake off the very wet white with which it is coated: shake! shake! shake out his teeth, shake off his nose, shake away his eyeballs, let all go flying off in a convulsive self-dismemberment. (117)

Eventually, he goes mad and the rest of the clowns destroy themselves in a dance of death in Siberia. The clowns represent the limits of masquerade as the only model for understanding (feminized) identity.

Joanne M. Gass notes that the dominant image of the novel is the panopticon (71). The other places where marginalized women reside (whorehouse, freakshow, circus) perform the same function, to "provide the defining arenas within which society may safely contain, define and exploit these chaotic elements" (71). These panoptical environments threaten to restrict women to the one-dimensional existence offered by permanent, unchanging masquerade, and condemn them to meet the same fate as that of the clowns. The connection between the performative spaces of the text and the prison are made explicit: "During the hours of darkness, the cells were lit up like so many small theatres in which each actor sat by herself in the trap of her visibility" (211).

However, the system can be disrupted from within. If the spectacles realize the gaps in the system, that the enforcers are not omniscient or omnipotent and are equally trapped by maintaining their role in the system, escape is possible. Once she exonerates herself, Olga reflects on the prison itself and realizes that the wardresses are also trapped by the system they are enforcing: "[she] had come to the obvious conclusion that the guards were as much the victims of the place as she" (215). As a result of this realization, she makes contact with her guard, and spawns a revolution, and "an army of lovers . . . rose up against the Countess" (217). Their escape from prison symbolizes the possibilities that women may one day free themselves from positions of limited agency.

The other panoptical spaces in the novel are disrupted by Fevvers' presence (Gass 75). Fevvers represents the freedom of the liminal space created by carnival -- she insists on being both spectacle and spectator. For Mary Russo, "*Nights at the Circus* is unique in its depiction of relationships between women as spectacle, and women as producers of spectacle" (165-6). Although Bakhtin viewed spectacle as "the antithesis of the carnivalesque" because it "assumed a partitioning of space and a creation of discrete sightlines" (Russo 38), Carter puts the spectacle

into a carnivalesque space by making the spectacle a spectator at the same time:

While masculinity and femininity are generally produced discursively as a difference between subject and object, *Nights at the Circus* disrupts this production by assigning agency to the (feminized) spectacle, making of her, simultaneously, a spectator. (Robinson 117)

Robinson finds in this novel "a carnivalesque world where all identities are performances and where subjectivity is articulated in the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexual ideologies" (23).

In the circus, all are performers and audience at once. Walser, in entering the world of the circus, loses his identity as simply one who watches, and becomes one who performs. The discussion of the clown face clearly demonstrates the paradox of embracing the role of performer. When Walser injures his arm, he ceases to be a journalist masquerading as a clown:

he cannot write or type until [his arm] is better, so he is deprived of his profession. Therefore, for the moment, his disguise disguises -- nothing. He is no longer a journalist masquerading as a clown; willy-nilly, force of circumstance has

turned him into a real clown, for all practical purposes. (145)

Both Walser and Fevvers must wrestle with their self concept as the result of a broken appendage which prevents them from enacting the performances with which they are most comfortable. Walser becomes a clown as a result of a broken arm; Fevvers loses her looks and the use of a wing at the same time:

Freed from the confines of her corset, her once-startling shape sagged as if the sand were seeping out of the hour-glass. . . . there were still curds of rouge lodged in her pores and she was breaking out in spots and rashes. She had screwed up her mostly mousy hair on her head all anyhow. . . . Since she had stopped bothering to hide her wings, the others had grown so accustomed to the sight it no longer seemed remarkable. Besides, one wing had lost all its glamorous colours and the other was bandaged and useless. . . . Where was that silent demand to be *looked* at that had once made her stand out? Vanished; and, under the circumstances, it was a good thing she'd lost it - these days, she would do better to plead to be ignored. She was so shabby that she looked like a

fraud. (276-7)

She has faced situations throughout the book in which she is in danger of having her identity reduced, but escaped them because of her confidence in herself. As long as she has knows that she is more than she appears to be, she can avoid being "sealed up in her appearance." However, she has come to rely on both the awe and the skepticism of others to reinforce her identity.

The greatest danger of identity reduction comes in Siberia when she starts to lose her sense of self:

Fevvers felt that shivering sensation which always visited her when mages, wizards, impresarios came to take away her singularity as though it were their own invention, as though they believed she depended on their imaginations in order to be herself. She felt herself turning, willy-nilly, from a woman into an idea. (289)

Like Walser, turned "willy-nilly . . . into a real clown" (145), Fevvers feels out of control of her identity. The danger intensifies as she feels "her outlines waver" and wonders: "Am I fact? Or am I fiction? Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?"(290). The crisis resolves when, at Lizzie's urging, she displays her feathers. The answer to the question appears to be *both*. She is what she

knows herself to be, but one of the ways she knows herself is through the eyes of others.

Fevvers' sense of identity is restored through being viewed by others. The paradox of identity is that while it is painfully restrictive to be consigned solely to public perception, identity cannot exist in a vacuum. Identity relies on the perceptions of others to validate existence and provide an audience for the performance.

Walser's identity reconstruction is due to losing his (illusion of) self-created identity, falling in love, and losing his memory. His sense of himself and the world around him is utterly transformed, as is evidenced by his "story" in the envoi. He begins firmly placing himself at the centre of his story, the hero and author of all events:

I am Jack Walser, an American citizen. I joined the circus of Colonel Kearney in order to delight my reading public with accounts of a few nights at the circus and, as a clown, performed before the Tsar of All the Russians, to great applause. (What a story!) I was derailed by brigands in Transaikalia and lived as a wizard among the natives for a while. (God, what a story!) Let me introduce my wife, Mrs Sophie Walser, who formerly had a successful career on

the music-hall stage under the name of --(293-294)
 Then midnight, and with it a new year and new century,
 arrives, and Walser "took himself apart and put himself
 together again" (294). In the new version of the story he
 recognizes that

All that seemed to happen to me in the third
 person as though, most of my life, I watched it
 but did not live it. And now, hatched out of the
 shell of unknowing by a combination of a blow on
 the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I
 shall have to start all over again. (294)

Walser's use of the metaphor of hatching to describe his
 reconstruction signals that he is becoming an appropriate
 partner for the "pure child of the new century." His
 experience as a clown forces him to give up his original
 notions of what constitutes reality; having moved through a
 number of (feminized) subject positions he is able
 (literally) to embrace the contradictions inherent in
 Fevvers.

The novel leaves readers again in a position somewhat
 akin to Walser's. Fevvers manages to get the last laugh,
 having fooled Walser about her virginity. The indeterminacy
 of "It just goes to show there's nothing like confidence"
 (295) leaves readers still negotiating with the meanings of

the novel, and the identities of Fevvers, even after the last words have been read. Like Walser, we are "not quite sure whether or not he might be the butt of the joke" (295). Her confidence is multi-faceted; it is both the confidence in herself that has been restored in Siberia, but also confidence akin to that of the shaman, and the other practitioners of the confidence game that exist in the novel. It "depends on the belief the audience (and the reader) invests in her" but "does not fix Fevvers's identity as either fact or fiction, but as a negotiation between seer and seen" (Lee 97).

Fevvers' confidence trick is also Carter's. When asked about the meaning of "I fooled you," Carter suggests that "[i]t's actually a statement about the nature of fiction, about the fiction of her narrative" (Haffenden 90). Like her final statement, Fevvers' identity has multiple meanings. Additionally, "Fevvers is not just a character in the novel . . . but a clue as to how to read the novel. Fevvers' actions mirror the novel's actions, and the way we respond to her controls our response to the novel" (Lee 93). The way in which the novel works on the reader is the focus of Chapter Two.

Chapter 2

That's the way to start the interview!

Identity in *Nights at the Circus* is seen to ultimately exist in the footlights -- a liminal space between the stage and audience. The interrogation of the relationship between performer and audience examined in the first chapter suggests a need to address the relationship between texts and their readers. Personal identity is not solely created by the individual nor is the individual entirely at the mercy of the gaze. Rather, identity exists in a state of flux between these two extreme positions. In the same way, texts are not created independently by either the author or the reader. Instead, the identity, or meaning, of a text is always contextual and multiple, based upon the words put down by the author, but subject to an endless variety of interpretations in multiple contexts. At the same time that the issues of performance in the novel foreground the fluid nature of identity, the nature of the text, and the way in which meaning is produced, is also being questioned.

Through a number of different techniques, Carter's last two novels make readers aware of the ways in which the story is told, and draw them into an active relationship with the texts. The narrative perspectives in these novels foreground the specificity and subjectivity of the voices transmitting the stories to the readers. The multiple

narratives and voices embedded in the novels emphasize that there is no one true voice, or one true story.

To recognize and identify the way in which the story is being transmitted is a process similar to examining the usually invisible assumptions which provide the framework for a particular ideology. Uncovering ideology is part of Carter's work as "demythologiser." She feels that writing is only applied linguistics. . . . Yet this, of course, is why it is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women -- it is part of the slow process decolonialising our language and our basic habits of thought. . . . [to create] a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language has previously existed. (Carter Notes 75)

In her writing she tries to "present a number of propositions in a variety of different ways, and to leave the reader to construct her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fiction" (Carter Notes 69). One of the ways she encourages readers to make their own fiction is by calling attention to the mechanics of art. Carter's novels question authority and destabilize meaning, both through narrative technique, and the questions about the nature of identity and fiction posed by the fictional characters.

The structure of *Nights at the Circus* is dialogic from the beginning, but as it progresses and the protagonists move further from Western society, binary logic and authority, the voice of the novel breaks down even more. Rather than becoming comfortable with the narrative style, and forget about its influence on the transmission of the stories, we must renegotiate our relationship with the text more often, more consciously and more carefully as the story progresses. The dialogic structure of the novel makes it impossible to prioritize or authorize any single voice or story. Rather, readers are forced to recognize their role in constructing their own text through the given information, to contemplate the role of the author or storyteller, and to question who controls the information and how it is conveyed.

The majority of the first section of the novel consists of Fevvers speaking her own (hi)story. By controlling the narrative, she exercises a degree of control over her representation. Walser enters the interview determined to expose her as a humbug, unwilling to believe that Fevvers could truly be what she represents herself to be -- a woman with wings. Sally Robinson observes that

Nights at the Circus is particularly concerned with enacting the contradictions between Woman as object of official narratives and women as

subjects of self-narratives. The text enacts a conflict between the female protagonist's story and the story that a male reporter attempts to tell about her. (23)

Fevvers spins a tale for Walser, the details of which are, in some instances, more fantastic than her unusual physiology. In this opening section, readers are encouraged to identify with Walser's perspective. At first, it seems that the omniscient narrator is seeing through Walser's eyes. The opening words of the novel are Fevvers': "'Lor' love you, sir!' Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids" (7). The direct address to Walser also acts as a direct address to readers, putting them in Walser's space. The descriptions of Fevvers and her surroundings assail the senses in a fashion that further encourages readers to identify with Walser's uncomfortable position in Fevvers' overwhelming space and presence. By the middle of the third page, it is likely that most readers will have begun to assume that the narrator's perspective is focalized through Walser. The initial identification of him as "the young reporter" emphasizes Walser's conception of himself as a disinterested third party.

However, when the description of Walser begins on the third page, it becomes apparent that the narration is as separate from him as it is from Fevvers:

there remained something a little unfinished about him, still. . . . There were scarcely any of those little, what you might call *personal* touches to his personality, as if his habit of suspending belief extended even unto his own being. . . . it was almost as if he himself were an *objet trouvé*, for, subjectively, *himself* he never found, since it was not his *self* which he sought. (10)

The description of Walser's self-concept contains observations that he would be unable to make, since he has no sense of himself. It becomes obvious that the narrative perspective is not restricted to Walser's point of view.

The rest of the first chapter continues to describe the events in what appears to be a traditional third person narrative. Despite the fact that it has been established that the narrative perspective does not come from Walser, readers' reaction to *Fevvers* is coloured by Walser's "suspension of belief". As she opens with "Only a bird in a gilded cage", the narrative reflects: "How kitsch, how apt the melody; it pointed up the element of the meretricious in the spectacle, reminded you the girl was rumoured to have started her career in freak shows (Check, noted Walser.)" (14). He questions the scientific likelihood of her existence:

Walser whimsically reasoned with himself . . .

now, the wings of the birds are nothing more than the forelegs. . . . if this lady is . . . a fabulous bird-woman, then she, by all the laws of evolution and human reason, ought to possess no arms at all (15); what about her *belly button*? . . . [t]he oviparous species are not, by definition, nourished in the placenta; therefore they feel no need of the umbilical cord . . . and, therefore, don't bear the scar of its loss! (17-18)

Although the description of her act is punctuated by his scepticism, it also reveals moments where his reason and scepticism waver:

The invisible wire that must have hauled her up remained invisible. . . . Her wings . . . beat steadily on the air they disturbed so much that the pages of Walser's notebook ruffled over and he temporarily lost his place, had to scramble to find it again, almost displaced his composure but managed to grab tight hold of his scepticism just as it was about to blow over the ledge of the press box. (16)

The chapter ends with Fevvers re-establishing her control of the narratives, both of the novel, and of her life: "But he had no time to think about how his eyes were deceiving him because Fevvers now solemnly took up the interview shortly

before the point where she'd left off. [¶] 'Hatched,' she said" (20).

The rest of Section 1 consists almost entirely of Fevvers' account of her life, accompanied by interjections from Lizzie. The interruptions to Fevvers' narrative are another of the tricks that Carter uses to keep readers from reading too passively. Lizzie's interruptions have two purposes. Often, she chimes in to verify, or embellish, a part of the story. This verifies Fevvers' version of events, and demonstrates the communal nature of women's narratives. However, the fact that Lizzie is called upon for corroboration also reminds readers that Fevvers' version is suspect, and encourages them to wonder how well-rehearsed this performance is.

The other purpose of Lizzie's interjections is to prevent Fevvers from revealing parts of the story:

" . . .and as for the activities of the Special Branch --"

This time it was Lizzie who kicked furiously at Fevvers' ankle and the girl never missed a beat of her narrative but went smoothly on a different track. (55-6)

This reminds readers that any story is largely composed of omissions, and that they should be sensitive to the question of what is being left out. The rhetorical gymnastics of the

storytellers are forceful, and clearly illustrated to readers: "Lizzie fixed Walser with her glittering eye and seized the narrative between her teeth" (32). The rhetorical tricks describe not only Fevvers' and Lizzie's manipulations of the narrative, but Carter's own:

Fevvers shot Lizzie a look of such glazing fury that the witch hushed, suddenly as she'd started. Walser raised his mental eyebrows. More to the chaperone than met the eye! But Fevvers lassoed him with her narrative and dragged him along with her before he'd had a chance to ask Lizzie if -- (60)

The places where narrative is seized in this way come when one of them is about to stray from the version of the story they wish to tell Walser. The other woman takes control of the narrative, and of Walser. The dash disrupts both Walser's and the readers' thought; Fevvers' lasso is also Carter's.

Diagetically, there are two people in charge of the transmission of this story to Walser, emphasizing the dialogic nature of storytelling by literally having two voices. Additionally, the story of Fevvers' life encompasses more than one life story. Part of her saga involves detailing the lives of other women for hire as she moves throughout different environments where women's bodies

are bought and sold. The number of stories accompanying Fevvers' personal history is as excessive as her size and generally overwhelming physical presence:

As Susan Suleiman has written, Carter's strategy "*multiplies* the possibilities of linear narrative and of 'story,' producing a dizzying accumulation that undermines the narrative logic by its very excessiveness." There is always something left over, something as untimely as subjectivity itself, that forms the basis of a new plan, perhaps another flight. (Russo 181)

This excessivity of stories within the story is evident throughout the novel. For the most part, the embedded stories of women are irrelevant to the main plot, but central to the issues of identity raised by the novel. This further emphasizes that both Fevvers and Carter are deliberately engaged in a different sort of story telling -- where "women write fiction as women" to "decolonialis[e] our language and our basic habits of thought" (Carter Notes 75).

Fevvers uses her position as famous and sought after freak to give voice to those who otherwise would have no public voice. Towards the end of the novel, she articulates this tactic to Lizzie:

"Think of him, not as a lover, but as a scribe, as an amenuensis," she said to Lizzie.

"And not of my trajectory, alone, but of yours, too, Lizzie; of your long history of exile and cunning which you've scarcely hinted to him, which will fill up ten times more of his notebooks than my story ever did. Think of him as the amanuensis of all those whose tales we've yet to tell him, the histories of those woman[sic] who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been, so that he, too, will put his poor shoulder to the wheel and help to give the world a little turn into the new era that begins tomorrow."(285)

Fevvers has a talent for turning men's use of her to her own advantage. Although she makes her living as an object of the gaze, she refuses to be reduced to appearances:

Fevvers's appropriation of the gaze signifies her control over her narrative. . . . She and Lizzie take turns narrativizing Fevvers's life, and again, the language Carter uses to describe this control suggests a certain amount of aggression on their parts. . . . while her active gaze and narrative control signal gender disruption to Walser -- he had not bargained for an enigma who spoke back -- she does not, thus, position herself as masculine. She

disrupts the singularity of masculine/feminine positions by representing herself as both spectacle and spectator, and forcing Walser to do the same.

(Robinson 124-5)

Fevvers' firm control of the narrative is also reflected in the structure of the chapters in the section. Four of the five chapters begin with Fevvers' voice. The other begins with Lizzie speaking to Walser ("You've filled up your notebook" [57]) calling attention to the act of writing accompanying their speech acts. Throughout, Fevvers conceives of her story in explicitly narrative terms, and the novel itself mimics this. She finishes the story of her life at Ma Nelson's, observing, "And so the first chapter of my life went up in flames, sir" (50), bringing the chapter to a close.

Fevvers' narrative manipulations also involve a manipulation of language, for narrative is built upon language. In "Notes From the Front Line", Carter has this to say about writing: "But, look, it is all applied linguistics. But language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation" (77). Language supports and creates the concepts and ideologies that are used to make sense of the world around us. The principles of binary logic inform much of Western thought, and therefore tend to dominate the English

language.

The primary way in which the novel destabilizes binary logic is through the disruption of gender. One of the ways that Fevvers disrupts the category of gender is by blurring the physical boundary between human and animal. In this way, she also disrupts the category of human. Section 2 continues this work by showing animals to have a capacity for speech, and an intelligence that, in many instances, exceeds that of humans. The belief that humans can communicate in more complex and advanced ways than animals is a fundamental assumption about the nature of humanity. This assumption is what the human/animal binary rests on. Carter continues her work as demythologiser by disrupting this binary, further upsetting notions of an easily definable human identity.

She uses the animals to draw attention to the manner in which language functions. By demonstrating that animals can learn to use human language, she destabilizes the human/animal boundary. Additionally, she questions the idea that language is the most advanced and productive way of communicating by demonstrating that the animals communicate effectively without speech, and in many cases without anything that humans would recognize as language.

There are a number of ways in which Fevvers and the performing animals are shown to be similar. The monkeys are

forced to dress up like and mimic the behaviour of humans. The appearance of animals masquerading as humans brings to mind associations with Fevvers, who is a human who dresses to accentuate her animalness. They are also similar in that both turn their performances to their own advantage:

A central theme in the text is the conventional patriarchal representation of woman in terms of polarities . . . by either symbols of transcendence . . . or the sub-human. . . . In order to highlight the latter, Carter constructs a witty parallel between the subordinate position of the troupe of performing apes in the circus and the position of the women as performers. Both are forced to endure frequent indignities and brutalities. Moreover, at a similar stage of the narrative, both rebel against their captors and succeed in liberating themselves from the tyranny of the circus. (Palmer 199)

Fevvers narrates her escapes from confining environments through speech, and in this way asserts some control over her circumstances and story. For the apes it is language itself which is the key to their liberation. They engage in a careful study of human speech and language to learn how to turn it to their advantage.

They turn their mock-up of a classroom into a true

place of study, using Walser as a model of humanity with which they can study speech:

Walser presently understood the Professor wanted him to speak to them, that his speech was of surpassing interest to them. The Professor continued to perch on the bucket, gazing ardently within Walser's mouth at play of tongue and uvula, as Walser hesitatingly began: "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!" (110-111)

Walser quotes *Hamlet*, a quotation which, on the surface, seems to celebrate man's supremacy over animals. That the quotation sets up a *man/animal* binary, not a *human/animal* binary, is undoubtedly deliberate, and ought to provoke readers to question how women fit into this scheme. The gender issues raised by the use of this quotation are emphasized further because it echoes Fevvers' (mis)quote of the same passage when she is at Madame Schreck's: "I would watch the shivering wretch who had hired the use of the idea of us approach [Beauty] as if she were the execution block and, like Hamlet, I would think: 'What a wonderful piece of work is man!'" (70).

Even without pursuing the gender implications of the quotation, the scene itself encourages readers to wonder about the accuracy of the (hu)man/animal binary. Walser has

already had a moment of confusion on this subject regarding the true difference between the faculties of humans and the chimps: "After that, [the Professor] stared directly into Walser's eyes, producing afresh in Walser that dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not" (110).

Although the monkeys lack speech, they communicate with each other through gestures and a form of written language. In order to negotiate with the Colonel, the Professor writes in English:

Nature did not give me vocal cords but left the brain out of Monsieur Lamarck. He is a hopeless drunk with no business sense. I therefore propose to take over all the business management of the "Educated Apes" and demand the salary and expenses formerly payable to Monsieur Lamarck now be paid to me.

"Well, here's a do, Sybil." Colonel Kearney addressed his pig. "The madmen take over the lunatic asylum." (169)

Not only is the Professor able to write, he is able to reason, and even negotiate. Sybil the pig also displays these abilities as the Colonel's business advisor. Through learning to use human language these animals gain economic power and freedom; without it they are in the captivity and at the mercy of men like Monsieur Lamarck and Colonel

Kearney. With it, they are better able to assert some control over the material conditions of their lives. Since the animals are clearly placed in a position analogous to that of commodified women in the text, the apes' success in freeing themselves from captivity with the tools of the oppressor is another element which suggests that women are not doomed to eternal subjugation.

The animals examined are shown to have the ability to use language, but still lack human speech. Conversely, there are humans in the novel who are unable or unwilling to use speech. Mignon cannot speak English, and therefore is unable to control her self-representation through a coherent narrative. Instead, she sings words she does not understand:

It was as though the scarcely-to-be-imagined tragedy of her life, the sea of misery and disaster in which she swam in her precarious state of innocent defilement, all found expression, beyond her consciousness of her intention, in her voice . . .

"I thought she didn't speak English," muttered Fevvers, ruffled, as if the child had been deceiving them.

"Don't you see?" whispered Lizzie. "She knows the words, but she doesn't understand them." (132)

While the apes can manipulate language in order to improve the conditions of their lives, the speechless Mignon has no control over the narrative of her life. However, when she communicates her feeling through song to a receptive audience, she begins a new life which is not defined by silent victimization. Her singing will come to represent a different sort of communication.

Through the relationship between the Princess of Abyssinia and Mignon, and their relationship with the tigers, words are denied their primacy as the most effective and advanced way of communicating. Rather, music is seen as a form of communication that transcends the limitations of spoken language:

"To sing is not to speak." said Fevvers, her syntax subtler than her pronunciation. "If they hate speech because it divides us from them, to sing is to rob speech of its function and render it divine. Singing is to speech what dancing is to walking. You know they love to dance." (153)

Fevvers' comparisons support Linden Peach's assertion that the "movement of the novel . . . is beyond language into song" and that "women's songs are a celebration and break the enforced silence" (134).¹

¹ The movement towards song (and dance) continues in *Wise Children*, which ends with the Chance twins' motto, "What a joy it is to dance and sing." The ways in which *Wise Children* picks up where *Nights at the Circus* leaves off will be discussed in Chapter Three and Chapter Four.

The issues of language brought up by the animals signal that the demarcation between human and animal is not as clear as is often thought. This distinction is also used to separate the educated Western (hu)man from the ignorant foreigner, where the latter is essentially equated with animal. During Walser's encounter with the Siberian natives, issues of language, knowledge and literacy are foregrounded:

Tracks of bird and beast upon the snow were legends they descried like writing. They read the sky to know from which direction wind, snow and the thaw would come. Stars were their compasses. The wilderness that seemed a bundle of blank paper to the ignorant, urban eye was the encyclopedia, packed with information, they consulted every day for every need . . . They were illiterate only in the literal sense. (252)

Western, "educated" ways of knowing are denied universality and superlative value. The possibilities for effective and useful communication and interpretation are multiplied when the distinction between animal and human is eroded. The validation of other sorts of communication suggests that not only is there more than one way to transmit narrative, there are ways of understanding and communicating that go beyond language and narrative.

Section 2 clearly demonstrates that language is not solely a human tool. Having made the reader think critically about the way in which language functions, Carter continues to require the reader to be conscious of the ways in which the narrative is conveyed. This section begins with a very different voice than the first. Like the first section, it begins with a woman telling stories, however this woman is a babushka reluctantly telling a story to a child. This story is interrupted by third person descriptions of the woman, her surroundings and musings on Russia, some of which is italicized. It is not immediately clear whose voice is represented by the change in font. The confusion originates with a temporal shift in the narrative. Although the narrated events are taking place in St. Petersburg, it is described as "St. Petersburg, a beautiful city that does not exist any more" (96). It is unclear from what perspective, and from what moment in time, the narrative comes. The confusion is cleared up as "Walser paused to flex his chilly fingers and insert a fresh sheet of paper into his typewriter" (96). The rest of the second section is written in the third person, with the interpolated stories and events coming primarily from the narrator, rather than from a character within the text. Although at the outset of Section 1 it is unclear from whom the narrative perspective comes, overall, it provides a

rather traditional and consistent narrative perspective. This allows readers to become accustomed to this voice and forget to consider who is in control of the narrative. As Section 2 begins, however, readers must renegotiate their relationship to the text, actively engaging in the question of who is in charge of the words on the page.

In Section 3 all narrative hell breaks loose. It begins in the first person, with no cue as to who is speaking. The default assumption is that it is Fevvers, which turns out to be the case. As with the beginning of the novel, Carter gives readers two pages to become comfortable with the narrative perspective, and then pulls the rug out from under their feet:

I hate it. We have no right to be here, in all this *gemütlich* comfort

"Feel like a bird in a gilded cage, do you?" inquired Lizzie . . . " Then how would you prefer to travel?"

Fevvers, thus pushed, could think of no reply. (199-200, emphasis added)

The narrative shifts to third person again for all of five paragraphs, then returns without warning to Fevvers' internal monologue for a single paragraph, and then shifts back to third person again. The confused narrative perspective continues for the rest of the chapter.

Unlike the first two sections, in which the narrative voice remains relatively coherent throughout, the final section is characterized by confusing changes in narrative perspective. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are told in the third person. The narrative shifts again with the beginning of Chapter 5, as Fevvers' voice returns, and remains the vehicle for the transmission of narrative in the chapter. Chapter 6 returns us to the third person, and describes Walser's odyssey. Chapter 8 is consistently Fevvers again; in Chapter 9 the narrative returns to the third person, where it remains till the end.

Throughout the text, our perception of Fevvers is continually revised, and Walser's self-concept is being reshaped; the text itself mirrors the changeable nature of identity by constantly changing itself. Fevvers' performance is contingent on context; the text's voice likewise changes to transmit the story in the most effective way.

Because of this, the novel cannot be appropriately described by a plot summary, any more than a sense of Fevvers can be conveyed by describing her as a woman with wings:

the positions occupied by the speaking subject
([the text's] author and/or narrator) are multiple
and contingent, as are the positions occupied by

the subjects spoken in the text (its characters), and the positions occupied by the subjects of the text's address (its readers). . . . the (gendered) subjectivities of writers, readers, and even the texts themselves, should not be reified or essentialized. These subjectivities are not products, but rather, effects that emerge in the process of reading. (Robinson 12-13)

The text is realized in the effects experienced by specific readers in specific contexts in relation to the voices presented by and in the text.

The novel, then, can best be made sense of as an experience, as opposed to an artifact. It is not simply the words on the page, or the action described, but what happens to individuals as they interact with those words. The experience of this novel encourages readers to question the nature of representation by foregrounding issues of identity, narrative and language.

Robinson observes that

[e]xperience, like gender, is a process, not a product. It can be most fruitfully conceptualized as the processes by which individual subjects are constituted in their situational specificity. In this way, experience forges a link between

representation and self-representation. (Robinson
13)

Fevvers occupies a position as both spectator and spectacle at once, and she narrates her experiences as a bridge between her representation and self-representation.

Walser, on the other hand, lacks "experience". One of the first things we learn about him is that he never "experienced his experience as experience" :

Walser had not experienced his experience as experience; sandpaper his outsides as experience might, his inwardness had been left untouched. In all his young life, he had not felt so much as one single quiver of introspection. (10)

In "Siberia", Walser undergoes profound changes. He loses his memory, and when it starts to come back, he finds himself in a context that is unable to make sense of his former world:

When he was visited by memories of the world outside the village, as sometimes happened, he thought that he was raving. All his previous experiences were rendered null and void. If those experiences had never, heretofore, modified his personality to any degree, now they lost all potential they might have had for re-establishing Walser's existential credibility. (252)

He becomes apprenticed to a shaman who "made no categorical distinction between seeing and believing." In such a place, the question of whether Fevvers is fact or fiction would never be asked: "for all the peoples of this region, there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magic realism"(260). The poles Western thought relies on in order to make sense of the world are not valid here. The issues of what constitutes language and intelligence, that were raised in relation to the distinction between (hu)man and animal, reappear.

This is evident in Walser's new relationship with language. As he begins to remember his past, he learns to translate his past into image and symbol instead of journalism:

"I see a man carrying a " -- he fumbled for the word -- " a pig. You don't know what a pig is? A little animal, good to eat. The upper part of this man's apparel mimics the starry heavens. The lower part, by a system of parallel bars, represents, perhaps . . . felled trees. . ."

Walser had learned to speak in images in order to recount his visions so that the Shaman would understand them but the Shaman understood them in his own way. (261-2)

Walser, who had previously been "like a house to let,

furnished" (10), was now occupied, albeit by a tenant who is as "insubstantial as a phantom and sometimes disappeared for days at a time"(261).

As Walser undergoes profound change in Siberia, so too does Fevvers. Her appearance changes dramatically; Lizzie tells Fevvers: "You're fading away, as if it was only always nothing but the discipline of the audience that kept you in trim" (280). With no audience, and damaged wings, Fevvers has her own identity crisis in Siberia: "She knew she had truly mislaid some vital something of herself along the road that brought her to this place" (273). Despite her own altered appearance and perception, and Lizzie's pessimism about what happens to the woman at the end of marriage plot comedies and fairy tales, Fevvers is still hopeful that she can write a different ending. Discussing the possibility of union with Walser, she says,

Oh, but Liz -- think of his malleable look. As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he'll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, not expect the vice versa! Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well -- I'll sit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting

mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march
hand in hand into the New Century -- (281)

When they are reunited, it turns out that Walser does not require Fevvers' assistance for his rebirth: "she saw he was not the man he had been or would ever be again; some other hen had hatched him out" (291).

Here, at the end of the novel, when the new Walser starts the interview again, his priorities are different: "What is your name? Have you a soul? Can you love?" (291). Fevvers clearly approves of the new Walser: "'That's the way to start the interview!' she cried. 'Get out your pencil and we'll begin'" (291). The end of the novel returns to the beginning, but this time the story will be different. This highlights the contextual nature of all stories, and the extent to which all stories are context-bound.

As the interview begins more than once, so does the novel end more than once. The first ending consists of Fevvers inviting Walser to pick up his pencil. There is, however, an envoi, in which both Walser and the readers are able to fill in some of the gaps from the first interview. The plot of this comedy ends with the lovers together, but there is hope that being a couple will not constitute being in prison for Fevvers and Walser.

In *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter looked at the "culturally determined nature of women and the relations between men and

women that result from it" (1). She ends with a postscript from Emma Goldman, who asserts that the true emancipation of women

will have to do away with the ridiculous notion that to be loved, to be sweetheart and mother, is synonymous with being slave or subordinate. . . . A true conception of the relation of the sexes will not admit of conqueror and conquered; it knows of but one great thing: to give one's self boundlessly, in order to find one's self richer, deeper, better. (151)

The initial "self he was so busily reconstructing" (293) shows danger of moving Walser back to his identity as an objective journalist, and hero of his own story. However, with midnight and the new century, things change. He stops objectifying and commodifying his life, and makes of himself a story that does not claim truth, that does not attempt to sell papers, that does not require the ownership of women, but admits to experience and subjectivity:

Walser took himself apart and put himself together again.

"Jack, ever an adventurous boy, ran away with the circus for the sake of a bottle-blond in whose hands he was putty since the first moment he saw her. He got himself into scrape upon scrape,

danced with a tigress, posed as a roast chicken, finally got himself an apprenticeship in the highest form of the confidence trick, initiated by a wily old pederast who bamboozled him completely. All that seemed to happen to me in the third person as though, most of my life, I watched it but did not live it. And now, hatched out of the shell of unknowing by a combination of a blow on the head and a sharp spasm of erotic ecstasy, I shall have to start all over again." (293-4)

In this version of his own story, Walser does not claim to be in complete control of the events of his life. The egg motif appears again, signalling a rebirth, akin to those experienced by Fevvers. One aspect of this rebirth is his shift to a first person experience of life which places him in a discursive and subjective space that claims no authority and practices no domination.

Walser's reconstruction is expressed in narrative terms. His identity consists of the stories he learns to tell about himself. By learning to use language differently, and using it to conceive of himself and the world differently, Walser demonstrates that it may be possible to escape the romantic paradigm of conqueror and conquered. If romantic relationships can be constructed, differently, than perhaps family relationships can as well.

It is the relationship between family and identity that is turned to in *Wise Children*, and the focus of Chapter Three.

Chapter 3

What are the Chances?

Identity, female identity in particular, is examined in *Wise Children* in ways that invite comparison with *Nights at the Circus*. Like Fevvers, the Chance twins flaunt excessive femininity through masquerade and spectacle. Also like Fevvers, they possess a biological feature that grants them special status in society and which they can trade upon for financial recompense and a measure of fame. Fevvers' uniqueness is both fantastic and symbolic; she has wings and represents the "New Woman". The Chance sisters, as identical twins, possess a more realistic uniqueness.

Fevvers' identity exists primarily in relation to the people for whom she performs for money. The novel is concerned with gender as the primary constituent of personal identity, and the extent to which female identity is influenced by material conditions. Fevvers' arenas of performance are communities of commodified women, and the text takes issue with this reduction of women.

Wise Children, on the other hand, deals much more with the influence of family on identity, and the ways the families, "natural" or chosen, are a part of, and an influence on, individual identity. The similarity in the strategies of putting on femininity demonstrates that *Wise Children* continues to share the concerns of *Nights at the*

Circus regarding female identity. In keeping with the more realistic tone and characters in the book, however, *Wise Children* chooses to address some of the issues of identity that are more obviously practical. Dora is not a symbolic woman, inhabiting various symbolic communities, but a representation of a real woman, trying to situate herself within her family. The family's extraordinary complexities serve to better illuminate the issues of identity revolving around place in the family.

In Chapter One, I observed that Fevvers' wingedness disrupts the category of women, thereby questioning the validity of a system of meaning based on binary logic. Her wings can also be viewed as an exaggerated sign of otherness. If "woman" is already other, then "woman with wings" is doubly other. It is this strategy, exaggerating difference, that Michael Hardin identifies as the primary means by which Dora constructs her identity:

In *Wise Children*, being an identical twin is one of the primary ways by which the female character removes herself from the defining domain of the patriarchal structure through the blurring of herself. . . .If . . . the signifying process is composed of an infinite chain of signifiers and there is no ultimate or originary signifier, then there can be no privileged signifier: since

identity is itself a signifying process, the idea that there could be a privileged or originary identity is exposed as fraudulent through Carter's exaggerated use of otherness. (Hardin 77)

While *Fewvers* disrupts the category of Woman through her doubled otherness, the Chance sisters do it through their double identity.

One of the issues of identity this novel focuses on is the identical appearance and shared identity of Dora and Nora. Dora makes it clear that she and Nora benefit (financially) from their likeness, and use it to their advantage: "Identity is their commodity, and they have learned how to market it. By hiding their difference, they are an anomaly" (Hardin 78). The Chance sisters' stage identity and marketability rely on their identical appearance. Because of this, neither is allowed to change her appearance on her own; in order to maintain their uniqueness, they are resigned to maintaining the illusion of identicalness. Like the clowns in *Nights at the Circus*, they are faced with the paradox of an identity that seems to offer freedom through its disruption of conventional notions of identity, but at the same time carries with it the danger of becoming a prison. Although they must face this paradox, they never seem to be in danger of losing themselves in the mask of each other. Carter describes them as "tough old

girls . . . [who] can hold onto the fact that their roles aren't all they are, although they're constantly reinterpreted by everyone who meets them" (Sage Interview 189). Instead, their identity confusion centres on their family.

In *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers' biological uniqueness depends, in part, on her uncertain biological origins. Issues of maternity and paternity come up in the novel, but are not the primary issues of identity. Fevvers appears unconcerned about her lack of verifiable origins, partly because a lack of biological parents confirms her identity as a bird-woman, and her perceived freedom from biological bondage symbolizes the potential freedom available to the New Woman.¹

Dora, on the other hand, finds the question of her origins quite important to her sense of identity. Issues of paternity and maternity, legitimacy and illegitimacy are central to the novel, as Dora struggles to understand how uncertainty about these issues have affected her sense of herself. Dora's identity revolves around her place in her

¹ Additionally, it "places her outside the classical Oedipal triangle in which, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, the girl child acquires a secondary and inferior sense of identity to the male child" (Peach 135). A similar observation is made by Michael (497). Dora, on the other hand, is born within that triangle, and is certainly not free of Freud's legacy. Kate Webb observes that "Wise Children is like the proverbial Freudian nightmare -- aided and abetted (as Freud was himself) by Shakespearian example. Dora's family story is crammed with incestuous love and oedipal hatred. . . . Nor is Dora's name accidental. In another example of 'writing back', Carter's Dora, unlike her Freudian namesake, suffers very little psychic damage from lusting after her father" (292-293).

various families; her relationship to her twin, which demonstrates their difference; and her public identity, which is identical to Nora's and highlights both their real and assumed similarities.

Although the twins are biologically "identical", down to their DNA, they are not exactly the same. However, their stage identity requires them to put on an identical feminine masquerade. They must work to maintain the illusion of identicalness, a task which is synonymous with creating the appearance of femininity. Like Fevvers, the Chance twins flaunt excessive femininity in a very self-conscious masquerade. As with *Nights at the Circus*, this strategy unmasks the assumptions of binary logic, which tend to naturalize gender differences.

This is most apparent at the end of the novel when the seventy-five year old women get dressed for Melchior's birthday party. They recognize that they have become parodies of femininity:

I suffered the customary nasty shock when I spotted us both in the big gilt mirror at the top -- two funny old girls, paint an inch thick, clothes sixty years too young, stars on their stockings and little wee skirts skimming their buttocks. Parodies. Nora caught sight of us at the same time as I did and she stopped short, too.

"Oooer, Dor'," she said. "We've gone and overdone it."

We couldn't help it, we had to laugh at the spectacle we'd made of ourselves and, fortified by sisterly affection, strutted our stuff boldly into the ballroom. We could still show them a thing or two, even if they couldn't stand the sight.

(197-8)

Nora and Dora have made a spectacle of themselves. They adopt this masquerade as a gesture towards their history: "we painted the faces that we always used to have on to the faces that we have now" (192). This statement explicitly addresses the notion that the appearance of femininity is a crafted, artificial one. When they catch sight of themselves in the mirror, they recognize that they've "overdone it", but remain unapologetic about it. As they contemplate themselves in the mirror, Nora observes that "It's every woman's tragedy . . . that, after a certain age, she looks like a female impersonator" (192). By refusing to be constrained by the rules of decorum and good taste, they demonstrate that they are unashamed about their age, the fact that they come from the wrong side of the river, and their illegitimacy, both professional and biological. They "den[y] the patriarchy the ability to define them according to its paradigm" (Hardin 77) by consciously and

unapologetically deviating from the ideal.

Their "overdone" appearance on their seventy-fifth birthday can be compared to Dora's reflections upon looking through scrapbooks at their younger selves:

Yet when I flick back through Grandma's scrapbooks, the pictures I see are of a couple of street urchins decked up like Christmas trees in all kinds of risky, frisky, flighty, unbecoming gladrags that they wear as if it were a joke.

We looked as if we had dressed up as grown-ups to go out on the town. (95)

As young women, their masquerade of femininity makes them look like children dressed up in adult clothes; as old women, they look like (old) men dressed like women. Since in both cases, they are certainly biologically women, this discrepancy effectively raises the point that looking like a woman is not natural.

Another aspect of identity highlighted by the requirement that the twins look the same is the effect that appearance has on identity. The twins decide they will be more marketable with a different hair colour, and decide to make the necessary change. It is not an alteration they make lightly, however:

We stood there, shivering in our camisoles, eyeing the dye as if there were a genie in the bottle and

we were scared to let it out. This was a big step for us, remember. We were about to change our entire personality. (80)

This again calls up the clowns in *Nights at the Circus*, the "vertiginous sense of freedom" (103) that Walser experiences when he dons a different appearance, mingled with the fear of being "condemned" to the chosen identity "in perpetuity" (122).

Although Dora and Nora's public identity relies on their identicalness, to maintain individual identities both must be aware of the ways in which they are different. Dora gives examples of their difference, many of them bodily aspects of being which cannot be changed:

identical we may be, but symmetrical -- never. For the body itself isn't symmetrical. One of your feet is bound to be bigger than the other, one ear will leak more wax. Nora is fluxy; me, constipated. She was always free with her money, squandered it on the fellers, poor thing, whereas I tried to put a bit by. Her menstrual flow was copious to a fault; mine, meager. She said: "Yes!" to life and I said, "Maybe...." But we're both in the same boat now. Stuck with each other.

(5)

This further emphasizes the point that their identicalness

is an illusion, despite the biological basis for identifying them as such. By showing that even identical twins are not truly physically identical, Carter also demonstrates that the category of Woman cannot possibly be homogeneous, despite the basic biological similarities.

The passage also demonstrates differences in personality that differentiate them, both to each other and to their friends. To help others distinguish between them, the twins wear different perfume. This is part of the artifice though, and can be changed at will. Dora puts Nora's perfume on and briefly plays a different role:

I smelled the unfamiliar perfume on my skin and felt voluptuous. As soon as they started to call me Nora, I found that I could kiss the boys and hug the principals with gay abandon because all that came quite naturally to her. To me, no. I was ever the introspective one. (84)

This incident suggests that even the smallest change of appearance can drastically affect behaviour. Dora's brief flirtation with her sister's identity also demonstrates the way that identity is influenced both by the self and by others.

The change of perfume encourages Dora to think of herself differently. Knowing what is expected of Nora, Dora changes her behaviour accordingly. This change is

encouraged by the reinforcement she gets from those around her, who believe she is who she pretends to be. This fleeting change of identity is successful not simply because Dora changes an aspect of her appearance, but also because it meets with an appropriate audience that is able to read her correctly.

Despite this brief flirtation with Nora's identity, Dora and Nora easily maintain a sense of the difference between their public and private selves. They suffer very little confusion about their separateness, which is emphasized both at the very beginning and the very end of the novel: "we've always respected one another's privacy. Identical, well and good; Siamese, no" (2); "Dora never pried because twins we may be but we respect each other's secrets" (231).

Although they have established clear boundaries in their relationship with one another, their relationships to the other members of their family are never very clear. Throughout the novel, the family relationships which Dora examines are couched in fictional terms. At one point she observes: "It is a characteristic of human beings, one I've often noticed, that if they don't have a family of their own, they will invent one" (165). The way in which the family depends on those fictions will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

As readers are given their first glimpse into this particularly complex family tree, Dora questions the social construction of sex and reproduction: "We are [Melchior's] natural daughters, as they say, as if only unmarried couples do it the way that nature intended" (5). This introduces the notion that family is more complicated than biology, and that the social forces which naturalize family and gender are not adequate to describe real relationships and identities.

Dora begins to deal with "the question of origins and past history" by "plung[ing] into the archaeology of [her] desk" and introducing her paternal grandmother:

the one fixed point in our fathers' genealogy.

Indeed the one fixed point in our entire genealogy; our maternal side founders in a wilderness of unknowability and our other grandmother, Grandma, Grandma Chance, the grandma who fixed the grandfather clock, the grandma whose name we carry, she was no blood relation at all, to make confusion worse confounded. Grandma raised us, not out of duty, or due to history, but because of pure love, it was a genuine family romance, she fell in love with us the moment she clapped her eyes on us. (12)

In this passage the notion of parenting as a chosen role,

rather than a biological fact, is raised for the first time. As well, Dora again aligns family relationships with fiction by comparing a parental love bond with a fictional notion of romance.

Grandma Chance not only functions as their mother, she is the only person who can validate, through her stories, the existence of their biological mother. When Grandma Chance dies, Dora experiences a double loss:

We hadn't just lost Grandma, either. She was the only witness of the day our mother died when we were born, and she took with her the last living memory of the ghost without a face. All our childhood went with her into oblivion, so we were bereft both of her in person and of a good deal of ourselves, too. (164)

Here Dora acknowledges the importance of memory and story as constituents of identity. Dora mourns both the loss of Grandma, and the fictions she provided, around which Dora created for herself a family and her own place within it.

Lacking any possibility of knowing their biological mother, the search for a father figure becomes very important. Throughout the novel, the twins wish to be acknowledged as the children of Melchior, a validation which continually eludes them. When Dora describes the girls meeting Melchior for the first time, she recalls that "[his]

eyes . . . were the bitterest disappointment of my life till then. No. Of all my life, before and since. . . those eyes of his looked at us but did not see us. . . To see him fail to see me wiped that smile right off my face" (72). As Fevvers briefly loses her sense of herself without an audience, so too does Dora suffer an identity crisis by Melchior's refusal to acknowledge the presence of his children.

Throughout their lives, Melchior denies his paternity; however, Peregrine is willing to play the role of father. Perry's presence as a father figure highlights the difference between biological and performative parenting:

Note how I call them both 'our fathers', as if we had the two and, in a sense, so we did. Melchior it was who did the biological necessary, it's true, but Peregrine passed as our father -- that is, he was the one who publicly acknowledged us when Melchior would not. I should tell you, now, that Melchior's entire family, Wheelchair apart, always maintained this fiction, too, which is why Saskia told Tristram we were his aunts and not his sisters. But Peregrine was so much beloved by us and behaved so much more fatherly to us, not to mention paying most of the bills, that I know I need to claim him as something more than uncle.

(17)

This clearly suggests that the role of father does not result simply from biology but from financial and emotional involvement. Later in the novel, this notion is conveyed quite emphatically by Tiff: "There's more to fathering than fucking, you know" (211). The role of father is shown by the novel to be one of choice, and defined at least as much by a willingness to take on the role, as it is by the simple biological facts.

To most effectively make this point, the true biological relationships must first be revealed. At the birthday party, all of the skeletons tumble out of the family closet. Lady A. stresses that although his legal daughters are not biologically his, they are in spirit: "Not your seed, Melchior, but those girls were cast in your mould, all the same! They robbed me and turned me out of my own home and spurned the love I felt for them just as you did yourself, Melchior!" (215). Lady A states aloud what is obvious to anyone who has observed the behaviour of the various members of the family. Saskia and Imogen have chosen to imitate their father, as he has chosen to imitate his father before him. It is the agreed upon fiction of paternity that has influenced the character of Melchior's legal children, not their biology.

Melchior's ability to be a good father has been

hindered by his own lack of a role model. On his birthday, he assumes the role of his father:

On his hundredth birthday, a man may indulge in any whim he chooses; Melchior had donned the costume of his father. . . . tonight of all nights, he'd chosen to become his own father, hadn't he, as if the child had not been the father of the man, in his case, but, during his whole long life, the man had waited to become the father of himself. (224)

Now that Dora has received the long-sought public acknowledgement of her paternity, she is able to look at Melchior differently: "I'd never taken into consideration that he'd got problems of his own where family was concerned. His childhood, which stopped short at ten years old, never to go again. . . .No love, no nothing"(224). To fill the void, Melchior "engage[s] in [a] titanic contest with [his] dead father" (215), and is irrationally attached to "a tattered cardboard crown which is the only memento of his own parents' Shakespearean success" (Chedgzoy 263).

Having been publicly acknowledged as members of the family,

Nora and I were well content. We'd finally wormed our way into the heart of the family we'd always wanted to be part of. They'd asked us on the

stage and let us join in, legit. at last. There was a house we all had in common and it was called, the past, even though we'd lived in different rooms. (226)

Now that Dora's paternity has been sorted out, and publicly acknowledged, it would seem that the primary issue in her quest for identity has been dealt with. But thus far, maternity has been largely ignored. It has been observed that the mothers of much of Carter's fiction are characterized by their absence, and Carter herself has noted that houses serve as mothers in her early fiction (Lee 109).

In the preceding passage, the house has come to represent the entire family. Where then does this leave motherhood?

An old saw begins the book: "It's a wise child that knows its own father." The saying is not thought to apply to mothers. Indeed, Dora's initial stance is that "mother is always a mother, since a mother is a biological fact, whilst a father is a movable feast" (216). However, at the very end of the novel Dora begins to reconsider this. After making love, Perry questions the twins maternity: "has it ever occurred to you that your mother might not be your mother?" (222). Dora replies: "Come off it, Perry. 'Father' is a hypothesis but 'mother' is a fact" (223). But Perry questions this notion, suggesting that like fatherhood, motherhood is a chosen role: "'Mother is as mother does,'

said Perry. 'She loved you just as much as if --'" (223).
 Grandma Chance changes the nature of family by choosing to
 parent the twins "because of pure love, it was a genuine
 family romance, she fell in love with us the moment she
 clapped her eyes on us." (12)

This is markedly different from the way in which
 Melchior functions in their family. Kate Chedgzoy observes
 that Carter uses the notion of family romance

to deconstruct the hegemony of the bourgeois
 nuclear family which founds its legitimacy in
 biological succession and the name of the father,
 replacing it with a carnivalesque family of
 elective affinities. . . . The text records the
 pain of cultural exclusion and exile from the
 legitimate family; at the same time, it subverts
 the power structures which give rise to family
 romances by revealing that the exceptional psychic
 power which the father figure holds may be in an
 asymmetrical and unstable relation both to
 familial and social structures. (262-263)

Melchior is ultimately shown to be two-dimensional, and
 unworthy of the unrequited love they have had for him all
 this time. Dora observes that he

looked two-dimensional. . . . Too kind, too
 handsome, too repentant. . . . he had an imitation

look. . . . like one of those great, big, papier-mâché heads they have in the Notting Hill parade, larger than life, but not lifelike. (230)

Melchior's recognition of them finally allows them to see him outside the lens of romance. Dora is now free to turn her attention to maternity.

As Melchior publicly accepts them, Dora thinks,

If only our mother could have been there to see.
But -- which mother? Pretty Kitty? Grandma?
That's a problem. I don't know what Pretty Kitty
might have said, but Grandma would have managed
something acid. (226)

Here, she recognizes that even if she knows the fact of who her biological mother was, she does not *know* the woman. Despite the elaborate narrative she has built around her origins, she can only extend that fiction so far.

Dora's concern with origins has focused on paternity because maternity has been assumed. But now, issues of paternity settled, and Perry's interrogation of maternity foregrounded, Dora realizes that maybe it takes a wise child to know her *mother*. She realizes that she does know something about her mother; she knows how her *adoptive* mother would have reacted. In this way, she demonstrates that the question of knowing her family extends beyond identification to understanding. By anticipating how

Grandma Chance would have reacted, she demonstrates that she does, finally, understand who her mother was.

Her ability to anticipate Grandma Chance's reaction is due, in part to the fact that, "the older we grow, the more like her we become"(28). This is yet another argument for the importance of nurture over nature, a validation of the sort of family that is created from love and choice:

"Grandma invented this family. She put it together out of whatever came to hand -- a stray pair of orphaned babes, a ragamuffin in a flat cap. She created it by sheer force of personality" (35).

Dora's similarity to Grandma Chance is emphasized by the unexpected gift Perry gives them late in the fifth act. The twins will be taking on the role of mother when they are more biologically suited to the role of grandmother, as did their mother before them. It is becoming apparent that motherhood may be as mobile as fatherhood, and have more to do with attitude than biology.

Although *Nights at the Circus* deals more overtly with the construction of femininity, *Wise Children's* focus on family engages these same issues. In all of Carter's fiction, the family is often shown to "reproduc[e] structures of male dominance and female subordination" (Palmer 182). Biological motherhood is the linchpin in this system. *Nights at the Circus* ends with a caution about the

inevitable end of marriage plot comedies, and the implied bondage to childbearing and rearing. Lizzie warns Fevvers that the "customary ending of the old comedies of separated lovers" is marriage, and worries that she will end up "brood[ing] over a clutch of eggs" (280, 282).

When they find a young mother in a hut Lizzie suggests that

this tableau of a woman in bondage to her reproductive system, a woman tied hand and foot to that Nature which your physiology denies, Sophie, has been set here on purpose to make you think twice about turning from a freak into a woman.

(283)

In societies where women require someone else to provide the materials that sustain life for them and their child, and where they have no choice about bearing children, subjugation is inevitable. Fevvers has the option of avoiding this, due to her uniqueness.

The succession of adoptive mothers in the two novels suggests that the only families which can escape the pattern of male dominance and female submission are those that involve choice. The final stage of the emancipation of women is not just the choice whether or not to bear children, but the separation of childbirth and mothering.

Wise Children takes up where *Nights at the Circus* left

off in many ways. It deals with issues left to the side of *Nights at the Circus*, such as the problems caused by lack of identifiable origins and the impact that may have on self-concept. The lack of biological parents is not painted as unproblematic, but the book moves towards an equalizing of parental roles. The most obvious way in which the novels are shown to be related is in the description of Grandma Chance's new beginning which aligns her with Fevvers and the creation of the New Woman coinciding with the beginning of the new century. The parallel role of aged, adoptive mother suggests that motherhood may, in fact, be characterized by a freedom equal to that of fatherhood. Rather than being bound to parenting by biology, the mothers in Carter's fiction are mothers by choice, not force. This is a rather revolutionary notion. Both mother and father have a choice in the matter, and that is what ultimately counts, that, and the stories that are made up to fill in the blanks. It is those stories, how they are told and who tells them, that will be examined in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Choose your own Romance

Wise Children opens with a riddle and a greeting:

Q: Why is London like Budapest?

A: Because it is two cities divided by a river.

Good morning! Let me introduce myself. My name is Dora Chance. Welcome to the wrong side of the tracks. (1)

This direct address to the audience sets the stage for one of the central themes of the novel. There is an immediate blurring of the boundaries between written and oral communication. By ensuring that readers know that she is speaking from "the wrong side of the tracks", Dora (and through her, Carter) introduces the tensions between the legitimate and the illegitimate, and high and low culture, that pervade the novel. Like the twins, the issues of illegitimacy are doubled; Dora and Nora are "illegitimate twice over: by birth . . . and by profession" (Webb 280).¹

Through blurring genre distinctions and confusing the boundaries that divide high and low culture, Carter continues to disrupt binary logic and patriarchal systems

¹ A similar point is made by Kate Chedgzoy: "The Hazard and Chance [families are] [d]oubly theatrical: because the families are split between the legitimate classical theatre, and the illegitimate, *declass * world of music hall, song and dance, the movies. . . . [and] [d]oubly fictional: because within the fictional world of the novel, the history of the family is represented as a fabulous romance which the participants tell themselves as they go along" (262)

that place a greater value on official narratives, histories and bloodlines. By combining different genres and conventions, Carter points out that a single convention is rarely adequate to describe experience. Also, highlighting convention and exposing the way in which convention and formula create certain expectations in the reader demonstrates the power that form has on interpretation. The difference between comedy and tragedy is not so much one of content as it is one of context.

Genre boundaries are blurred in a number of ways. First, there is a blurring of written and oral communication in Dora's voice, which transmits the narrative to the readers. Second, Dora refers to her family relationships and the events of the novel in specifically narrative terms, invoking the conventions of a number of different genres, but also blurring the distinctions between them. The blurring of literary boundaries and styles undermines distinctions between high and low culture. Just as biological legitimacy becomes a problematic notion, so too does literary legitimacy. Finally, diagetically, the boundaries between fiction and reality become blurred for the characters; the "legitimate" side of the family repeatedly confuses life offstage with theatre.

Dora reveals her agenda at the outset, telling her audience that she is writing her memoirs: "I am at present

working on my memoirs and researching family history -- see the word processor, the filing cabinet, the card indexes, right hand, left hand, right side, left side, all the dirt on everybody"(3). She describes for her audience the hidden tools of the trade necessary for the transmission of this narrative. Kate Webb identifies this as one of the ways that Dora/Carter is "a demythologiser, keen to let her reader in on the tricks of the trade" (295).

Where legitimate "histories" are carefully constructed and deal with the public works of "great" men, Dora is concerned with personal history, the parts of life that are relegated to women's talk, gossip and non-official narratives. She "challenges the notion of history as a narrative written by men, by the young and . . . by the legitimate" (Peach 133). She reveals that in the process of writing her memoirs, she will use artifacts from the seamier side of life:

Sometimes I think, if I look hard enough, I can see back into the past. There goes the wind, again. Crash. Over goes the dustbin, all the trash spills out. . . . What a wind! Whooping and banging all along the street, the kind of wind that blows everything topsy-turvey. (3)

The fact that everything in the house is "[s]lightly soiled" (2) recalls Fevvers dressing room, as the physical and

literal trash in the preceding passage parallels Fevvers soiled undergarments strewn about her dressing room. The wind is Dora's narrative, a force that uncovers the underside of the polished performance that would be the norm in an official presentation of the facts. As Dora constructs her (hi)story for us, the evidence is dug from deep in the "archaeology of [her] desk" (11), and comes in the form of faded postcards and the like.

Her colloquial style prioritizes the spoken word and personal experience. In her introduction to *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*, Angela Carter describes a particular convention of women storytellers:

there exists a European convention of an archetypal female storyteller, "Mother Goose" in English . . . an old woman sitting by the fireside, spinning. . . . Old wives' tales -- that is, worthless stories, untruths, trivial gossip, a derisive label that allots the art of storytelling to women at the exact same time as it takes all value from it. (xi)

Dora is a modern Mother Goose, transmitting an "unofficial" narrative using a word processor instead of spinning by a fire. By choosing this mode of narrative transmission, she attempts to demonstrate that it has no less value than official forms of conveying narrative. She invokes the

genres of contemporary low culture (romance, tv game show, soap opera) to further align her tale with popular culture.

The never-ending allusions to Shakespeare also serve in this respect. For Carter, Shakespeare is

anybody's and everybody's. . . . Shakespeare just isn't an intellectual, and I think this is one of the reasons why intellectuals get so pissed-off with him. They are still reluctant to treat him as popular culture (Sage Interview 185-186)

Sage observes that for Carter, Shakespeare is "in the tradition of Chaucer and Boccaccio, ribald, magical and a bricoleur" (187). As a bricoleur, whose plays deal with the more physical side of life celebrated by the carnivalesque, he "has more in common with illegitimate, working-class, populist entertainers such as the Chance sisters than with those who treat him with idolatry" (Lee 118). This position on Shakespeare makes him the perfect vehicle with which to interrogate the notions of legitimacy and illegitimacy:

[his] position as cultural father, source and guarantor of all that is finest in English literary history . . . is both secure and ambivalent, unchallengeable yet grounded in the shakiest of foundations. (Chedgzoy 249)

Since the contemporary transmission of popular culture takes place primarily on television and through videos, it

is certainly appropriate for Dora to appropriate this language in the telling of her story. Dora's story is interrupted, as are readers, by the dramatic entrance by the tail end of the legitimate side of the family. Tristram has no words to tell his story, and hands his "aunts" a video tape of the program. On it, his real life unfolds in the public eye, only to be mistaken for television programming. This action parallels the scene at the end where the truth about the family's paternity issues is revealed in such a dramatic fashion that the audience of party guests applauds.

When Tristram hands her the tape, Dora inserts a technology-based stage direction in her narrative. A freeze-frame ensues for the next 30 pages as she outlines the background to what we are about to watch. This invokes a very visual and technologically specific convention, and also recalls another convention of television, the "last time on . . ." feature that usually begins serial tv shows:

Freeze-frame.

Let us pause awhile in the unfolding story of Tristram and Tiffany so that I can fill you in on the background. High time! you must be saying. Just who is this Melchior Hazard and his clan, his wives, his children, his hangers-on? It is in order to provide some of the answers to those questions that I, Dora Chance, in the course of

the assembling notes towards my own autobiography, have inadvertently become the chronicler of all the Hazards, although I should think that my career as such will go as publicly unacknowledged by the rest of the dynasty as my biological career has done for not only are Nora and I, as I have already told you, by-blows, but our father was a pillar of the legit. theatre and we girls are illegitimate in every way -- not only born out of wedlock, but we went on the halls, didn't we! (11)

Dora combines their biological and artistic illegitimacy here, pointing out that her current task will also be unacknowledged, like her parentage. The fact that Dora cannot tell her own story without telling those of her family speaks to the extent that family is involved in personal identity.

They watch the video as if it were live, although it is a recording. This emphasizes the family's tendency to confuse art and life. Tristram, who has already lived through it once, nonetheless reacts to the pain of the shoe hitting his shin: "The real Tristram, sitting here beside his aunties in the flesh, let out a short, sharp cry in unison with himself on the screen" (43). Dora, watching for the first time, is so caught up in the drama she reaches out as if to catch Tiff through the screen: "I leaned forward to

the screen so that I could reach out and catch her if she tumbled, I was so caught up in it" (44). Theatre, television and cinema encourage this sort of reaction more than written language. The conventions of verisimilitude of television are designed elicit the same response from the audience as it would if it were a live production.

The paradox regarding the conventions of theatre, television and cinema is that to maintain the illusion of life an adherence to certain formulas is necessary. The audience will be made very uncomfortable by art which is as truly unpredictable as life. The comfort of convention is demonstrated when Tristram falls back on a formulaic response as an attempt to reassert control over the situation: "The good old goodbye formula. It reassured the studio audience. One or two of them started to clap, as if by doing that they could change what they had seen into what they ought to have seen" (47).

This side of the family has a talent for encouraging observers to respond to their private lives as if it were theatre, and playing out their personal lives on the stage. After his final performance of *Othello*, Ranulph murders his wife, her lover and himself. Dora wonders if "Perhaps, by then, Old Ranulph couldn't tell the difference between Shakespeare and living" (21). Like his father, or at least, the man publicly recognized as his father, Melchior lives in

a fictional world. At the fire, he laments the loss of his paper crown. Dora is "amazed to see him so much moved, and on account of what? A flimsy bit of make-believe. A nothing" (105).

He milks this loss for all it is worth, putting on a pathos-filled performance for all who are assembled:

He began to cry. The tears ran down his sooty cheeks like chalk down a blackboard but, and this was the funny thing, although my own tear ducts remained untickled, my palms itched and prickled like anything and I knew the only way to ease the irritation was to clap them together. Just as I was about to give the old fraud a big hand, couldn't help it, the waiter, who was hovering by, as struck with this performance as I was, caught hold of my arm, spilling my champagne. (105)

In a similar vein, at his birthday party the guests arrange themselves so they can best view the confrontation between Lady A. and Melchior:

What a performance. Those who could secure one perched on the little gilt chairs that stood around, the rest roosted on the floor at risk to gowns and trousers and all turned into the perfect audience, quiet as mice, rustling at tense moments, indrawing breath at the startling

disclosures and sometimes rippling with discreet mirth. (213)

At the end of it all "[t]here was a patter of applause that petered out as soon as people realised that everything was real" (216).

The final scene necessary for a happy ending requires Melchior to finally acknowledge his illegitimate daughters, thus tying up the loose ends, uncovering all deceptions and (re)uniting the family. There is "[n]ot a dry eye in the house" as Melchior kisses his girls. The theatricality of it is further emphasized by Dora's remembrance of the moment:

I could have sworn that then the curtain came down, the lights went up and there was a standing ovation but, as Nora pointed out later, there was no curtain, the lights were on already, and it would have been discourteous of that audience to applaud. So I imagined all that. But, anyway, after this inexpressibly moving reconciliation, came a short intermission. Everybody got up and stretched and vivaciously discussed the action so far while the waiters cleared the cake away. (217)

Not only is the scene couched in terms that emphasize its theatricality, Dora also stresses the role of her imagination in constructing the memories which make up her

narrative.

She questions the reliability of her memory and therefore the veracity of her stories throughout the novel, pointing out places where she is aware that she is shaky on the details. One example of this occurs when Dora escapes marriage and watches her sister and a replica of herself partake of a triple marriage ceremony:

It was a strange night, that night, and stranger still because I always misremember. It never seems the same, twice, each time that I remember it. I distort . . . And I no longer remember the set as a set but as a real wood . . . but looking as if it were unreal and painted. . . . These days, half a century and more later, I might think I did not live but dreamed that night, if it wasn't for the photos, see? This one of Bottom, being hugged by --

There I go again! Can't keep a story going in a straight line, can I? Drunk in charge of a narrative.

Where was I?

There I was, one of the crowd, among the fairies, goblins, spirits, mice, rabbits, badgers, etc. etc. etc. (157-8)

In this passage, she draws attention to her narrative

strategy by asking a double edged question, "Where am I?", which seems at first to be questioning where she left off the narrative. Her answer, however, identifies her physical location within the story that she is telling, which also serves to reposition her within this particular story. Like Fevvers and Lizzie's narrative, Dora's peculiar story does have artifacts to validate elements of it. In this case, she is distracted from her narrative by one such artifact.

Dora again points out that her memory is unreliable when Gorgeous George approaches her at Melchior's birthday party:

At my age, memory becomes exquisitely selective. Yes; I remember, with a hallucinatory sensitivity, sense impressions. . . . But it takes an effort to dredge up anything else, I can tell you. I couldn't for the life of me remember the brand name of Irish's favourite tippie. . . . what was the brand? If you get the little details like that right, people will believe anything. (195-6)

Dora points out to her audience another of the tools of the trade. The details which lend authenticity to a narrative are used to provide the illusion of truth, to blur the line between fact and fiction. This is similar to the way Fevvers and Lizzie insert checkable facts into the interview with Walser to lend credibility to their story.

Dora's unreliable memory is another aspect of her story which aligns it with the fairy tale. As Carter points out in the Introduction to *The Old Wives' Fairy Tale Book*, "In most languages, the word 'tale' is a synonym for 'lie' or 'falsehood'" (xi). The deception is freely admitted to by the storyteller, and acknowledged by the audience. When presented with the conventions of the fairy tale, such as the traditional English opening, "Once upon a time": "we know in advance that what we are about to hear isn't going to be true"(xii). Since Dora's story will not be confined to one genre, it does not start with any such formula, nor is the story meant to be simply a tale. However, Dora's willingness to admit to her audience that she may not be entirely reliable is a characteristic that calls upon the conventions of the fairy tale.

Not only is her memory unreliable, but it is apparent that her source material is also unreliable. Her history, and sense of herself, is a narrative constructed from the scraps in her desk and stories from others. As she discusses the lives of her fathers, and her mother(s), it becomes increasingly apparent that the story is mostly a fiction based on a sketchy outline of questionable facts. Melchior's escape from Aunt Effie's is couched in terms of "it would have" and "I wonder" and "I picture him". She becomes even less certain as her mother enters the story: "I

suppose my mother must have felt sorry for him. I can imagine her stripping off in the cold room, turning towards the starving boy. How did she do it? Shyly? Nervously? Lewdly?" (24). She continues describing the possibilities of her conception, all stated as questions. Finally, she shares the fiction she would like to believe: "I'd like to think it went like this . . ." (24).

It is mostly Grandma Chance who has provided the bits that Dora uses to make up stories about her origins. They have often heard the moment of their birth described:

So there was dancing and singing all along Bard Road and Mrs Chance picked us up, one on each arm, and took us to the window so the first thing we saw with our swimming baby eyes was sunshine and dancing. Then a seagull swooped up, past the window, up and away. She told us about the seagull so often that although I cannot really remember it, being just hatched out, all the same, I do believe I saw that seagull fly up into the sky. (26)

The relationship between storytelling and identity is highlighted here, as is the blurry boundary between fiction and reality. Dora has so often been told this story that includes her in its narrative that she considers it part of her (hi)story, and has even constructed a memory of the

event.

When Dora describes Grandma Chance's entrance into their lives, it is also described in terms that emphasize the fictional aspect, and the theatricality of the whole story. She says of the boarding house that Grandma Chance ran, "the whole place never looked plausible. It looked like the stage set of a theatrical boarding house, as if Grandma had done it up to suit a role she'd chosen on purpose" (25).

There is an obvious connection between the theatre and the oral tradition, as in both cases the narrative is transmitted verbally by a performer who occupies the same physical space as the audience. Dora's memoirs are very oral. As a matter of fact, it is never clearly determined whether we are reading her memoirs, or have walked in on her as she is writing. Since we are reading, it seems that the object in front of us must be the memoirs of which she speaks, yet the style is very colloquial, and places the reader in the room with Dora: "Carter's mouthpiece, 'I, Dora Chance', speaks to her reader as if she expected him or her to reply" (Webb 294).

This recalls the way in which *Nights at the Circus* begins with an assault on the readers' senses which virtually places them in Walser's shoes. *Nights at the Circus* begins in Fevvers' "mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor" (NC 9); *Wise Children* begins in Dora's

cluttered, dirty room: "This is my room. We don't share. . . . Everything slightly soiled, I'm sorry to say. Can't be doing with wash, wash, wash, polish, polish, polish, these days, when time is so precious" (2). Even the narrative voice is similar, Dora's voice "resonat[ing] as the mature voice of Sophie Fevvers" (Boehm 84).

Dora constantly anticipates the reaction of an audience to her text. The verbal style of address is highlighted by the way she interrupts her narrative in order to directly address potential concerns of her audience. As she is showing off the documents of her paternal grandmother's stage triumphs she stops in mid-sentence to keep the story on track: "This one is a real collector's item because - [¶] No. Wait. I'll tell you all about that in my own good time" (13). A paragraph later, Dora again comments on her narrative strategy: "I sold one of poor old Irish's letters to pay for it. [¶] Irish? Who's he? [¶] You'll find out, soon enough" (13). In another example of colloquial, conversational style, she describes Daisy's appearance at Melchior's birthday party: "not a line on that skin but, then, sharkskin doesn't wrinkle, does it, don't be a bitch, Dora" (202). The oral nature of the narrative is re-emphasized as Dora is winding the story down:

Well, you might have known what you were about to let yourself in for when you let Dora Chance in

her ratty old fur and poster paint, her orange (Persian Melon) toenails sticking out of her snakeskin peep-toes, reeking of liquor, accost you in the Coach and Horses and let her tell you a tale. (227)

Throughout the novel, Dora has called upon the conventions of a number of genres to convey her story. The blending of genres and styles emphasizes the different ways in which narratives can be framed, showing the effect that different frames have on the story and the way in which different stories suggest different modes of transmission. Tristram, as a game show host, functions best within the conventions of television; it is with those that Dora describes him. She and Nora have a VCR to watch old musicals, and Dora observes that "[w]e watch so many old movies our memories come in monochrome"(10), demonstrating that the type of art one consumes can affect the way one sees one's life. The conventions of film are even used to describe history she was not present for. Describing Ranulph embarking on his proselytizing mission, she notes that: "I see it in my mind's eye as if it were a movie" (17). In this way, Dora invites readers to visualize the scene, using the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema.

Dora uses the conventions of particular kinds of art not because they are the best way to describe experience,

but in order to point out that conventions are too limiting to adequately describe experience. As she first reveals to the audience that she and Nora are "illegitimate in every way", she comments:

Romantic illegitimacy, always a seller. It ought to copper-bottom the sales of my memoirs. But, to tell the truth, there was sod all romantic about *our* illegitimacy. At best, it was a farce, at worse, a tragedy, and a chronic inconvenience the rest of the time. (11)

Here Dora contrasts the truth of their experience with simplifying literary constructions. The traditional genre, romance, is seen to be entirely inappropriate. She applies other genres, but also finds them to be insufficient.

Dora reveals that it is context, rather than content, that is often at the heart of genre distinctions:

It was high time that Saskia got wise. Remember Gorgeous George on Brighton Pier long ago, and the punch line of his joke? I couldn't resist, I came out with it:

'Don't worry, darlin', 'e's not your father!'

What if Horatio had whispered that to Hamlet in Act I, Scene I? And think what difference it might have made to Cordelia. On the other hand, those last comedies would darken considerably in

tone, don't you think, if Marina and, especially, Perdita weren't really the daughters of . . .

Comedy is tragedy that happens to other people.

Brighton Pier broke up with mirth when Gorgeous George said, 'e's not your father'; when I said the same thing in the Hazard residence, you could have heard a pin drop. (213)

The fine line that distinguishes a comedy from a tragedy is partly one of audience, and therefore context.

It may be the awareness of the fine line between comedy and tragedy that accounts for the continuing popularity of Shakespeare after all this time. In an interview with Lorna Sage, Carter observes that

there's something about Shakespeare that converts the most sophisticated person into the naive observer: *this time*, you know, Othello will see sense about the handkerchief. They played *Lear* with a happy ending for two hundred years, and it's perfectly possible that *Lear* with a happy ending would have sent you from the theatre with a great surge of joy, it would turn into a late comedy, a successful *Cymbeline*. (186)

Dora works, throughout the novel and throughout her life, to maintain the perspective of the "naive observer", who hopes

for the best, despite the probable outcome.

In adopting Grandma Chance's motto: "Hope for the best, expect the worst," she acknowledges that tragedy also has to do with circumstance and attitude:

I felt sad.

Sad. Nothing more than sad. Let's not call it a tragedy; a broken heart is never a tragedy. Only untimely death is a tragedy. And war, which, before we knew it, would be upon us; replace the comic mask with the one whose mouth turns down and close the theatre, because I refuse point-blank to play in tragedy. (153-4)

Although Dora refuses to play in a tragedy, she does not refuse to acknowledge its existence (Boehm 87). Quoting Jane Austen, she decides to "[l]et other pens dwell on guilt and misery' . . . I do not wish to talk about the war. Suffice to say it was not carnival" (163).

Dora knows that "[t]here are limits to the power of laughter and though I may hint at them from time to time, I do not propose to step over them" (220). Like Carter, she is a materialist who will not be fooled into thinking that you can simply laugh away troubles, although she is willing to indulge in the illusion from time to time:

While we were doing it, everything seemed possible, I must say. But that is the illusion of

the act. Now I remember how everything seemed possible when I was doing it, but as soon as I stopped, not, as if fucking itself were the origin of illusion.

"Life's a carnival," he said. He was an illusionist, remember.

"The carnival's got to stop, some time, Perry," I said. "You listen to the news, that'll take the smile off your face." (222)

Dora's observation that "wars are facts we cannot fuck away, Perry, nor laugh away, either" (221), is not something that Perry, as the embodiment of carnival², is able to hear.

Perry's inability to acknowledge reality is indicative of the fact that Carter's use of the carnivalesque is not a wholehearted endorsement of it as a strategy for living. Linden Peach suggests that the carnivalesque is "a theme and not necessarily a position from which she writes"(144):

[i]f there is a single position from which Carter writes in *Nights at the Circus* and *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

² "the spirit of the carnivalesque is embodied -- literally -- in the ever-expanding, Rabelaisian Perry" (Peach 145). "Although some women in *Wise Children* possess characteristics that might be thought of as carnivalesque, it is a man, Peregrine, who embodies it" (Webb 302).

which in the Renaissance "illegitimacy" and "theatre" were often linked. . . . Indeed, the source of the carnivalesque element in *Nights at the Circus*, and *Wise Children* was undoubtedly Shakespeare rather than Bakhtin. (144-145)

Shakespeare is the ideal figure around which to question the boundary between the legitimate and the illegitimate. As Kate Webb observes, "Shakespeare may have become the very symbol of legitimate culture, but his work is characterised by bastardy, multiplicity and incest" (282). Additionally, most of Shakespeare's work was built around stories from other sources. He was a great recycler, in the tradition of the teller of the folk tale. In comparing the fairy tale to modern notions of art, Carter observes:

Ours is a highly individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original, a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. "This is how I make potato soup." (Introduction x)

In *Wise Children*, Carter reclaims Shakespeare as a writer of

the people, dishing up his own recipe for potato soup. Dora, in turn, mixes into her own soup, not only a hefty dose of the Bard, but numerous other canonical voices, challenging readers to "unpick the words of others that have been woven into Carter's/Dora's own" (Webb 295).

This element of carnival, or theatre, in both novels can be aligned with popular culture, and especially the fairy tale. Traditional folk and fairy tales

are structured around the relations between men and women. . . .The common, unspoken goal is fertility and continuance. In the context of societies from which most of these stories spring, their goal is not a conservative one but a Utopian one, indeed a form of heroic optimism -- as if to say, one day, we might be happy, even if it won't last. (Introduction xviii)

The happy endings of Carter's two final novels borrow from the convention of fairy tales, but also deviate in significant ways. *Nights at the Circus* ends with a regenerative act, but one that guarantees neither procreation nor legitimacy. *Wise Children* ends with two geriatric dancehall girls becoming mothers, once again denying fertility and sanctioned union. The heroic optimism of fairy tales is evident in Grandma Chance's motto "Hope for the best, expect the worst."

Like Fevver's motto, "Is she fact or is she fiction?", it is a motto structured on binaries. However, by the end of *Nights at the Circus*, it is quite evident that Fevvers inhabits a space between the two poles. Similarly, hoping for the best while expecting the worst means that Grandma Chance lives somewhere in the middle, in a space that is neither best nor worst.

The Chance twins follow their mother's tradition of living in a liminal space. They deny biological notions of parenting and naturalized gender roles by each taking on the dual roles of mother and father: "'We're both of us mothers and both of us fathers,' she said. 'They'll be wise children, all right'" (230).

These wise children have finally come to understand that all along their real father has been an illusion:

"D'you know, I sometimes wonder if we haven't been making him up all along," she said. "If he isn't just a collection of our hopes and dreams and wishful thinking in the afternoons. Something to set our lives by, like the old clock in the hall, which is real enough, in itself, but which we've got to wind up to make it go."

"Oh, very profound. Very deep."

"Think about it," she said. "We can tell these little darlings here whatever we like about

their mum and dad if Perry doesn't find them but whatever we tell them, they'll make up their own romance out of it." (230)

They serenade the new additions to their family, recreating the "dancing and singing all along Bard Road" (26) the day of their birth. They have inherited a great deal from Grandma Chance, and the pragmatism Dora displays after her romp with Perry indicates that she will never be uncritically optimistic. However, they are too wise to unconsciously replay the lives of their parents. The twins are "boy and girl, a new thing in our family" (227), suggesting different family patterns. And in the place of Grandma Chance's "hope for the best, expect the worst", late in the night, late in their lives, the Chance twins are willing to go one better: "What a joy it is to dance and sing!" (232).

Conclusion

In the 1998 Peter Weir film, *The Truman Show*, a baby is adopted by a corporation, and is brought up in a fictional world. For Truman, Seahaven is the "real world", and the only one he knows. He lives his life in oblivion to the truth known by everyone else around him: that he is the star of a twenty-four hour, live television show, and everything he does is entertainment. Christof, the creator of the show, explains that it is successful and appealing because, despite the artifice surrounding him, Truman himself is real. How is it possible that someone live "real" life in such an environment? Christof explains: "We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented" (Weir).

Initially, this appears to be true. However, when Truman is encouraged by an outsider to look at his world differently, he notices inconsistencies that had hitherto been invisible to him. Once he begins to deconstruct his world, there is no turning back.

The Truman Show can be seen to function symbolically in a number of different ways. This is one feature it has in common with the writing of Angela Carter, who "put[s] everything in a novel to be read -- read the way allegory was intended to be read . . . on as many levels as you can comfortably cope with at a time" (Haffenden 86). Like Carter's last two novels, *The Truman Show* is about the

search for individual identity, and trying to establish identity outside of the inherited codes. They also share a concern with the way in which contemporary culture blurs the lines between life and entertainment, though they go about this in very different ways. Like *The Truman Show*, classified as "Fantasy / Drama / Comedy / Sci-Fi", Carter's work defies genre. It simply is not possible to reconstruct the world within the conventions and confines of a single genre.

Finally, *The Truman Show* is also about art and a creator who loses control of his creation. At the end of the movie, Truman walks away from his creator and out into the world. In an interview with John Heffenden, Carter describes herself as using this strategy at the end of *Nights at the Circus*. Asked about how the reader is to understand Fevvers' statement, "To think I really fooled you!" (295), Carter responds:

It's actually a statement about the nature of fiction, about the nature of her narrative. . . .
It's actually doing something utterly illegitimate -- in a way I like -- because ending on that line doesn't make you realize the fictionality of what has gone before, it makes you start inventing other fictions, things that might have happened --

as though the people were really real, with real lives. Things might have happened to them other than the things I have said have happened to them. So that really is an illusion. It's inviting the reader to write lots of other novels for themselves, to continue taking these people as if they were real . . . it is inviting the reader to take one further step into the fictionality of the narrative, instead of coming out of it and looking at it as though it were an artefact. (90-90)

All of Angela Carter's fiction takes place in unusual worlds. Even her most realistic fiction has an element of the strange, the fantastic, at the very least, the theatrical. By offering us these different worlds, she encourages us to look at our own world differently. And like Truman, once we have begun to look at our world with different eyes, there is no turning back.

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