# Legitimacy in Ruins: Grotesque Femininity and the Carnivalesque in Angela Carter's Wise Children

# الشرعية المنهارة: الأنوثة الغروتيسكية والكرنفالية في رواية أنجيلا كارتر الأطفال الحكماء


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## Abstract

Angela Carter's Wise Children reimagines legitimacy, identity, and cultural value through a carnivalesque lens. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body and carnival laughter, as well as Mary Russo's feminist revision of his work, this paper explores how Carter stages theatricality as both a mode of survival and a strategy of resistance, particularly for aging, illegitimate women whose bodies and performances defy patriarchal ideals.

Through close textual analysis of Dora's narration and key theatrical scenes, including the birthday celebration and the Twelfth Night ball, the paper examines how grotesque embodiment and parody disrupt official scripts of power. Rather than offer resolution, the novel revels in excess, confusion, and collapse, mocking patriarchal structures and affirming the vitality of marginal voices, whose stories resist containment and demand cultural space. Through comic inversion, mistaken identities, and carnivalesque spectacle, Wise Children dismantles the authority of lineage, genre, and gender. The paper contributes to feminist literary criticism by foregrounding how Carter mobilizes grotesque femininity and theatricality to challenge the legitimacy of cultural hierarchies.


Keywords: Carnivalesque, Grotesque Femininity, Theatricality, Illegitimacy

## الملخص

تعيد رواية الأطفال الحكماء لأنجيلا كارتر تصور الشرعية والهوية والقيمة الثقافية من خلال عدسة كرنفالية. استناداً إلى نظرية ميخائيل باختين حول الجسد الغريب والضحك الكرنفالي، فضلاً عن المراجعة النسوية التي أجرتها ماري روسو لعمله، يستكشف هذا البحث كيف يقدم كارتر المسرحية كأسلوب للبقاء واستراتيجية للمقاومة، وخاصة بالنسبة للنساء المسنات غير الشرعيات اللاتي تتحدى أجسادهن وأدائهن المثل الأبوية.

من خلال التحليل النصي الدقيق لسرد دورا والمشاهد المسرحية الرئيسية، بما في ذلك الاحتفال بعيد الميلاد وحفلة الليلة الثانية عشرة، تبحث الورقة في كيفية تعطيل التجسيد البشع والمحاكاة الساخرة للنصوص الرسمية للسلطة. وبدلاً من تقديم الحل، تستمتع الرواية بالإفراط والارتباك والانهيار، وتسخر من الهياكل الأبوية وتؤكد حيوية الأصوات الهامشية، التي تقاوم قصصها الاحتواء وتطالب بمساحة ثقافية. من خلال الانقلاب الكوميدي، والهويات الخاطئة، والمشهد الكرنفالي، تقوم رواية الأطفال الحكماء بتفكيك سلطة النسب والنوع والجنس. تساهم هذه الورقة في النقد الأدبي النسوي من خلال تسليط الضوء على كيفية حشد كارتر للأنوثة الغريبة والمسرحية لتحدي شرعية التسلسل الهرمي الثقافي.


الكلمات المفتاحية: الكرنفالية، الأنوثة البشعة، المسرحية، عدم الشرعية

# Introduction

Angela Carter's Wise Children is a novel deeply concerned with performance. This applies both to the literal world of theatre and to the more abstract shpere of identity, how people take on roles, how those roles shift, and how easily they can be undone. The story is told by Dora Chance, a former chorus girl looking back at her life, and through her, Carter gives us a world that is messy, layered, and often contradictory. Family structures blur, legitimacy is questioned, and the line between performance and reality becomes hard to pin down.

One way of approaching Wise Children is through the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque. For Bakhtin, carnival is not simply a festival but a worldview that permits the temporary suspension of social hierarchies. It brings the high and the low into contact, often through laughter, excess, and inversion (Bakhtin 1984). Carter's novel draws on this carnivalesque spirit. In its tone, imagery, and characters, the novel plays with boundaries and turns the serious into the absurd. Yet Carter's use of carnival goes beyond mere reversal or satire. She places particular emphasis on the body, especially the female body, as a site of resistance to norms, whether those norms are about gender, class, or cultural legitimacy. As Mary Russo argues in her feminist reading of Bakhtin, the grotesque body's disruptive power becomes even more significant when imagined through female embodiment.

The grotesque is central to how Carter articulates resistance in Wise Children. Drawing on Bakhtin, the grotesque body is marked by change, openness, and excess.

It stands in stark contrast to the idealized, sealed-off body of classical art and traditional authority. Instead, it is a body that leaks, swells, breaks down, and continually renews itself. In Carter's novel, this grotesque form appears in multiple ways. Dora and Nora, the Chance twins, never settle into fixed identities, and the roles they inhabit, both onstage and off, remain fluid and shifting. Grandma Chance similarly constructs a family without men, without marriage, and without apology, redefining kinship on her own unruly terms. What connects these women is not a commitment to purity or social order but to invention, disruption, and survival.

Carter's focus on theatre deepens her exploration of identity and resistance. The novel is full of actors, performances, stages, and scripted lines. Characters take on parts, both literally and figuratively, blurring the boundary between role and reality. Legitimacy, especially in the familial and patriarchal sense, emerges as fragile, something that can be assumed, rejected, or performed, but never fully secured. This performative instability mirrors the structure of carnival, where roles are fluid and social norms are temporarily overturned. As Kate Webb notes, Carter delights in the subversive energy of inversion and theatricality, using it to expose the artificial foundations of social order.

While many critics have explored Wise Children through Shakespearean pastiche or carnivalesque play, few have focused on how Carter uses carnival to foreground the voices and bodies of aging, illegitimate women. This paper fills that gap by examining how grotesque femininity and theatrical performance enable Carter's characters to resist patriarchal legitimacy. By centering older female bodies and non-

normative kinship structures, the analysis contributes to feminist scholarship on visibility, gender, and power. This study uses close reading informed by Bakhtinian and feminist theory, particularly Mary Russo's revision of the grotesque, to show how Carter challenges authority through bodily and performative excess. It argues that Wise Children uses the theatrical and grotesque body, shaped by the logic of the carnivalesque, to unsettle the foundations of patriarchal order. The following sections begin by outlining the theoretical background, especially the ideas of Bakhtin, before turning to a close reading of how Carter applies and adapts these concepts through character, structure, and tone. This approach aims is not only to interpret Carter's novel but also to understand how carnival and the grotesque function as literary strategies that disrupt, rather than resolve, the tensions surrounding identity, legitimacy, and power.

## Theoretical Framework

The concept of the carnivalesque, as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, provides a valuable tool through which to examine Wise Children. In Rabelais and His World (1984), Bakhtin describes carnival not just as a historical event but also a radical cultural mode in which "the usual barriers between people are suspended" and a space emerges where "all were considered equal during carnival time" (Bakhtin 10). It was a world turned upside down, where kings became fools, authority was mocked, and social rules were temporarily erased. Bakhtin points out that carnival is not without rules; it's a kind of organized disorder. It temporarily upends hierarchies, giving people space to imagine different ways of relating to each other. But it does

not aim to overthrow authority for good; rather, it shows that authority is something people have made up.

While carnival laughter is both comic and critical, it is the grotesque body becomes central here. This body breaks with classical ideals of perfection and containment, as Bakhtin explains, “The grotesque body is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). Unlike the clean, self-contained body of official culture, this body is porous, excessive, and often obscene. Bakhtin highlights the openness of the body, including its orifices, bulges, and reproductive functions, as a sign of ongoing transformation rather than a final form. Through this openness, it expresses renewal and collective identity, standing in contrast to the closed, perfected, and fixed classical body. It eats, defecates, gives birth, and dies, all while refusing to obey the boundaries that define the polite or the proper.

Beyond its exaggerated physicality, the grotesque body carries deep ideological weight as a symbol of renewal and resistance. For Bakhtin, grotesque realism “seeks to grasp in its imagery the indestructible, ever regenerating body” (318). The grotesque rejects closed systems, instead represting renewal, multiplicity, and a rejection of closed systems. As such, it stands in opposition to any ideological structure (be it religious, patriarchal, or institutional) that seeks to fix meaning or identity in place.

While Bakhtin’s theory offers a compelling general framework, feminist critics such as Mary Russo have challenged its gender neutrality and proposed key

adaptations. Russo revises Bakhtin's male-coded theory by insisting that the female body cannot be read through grotesque imagery without considering the history of how women have been publicly shamed, sexualized, and silenced. She argues that "Bakhtin's grotesque body is male by default," and that applying his theory to female characters or authors requires a critical rethinking of how women's bodies are socially and symbolically marked (Russo 8).

For Russo, the female grotesque carries a unique danger because it defies traditional representations of feminine decorum. She writes, "To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off" (Russo 11). In this framing, femininity is performative, and exaggerated performance becomes a means of exposing its artificiality, anticipating what Judith Butler theorizes in Gender Trouble as gender parody and performativity.

When women embrace excess, parody, or physical unruliness, they confront a system that historically idealizes them as pure, passive, and controlled. Russo also notes that the grotesque body, when made female, is often met with fear or disgust in dominant culture. "The female body," she writes, "is often the site of too much, too much flesh, too many functions, too much emotion" (Russo 9). Within this logic, Carter's exaggerated, aging, sexual female characters are not just grotesque for comic effect, they represent a deliberate refusal of patriarchal expectations. They dramatize what Russo calls the "visibility and volatility" of the female grotesque. These are figures who "make a spectacle of themselves" and are punished or dismissed for refusing to stay small, clean, or contained. Their visibility, their

theatricality, and their failure to be "proper" women is precisely what makes them politically potent.

Bakhtin's concept of laughter adds a final layer of complexity to Carter's adaptation of the carnivalesque. Carnival laughter, according to Bakhtin, is "universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants" (Bakhtin 11). This kind of laughter dissolves social boundaries, allowing people to inhabit multiple roles and identities without punishment. Carter adopts this spirit of ambiguity, but she does not romanticize it. Her characters laugh and perform, but often in situations of pain, marginalization, or uncertainty. The novel plays with carnival logic, but it also critiques its limits, especially when the suspension of order proves temporary or fails to protect the marginalized.

This paper extends Bakhtin's and Russo's frameworks by applying them specifically to Carter's aging twin protagonists characters, whose theatrical grotesqueness is both narrative engine and ideological resistance. Taken together, these ideas provide a strong foundation for analyzing Wise Children. Bakhtin's concepts offer tools for reading Carter's subversion of authority, while Russo's feminist lens clarify its political edge. Carter does not merely use parody or inversion for comic effect. Rather, she constructs a world in which theatricality and grotesque embodiment challenge the systems that attempt to define what is legitimate, be it familial, cultural, or gendered. With these concepts in mind, the analysis now turns to Wise Children to examine how Carter's characters, especially the Chance twins, perform grotesque femininity and challenge patriarchal legitimacy.

## Grotesque Bodies and Feminine Subversion

Angela Carter's Wise Children stages the female body as a site of resistance, parody, and reinvention. Through the grotesque performances of Dora and Nora Chance, Carter presents femininity not as a fixed role but as a performance that can be exaggerated, reshaped, and reclaimed. Their bodies do not conform to patriarchal expectations of youth, modesty, or maternal purpose. Instead, they laugh, age, seduce, and perform without shame. In this way, drawing on Russo's definition of the "female grotesque," Carter gives voice to bodies that refuse containment and exposes the artificial boundaries imposed on women's identities and bodies (Russo 9). Carter uses grotesque embodiment across these characters to destabilize the symbolic and social ideals that attempt to define womanhood.

From the opening pages, Dora's voice sets the tone. She is seventy-five years old, brash, reflective, and theatrical. Her narration is filled with bodily references, from menstruation to wrinkles to sexuality. She announces herself not as a dignified elder but as a bawdy performer: "I shall probably fall down dead in the middle of this sentence" (Carter 1). This willingness to present the aging female body as comic, unstable, and still sexually aware immediately marks a departure from sanitized or idealized depictions of older women. Rather than apologizing for her age or erasing her physicality, Dora foregrounds it. She mocks her own body, and in turn she reclaims it as a source of vitality and humor.

Dora and Nora's identities are never fixed; they frequently swap roles, names, and lovers. This fluidity,

paired with their physical sameness, disrupts the idea of the coherent female subject. At one point, Dora admits to impersonating her sister in bed, asking, “Give me your fella for a birthday present... Why should he notice any difference?” (Carter 83). This moment is both comic and unsettling, but its implications are serious. Identity, like gender, is revealed as something that can be performed, borrowed, and played with. Through these acts, the Chance sisters become agents of their own self-fashioning, blurring distinctions between self and other, truth and performance.

Their sexual agency also sets them apart from normative representations of women. Dora recalls many of her lovers and her indifference to marriage and domestic life. She expresses not regret or shame but rather pleasure and nostalgia, exclaiming, “What a wonderful life we’ve had!” even as she recounts hardship and exclusion (Carter 227). As Niall Richardson observes, “Grotesque representations of older women offer a space to defy expectations of passivity and decline” (Richardson 78). Unlike the tragic spinster or the idealized mother, Dora embodies a subversive womanhood that embraces contradiction. She is sexual but old, maternal but unmarried; comic but wise. Kate Webb writes, “Contradictions are a sign of hope, and difference has to be negotiated rather than fought over as if there were only one place of rightness” (Webb 198).

This exaggerated femininity directly confronts cultural ideals, especially when expressed through the bodies of Dora and Nora. They are too loud, too visible, too sexually free. Their performances on and off the stage exaggerate femininity to the point of parody, exposing how artificial those ideals are. By dressing in revealing costumes, by

continuing to perform into old age, and by refusing to disappear, they assert a bodily presence that patriarchal culture often seeks to suppress.

Carter also refuses to link female identity to biological motherhood. Dora and Nora are illegitimate and childless, but their lives are full of familial bonds and surrogate relationships. Grandma Chance, who raises them, is another example of grotesque femininity. She is not elegant or restrained but earthy, practical, and fiercely loving. Dora describes her as someone who "didn't know what men were for until she clapped eyes on us. Then the penny dropped" (Carter 28). Grandma Chance creates a family from what society discards bastards, orphans, performers, and thereby, builds an alternative to the patriarchal household. Her authority does not come from marriage or motherhood but from care, invention, and defiance.

The grotesque also allows Carter to address the aging female body without sentimentality. Dora constantly reminds the reader of her physical decline, her wrinkles, her aching joints, her dentures, but never in a tone of pity. Instead, she uses humor to reframe aging as part of life's performance. She refers to her body with irreverence, describing her own flesh as "floppy" and her voice as "husky with age and gin" (Carter 7). These admissions do not weaken her but give her power. In Bakhtinian terms, the grotesque body "degrades" by bringing the high (idealized beauty, order, authority) down to the level of the material (Bakhtin 19). Carter's elderly women do not hide their bodies; they use them as sites of resistance.

This grotesque mode stands in stark contrast to Carter's portrayal of women within the legitimate Hazard family, particularly figures like Lady Atalanta and Saskia. These women, although also deeply flawed, represent versions of femininity shaped by performance for the sake of patriarchal recognition. Lady Atalanta conforms outwardly to the image of the refined, respectable wife, but engages in secret affairs that challenge her husband's authority. Saskia, similarly, manipulates her sexuality in more calculated ways, using her appearance and cooking to seduce and control. Unlike Dora and Nora, who embrace theatricality as liberation, these "legitimate" women perform according to scripts meant to reinforce status and control. The grotesque in Wise Children is therefore not only about the female body but about how that body is deployed, whether to serve patriarchal legitimacy or to ridicule and rupture it.

The carnivalesque spirit amplifies this resistance through laughter. Dora's narrative is filled with jokes, asides, and self-aware commentary. Her comic tone allows her to speak openly about sexuality, pain, and illegitimacy without adopting a tragic or confessional mode. Bakhtin reminds us that carnival laughter "is universal in scope" and directed at "all and everyone" (11). In Wise Children, this laughter is shared by women who have long been denied legitimacy but who now claim it through irreverence and spectacle. They do not mourn their marginal status; they mock the very idea that legitimacy matters.

Finally, Carter's portrayal of grotesque femininity challenges not just gender roles but cultural categories of worth. Dora and Nora, as illegitimate daughters of a famous actor, are excluded from the prestige of "high" culture. Yet

they inhabit a rich world of dance halls, music, sex, and storytelling. They inherit no money or titles, but they inherit the story, and they are the ones who tell it. “Let’s have all the skeletons out of the closet,” Dora announces (Carter 5), by making this declaration, she reclaims the authority to narrate, to remember, and to laugh. This reclamation of narrative authority is inseparable from Carter’s use of theatricality, a theme that further illuminates how legitimacy itself becomes a staged performance in Wise Children.

## Theatricality, Performance, and the Crisis of Legitimacy

In Wise Children, the boundary between theatre and reality is never firm. Angela Carter constructs a narrative universe where all social roles like fathers, daughters, lovers, even identities themselves are exposed as performances. Through stage performance, Carter interrogates and ultimately undermines the very idea of legitimacy, particularly patriarchal legitimacy tied to name, blood, and cultural authority. Theatre, in this novel, is not just a profession or setting. It is the metaphor through which the entire world of the story operates.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Melchior Hazard, a celebrated Shakespearean actor and a “national treasure,” Melchior embodies the prestige of canonical culture. He is not just a performer but a man who “acts” his identity on and off the stage. His status is built not on moral integrity or familial devotion, but on theatrical illusion. His patriarchal authority is stage-managed, not earned. The only object he keeps after his parents' death is the crown he wore while playing King Lear, a symbol not of fatherhood, but of performance. Carter describes him as “the greatest

Shakespearean of his generation" (Carter 45), but his greatness is hollow. He refuses to acknowledge his daughters, maintains a series of image-driven marriages, and performs fatherhood only when it serves his image

The Chance twins, in contrast, represent the so-called illegitimate side of this theatrical world. They are born out of wedlock, raised outside the grand Shakespearean lineage, and spend their careers dancing in music halls and chorus lines. Their status as "low" culture is repeatedly contrasted with Melchior's "high" art. Yet Carter deliberately blurs the distinction. She gives Dora and Nora not just vitality and humor, but also narrative voice and agency, while portraying Melchior as a narcissist obsessed with image. The contrast is not between performance and authenticity, but between two kinds of performance: one that reveals its artifice and one that hides behind tradition.

The novel's structure reinforces this theatrical worldview. Wise Children is divided into chapters that mirror the five acts of a Shakespearean play. The characters even share Shakespeare's birthday, April 23rd. The narrative is filled with quotes, allusions, and parodies of Shakespearean drama. These intertextual references are not used reverently but satirically. Carter uses Shakespeare to both anchor and destabilize the story. The Chance family, the Hazards, and their various illegitimate and mistaken offspring become a kind of chaotic, carnivalesque parody of the classical family dramas found in King Lear, Hamlet, or A Midsummer Night's Dream.

This theatrical play with legitimacy reaches its height in the character dynamics surrounding paternity. Melchior's refusal to recognize Dora and Nora is one of the novel's central injustices. Even when he appears at their seventy-fifth birthday celebration, he refers to them only as "Peregrine's girls" (Carter 72). Legitimacy here is not a matter of biology but of performance and social recognition. Melchior plays the part of father when it is useful and discards it when inconvenient. Meanwhile, Peregrine, Melchior's brother and an equally theatrical figure, accepts the girls and raises them as his own, blurring the boundary between real and assumed kinship. The fact that Peregrine may himself be illegitimate further erodes any solid foundation for patriarchal lineage.

Carter consistently shows that official roles, especially paternal ones, are constructed and fragile. Even Melchior's legitimate children, Saskia, Imogen, Tristram, and Gareth, are tangled in lies, affairs, and substitutions. The family tree becomes so entangled that it collapses under its own contradictions. Saskia and Imogen, for instance, are later revealed to be the biological children not of Melchior but of Peregrine and Lady Atalanta. Dora later reveals with dry irony that Melchior was never the biological father of his "legitimate" daughters, Saskia and Imogen. This revelation does not bring closure or resolution, but more confusion. Carter refuses to allow bloodlines or names to provide certainty. Instead, everything depends on who performs which role, and when.

Hope Jennings notes that "[The Chance sisters] inevitably return to some kind of family structure, in which the

individual/child must negotiate his/her identity in relation to paternal/maternal figures" (Jennings 54).

Even Dora's narration is theatrical. She is not a neutral, objective voice, but an aging performer reclaiming her story through performance. Her tone is self-aware, ironic, and emotionally layered. She often refers to scenes in her life as if they were on stage: "I could have sworn that then, the curtain came down" (Carter 217). This language reframes personal memory as performance, suggesting that life itself, especially for women like Dora, is a series of staged roles. By narrating her life in this way, Dora asserts control over a narrative that has long excluded her. She may not have inherited Melchior's name, but she claims the power to tell the story.

This performativity also extends to the question of cultural legitimacy. Throughout the novel, high and low art collide. The music halls, pantomimes, and chorus lines that Dora and Nora inhabit are filled with life and movement, while Melchior's world of Shakespearean prestige is stiff, self-important, and deeply hypocritical. Kate Webb writes, Carter "revels in wrong-sidedness", deliberately aligning her heroines with the illegitimate and the theatrical in order to question dominant narratives of worth and value (198). Dora and Nora may not belong to the elite tradition, but they thrive in its shadow. In a way, they write their own cultural history, not with grandeur, but with laughter, survival, and performance.

Carter's use of role-playing becomes a strategy for survival and critique. The Chance sisters enact shifting personas not just on stage but in every aspect of their lives.

They use makeup, costumes, wigs, and personas to navigate a world that refuses to recognize their legitimacy. Their self-stylization is not deception; it is a way of surviving illegitimacy. It is how they endure exclusion, loss, and marginalization. By exaggerating their performance, they reveal the artificiality of the roles they were denied.

Ultimately, Wise Children does not resolve the crisis of legitimacy; it exposes it. The final scenes do not offer a clean reconciliation, but a chaotic celebration where masks fall and truths are spoken, yet identities remain fluid. Melchior is finally forced to acknowledge Dora and Nora, but the moment is tinged with irony. He does admit them in the end, but the way he does it seems staged, not sincere. It comes too late and means too little. Dora frames the moment as the end of a performance, not a revelation, which is fitting for a life narrated in theatrical terms affirming that this is not redemption but closure; a scene ending, not a truth revealed.

Through theatricality, Carter dismantles the assumptions on which patriarchal legitimacy is built. Roles like father, daughter, wife, and actor are shown to be unstable, negotiated, and performed. In this world, bloodlines offer no certainty, names carry no guarantee, and authority must constantly be acted out to be believed. Carter's carnival is not a fantasy but a mirror that shows how easily the scripts of power can be rewritten.

## Carnival, Desire, and the Collapse of Patriarchal Order

In Wise Children, Angela Carter uses carnival not only as a theme, but as a structural and symbolic force that drives the story's most chaotic and revealing moments. The novel's climactic scenes are steeped in carnivalesque energy, ritualized disorder, exaggerated bodies, sexual transgression, and theatrical parody all of which serve to destabilize the authority of the patriarchal family. These episodes do not resolve tension through restoration, as classical comedy might, but revel in uncertainty. In line with Bakhtin's theory of carnival, Carter uses these events to temporarily suspend social order and expose its artificiality. Through this temporary suspension, the fragile foundations of symbolic authority, especially patriarchal lineage and order, are laid bare and laughed at.

One of the most carnivalesque moments in the novel occurs at the Lynde Court Twelfth Night costume ball, a setting that directly evokes Shakespeare's comedy of mistaken identities. Dora, in a moment of youthful confusion and desire, seduces a man she believes to be her former lover, only to discover he is not. "I succeeded in persuading him I was Nora…" (Carter 104). The moment is comic, sexual, and absurd which is all hallmarks of carnival's erotic chaos. The fact that this happens on a Shakespearean stage (a literal aristocratic mansion) underscores Carter's critique of performance, class, and propriety. The fire that destroys the estate is no accident: it is the symbolic collapse of inherited power ignited by female desire and misrecognition.

The aftermath of this sexual encounter is literal destruction: the Hazard mansion catches fire. This moment is

rich with symbolism: the burning of the estate, a seat of patriarchal and aristocratic culture, results from an act of mistaken identity, sexual play, and female agency. Dora does not regret the chaos, if anything, she finds it invigorating. Bakhtin reminds us that in carnival, "everything that was 'high' is brought down" (Bakhtin 19), and here the grandeur of the Hazard name, home, and inheritance is reduced to ash. The accident is both comic and profound: a grotesque scene where desire becomes the spark for structural ruin.

If the Twelfth Night ball is a scene of erotic confusion, the one-hundredth birthday party is carnival at its most grotesque and satirical. Melchior's carefully managed identity collapses in front of everyone as secrets spill and roles unravel among his assembled kin. Lady Atalanta's declaration that "The darling buds never sprang from the seed of Melchior Hazard" (Carter 214) shatters his patriarchal claim. Peregrine mocks him by handing back the Lear crown like a prop in a bad play. What should be a celebration of lineage becomes a spectacle of illegitimacy. This is not just a reversal; it is a comic uncrowning, a ritual exposure of masculine myth, where even truth feels scripted.

The party also becomes a space of taboo-breaking desire. Dora and her uncle Peregrine, in a moment of carnivalesque madness, sleep together. "He was not the love of my life but all of the loves of my life at once, the curtain call of my career as a lover," Dora says (Carter 221). This act is not presented as trauma or tragedy, but as an expression of desire that is at once grotesque, absurd, and strangely liberating. In the carnivalesque tradition, sexuality breaks free from social constraint, creating moments of unexpected power and vulnerability. Carter does not idealize this scene;

instead, she frames it within the theatrical logic of the novel, one final performance, one final inversion of what is allowed.

Carnival in Wise Children is thus not merely visual or thematic; it is deeply embedded in how desire operates in the novel. Desire is not clean, rational, or contained. It is messy, excessive, mistaken, and grotesque. It leads to illegitimate children, incestuous encounters, affairs, and shifting loyalties. Yet Carter does not present desire as a force to be corrected or punished. Instead, she uses it to expose the artificiality of the systems meant to contain it. Melchior's legitimacy as a father, husband, and cultural icon collapses under the weight of his desires and denials. His performance of authority cannot hold when the roles around him begin to shift beyond his control.

The carnivalesque also provides space for women to reclaim pleasure and visibility on their own terms. Dora, even in her old age, speaks openly about sex, attraction, and bodily experience. She narrates her past liaisons with fondness and humor. She resists the notion that aging should render her invisible or asexual. As Niall Richardson argues, "Rather than hide signs of age, some performers amplify them, creating a grotesque, exaggerated femininity that resists erasure" (Richardson 77). When Peregrine flirts with her at the birthday party, she responds with gleeful bawdiness: "I don't fancy a foxtrot, Perry, but I wouldn't say no to a—" (Carter 218). Her half-spoken line, filled with implication, plays perfectly within the carnival register. She is not shamed for her desire; she is empowered by it. Her narrative remains central throughout the novel precisely

because it is willing to embrace that which polite society excludes.

This carnival of desire reaches beyond the personal to touch cultural norms. Shakespeare, used as a symbol of patriarchal, high-art authority, is repurposed and mocked throughout the novel. Sarah Gamble observes, "The novel seeks to reclaim [Shakespeare] for popular culture and put him back on the side of 'folk' where Carter believed he belongs" (Gamble 148). Melchior claims his identity through Shakespeare, taking roles from King Lear to Prospero, imagining himself as the great father and wise magician. But Carter strips these roles of their gravitas. The crown Melchior treasures—once worn in Lear—becomes a paper prop, passed around and ultimately discarded. Peregrine mockingly hands it back to him, not in reverence, but as a joke. In this moment, Carter enacts what Bakhtin calls the "comic uncrowning," where the powerful are dethroned through laughter (Bakhtin 124). Melchior, the king of English theatre and patriarchal order, is made into a fool. These climactic spectacles reinforce the novel's central message: official legitimacy, whether based on bloodline, culture, or gendered authority, cannot withstand the truth of chaos and performance. Carter uses carnival to expose that "legitimacy" itself is just another performance waiting to be unmasked.

The power of the carnivalesque in Wise Children lies in its refusal to resolve contradiction. The novel does not end with the restoration of order, but with celebration in the midst of disorder. Dora and Nora are finally acknowledged as Melchior's daughters, but this recognition is ambivalent. As Jeffrey Roessner argues, "Only after being accepted by

the legitimate family can Dora and Nora begin to think of their father as 'a projection of their own desires, fueled by the cultural myth of patriarchal authority'" (Roessner 99). Melchior's admission, "I am the one who deserves to weep" (Carter 217), is too little, too late. The girls do not embrace him; they do not grant him the emotional closure he seeks. Instead, the moment is theatrical, staged, and flat. As Scott Harris argues, "Carter adopts the critical edge of comic performance to establish a dissenting, oppositional relationship to imperial culture" (Harris 341). Dora imagines a curtain falling, not as a triumphant ending, but as a signal that the act is over.

What remains, then, is not a neat narrative of reconciliation but a space where legitimacy has been thoroughly questioned and found hollow. Carnival in Wise Children does not rebuild a new order, it simply shows how the old one was made, and how easily it can fall apart. Carter's use of carnival allows her characters, especially her women, to inhabit spaces of excess, confusion, and freedom. As Erica McWilliam explains, "They [grotesque bodies] function as carnivalesque, a disruptive materiality in the social world, one that is at the same time transformative and counterproductive, hovering as it does around the threshold of chaos and order" (McWilliam 219). Desire becomes a tool not of transgression for its own sake, but of exposure. By laughing at authority, mocking tradition, and performing the grotesque, the Chance sisters rewrite the rules of kinship, gender, and cultural worth.

## Conclusion

Angela Carter's Wise Children is a novel that celebrates the disorderly, the theatrical, and the illegitimate, not as failures of social order, but as vital forces of resistance and reinvention. Through her use of Bakhtinian carnivalesque, grotesque imagery, and a deliberate exaggeration of theatrical form, Carter constructs a world in which fathers are actors, daughters are storytellers, and families are stitched together through care, performance, and defiance rather than bloodlines. Throughout the novel, Carter privileges women who perform, laugh, age, and break rules over those who try to uphold appearances. Dora and Nora, illegitimate and overlooked, emerge as the true narrative authorities. Their grotesque, theatrical bodies do not conform to ideals of femininity, but they are vibrant and full of life. They play roles, take lovers, and tell stories in ways that resist containment. Unlike Melchior, whose authority crumbles under the weight of his performance, the Chance sisters flourish in the margins, building identity and kinship through excess and adaptation. The carnivalesque is not simply a backdrop to the novel, it is its mode of operation. Carter adopts the rhythms of carnival to expose the theatricality of power itself. Through mistaken identities, sexual inversion, and comic disruption, she reveals how easily systems of legitimacy can be mocked, undone, or reimagined. As Bakhtin suggests, carnival does not destroy; it displaces, it opens space, it laughs at the seriousness of authority. In Carter's hands, this spirit becomes a feminist strategy, one that does not offer neat alternatives, but insists that meaning, like identity, is always in motion.

Ultimately, Wise Children refuses to restore order in the way conventional narratives do. There is no moral resolution, no purified identity, no authoritative father figure who brings closure. Instead, there is performance, storytelling, and celebration. Through this, she affirms the power of women to claim space in a world that has denied them legitimacy, not by conforming to its rules, but by rewriting them from the stage. By reading Wise Children through Bakhtin's concept of carnival and Russo's theory of the female grotesque, this paper highlights how Carter expands the carnivalesque tradition with a distinctly feminist edge. It contributes to ongoing conversations in feminist literary criticism and Carter studies by showing how Carter's aesthetic excess functions as ideological resistance, not merely parody, but a reinvention of cultural legitimacy through the grotesque and theatrical. In doing so, Carter anticipates contemporary feminist critiques of how culture disciplines aging female bodies and marginalizes those who fall outside normative family structures. By centering grotesque, illegitimate women who refuse to be erased, Wise Children not only reclaims narrative authority, but challenges the limits of who gets to be seen, heard, and celebrated in literature and society.

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