CHAPTER 5

NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS

&

WISE CHILDREN
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The two novels *Nights At The Circus* and *Wise Children* are the matter of study of this chapter. They examine critically and analytically how the feminism is developed in Angela Carter's work, and how the feminine lore recycles ideas in the author's mind. This chapter sheds light on the feminine themes and concerns, and depicts the location of lore and the scope of its role in these rewritings. In these novels Carter speaks out lots of feminine matters and wishes which I guess move around strongly in her mind.

*NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS*

This novel has a feminine lore source. In "Polemical Preface" to *The Sadeian Woman* Carter writes, "all the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsense; and consolatory nonsense seems to me a fair definition of myth, anyway. If a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real conditions of life. This is why they were invented in the first place."¹

According to Joanne Gass, Carter's point is that myths belong to a system of discourses, the purpose of which is to console women by convincing them that their place in society belongs to a "natural order". Acceptance of that "natural order" results in being controlled by it. Carter rejects out of hand any appeal to metaphysical constructs, calling them "consolatory nonsense." Instead, she insists that metaphysical constructs, indeed all discourses, are material elements, like language, that have no basis other than the fact of their materiality, their cultural acceptance, and their will to power.\(^2\)

Carter's *Nights at the Circus* is a novel about the ways in which these dominant, frequently male-centred discourses of power marginalize those whom society defines as freaks (madmen, clowns, the physically and mentally deformed, and, in particular, women) so that they may be contained and controlled because they are all possible sources of the disordered disruption of established power. The whorehouse, the freak show, the circus, and the prison provide the defining arenas within which society may safely contain, define, and exploit these disordered elements.

Although it appears only briefly, the novel's dominant image is the pan-opticon. It appears as the women's prison created by the Countess P. Carter imaginately and creatively employs the image of the prison. The prison is structured with all of the diabolical accuracy "It was a *panopticon* she forced them to build, a hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a round room surrounded by windows."(p.210) Each inmate is always
visible to the monitor in the middle, or the hold, of the doughnut, and invisible to all of the other inmates and the guards. In fact, each inmate is not only deprived of the sight of others but also of the touch of others – her isolation is complete. She is always subjected to the warden’s scrutinize gaze. The Countess P.’s avowed purpose is to create a “charitable” institution where by women who have murdered their husbands might repent their sins, accept responsibility for their crimes, and be returned to society. Her prison is:

.....a machine designed to promote penitence. For the Countess P. had conceived of the idea of a therapy of meditation. The women in the bare cells, in which was neither privacy nor distraction, cells formulated on the principle of those in a nunnery where all was visible to the eye of God, would live alone with the memory of their crime until they acknowledged, not their guilt – most of them had done that, already – but their responsibility. And she was sure that with responsibility would come remorse. (p.212)

She creates the prison as a place of isolation and contemplation where women may confront their responsibility and be forgiven. Because the Countess P. is herself the very model of the subject of a discourse of power, she enacts its every law without questioning it, and in her enactment she perpetuates the law’s reforming power. (Madame Schreck is another of those ultimate victims, and Carter reserves the most horrible retributions for them). Unfortunately for the Countess P., her victims are nothing like her, and in all the years of the prison’s
existence not one woman has come forward to receive the Countess's benediction. Not one of the inmates feels responsibility, much less remorse; each of them views her act as one in which she has freed herself from the intolerable tyranny of a husband whose every cruel act is justified and legitimized by the state. Nevertheless, each inmate is the victim of an observing and defining authority both inside and outside the prison, and it is this model of observation that controls the novel as a whole.

The novel begins with observation. Jack Walser, a young “unfinished” reporter, interviews Sophie Fevvers, an ‘aerialiste’ who insists that at adolescence she sprouted wings with which she flies from trapeze to trapeze in her circus act. Jack. Fevvers’s quest is to undergo the transforming process by which she becomes “the female paradigm, no longer an imagined fiction but a plain fact” (p.286). Like all women, Fevvers is the “imagined fiction” of the patriarchal culture to which she belongs. Because of her wings, she becomes the object of men’s desires, especially and almost exclusively their sexual desires; virtually of the men who see or hear about her imagine themselves to be the one who takes her virginity.

She is defined by her body, by her outward appearance, just as the freaks and clowns are. As a freak, she has economic value; as a commodity, she is bought and sold by those who collect unique and exotic objects; she has no essential value as a human being. As Lizzie, her companion and fellow anarchist, tells her:
...the baker can't make a loaf out of your privates, duckie, and that's all you'd have to offer him in exchange for a crust if nature hadn't made you the kind of spectacle people pay good money to see. All you can do to earn your living is to make a show of yourself. You're doomed to that. You must give pleasure to the eye, or else you're good for nothing. For you, it's always a symbolic exchange in the marketplace; you couldn't say you were engaged in productive labour, now, could you, girl? (p. 185).

Fevvers, however, takes advantage of her commodity value in order to further her special destiny to be "the pure child of century... the New Age in which no women will be bound to the ground" (p. 25). She trades upon her position as a rare knowing full well that the money squandered on her by men who think of her as a "bright, pretty, useless thing" has "nothing to do with [her] value as such" (p. 185). She exploits her exploiters by profiting from her appearance in order to further her revolutionary political aims, yet she never gives up her uniqueness (and that uniqueness is not her virginity) because she understand clearly that once she has succumbed to "the kiss of a magic prince.... such a kiss would seal her up in her appearance for ever" (p. 39).

Fevvers inhabits those marginal institutions of society — the whorehouse, the freak show, and the circus — that safely contain those elements that threaten to disrupt the orderly and legitimate exercise of power. In each of these institutions the inhabitants are on display, objects to be bought or seen for the pleasure of the viewing and consuming public, safely concealed behind walls or bars or within the

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carefully prescribed circle of the circus ring. In Nelson's Academy (the whorehouse) and Madame Schreck's museum of women monsters Fevvers and the other women are objectified because of their sex; in the circus she and the other performers are there because of their ability to use their excessive physical features to perform. Their physical appearance does not, however, generalize them, nor does it reduce them to an undifferentiated group. The panopticon individualizes its inmates in an impersonal and diabolical way. Each of the inmates of the whorehouse, the freak show, and the circus is easily identifiable by her specific deformity or talent or face. In the arena each can be safely observed or used, but she only threatens established power when she exceeds the bounds of the arena.

They are abnormal and improper because their discourse, the discourse that threatens the very foundations of the powers that suppress them, is the discourse of love. The murderesses escape from the Countess P.'s panopticon because they have defeated her through the power of human touch and human love. They set out to forge for themselves a new society based upon love.

Just as the murderesses break the panopticon of their prison, so does Fevvers provide the means by which the panopticons of the whorehouse, the freak show, and the circus are ruptured. Her presence in an institution seems to invite its disastrous demise. Because she plays "Winged Victory" at the whorehouse, business declines. When Madame Schreck tries to cheat Fevvers, she causes the old hag's death and frees the inmates of the museum of women monsters, and she and Lizzie restore each inmate to a happy situation. Finally, after
Fevvers joins the circus, it literally disintegrates – the clowns disappear into the Siberian snows; the apes get a better contract and join another circus; the aerialists are fired; the circus train is sabotaged in Siberia and the remaining members of the circus scattered over the tundra. Fevvers's heroic role, it seems, is to be the instrument of destruction of panopticons.

However, she is not just a destroyer; she is a mender, a builder, a unifier. What she destroys are the cages that confine the socially oppressed; her goal is to "see the end of cages" (p.38). What she builds are human relationships. She and Walser rescue Mignon from her life of repeated sexual and physical abuse and introduce her to the Princess; in the process Mignon is transformed from the child-woman victim of male violence to a woman loved unconditionally by another woman. Fevvers and Lizzie rescue and aid other victims as well. The strong man, who had mindlessly abused Mignon, learns to love her without any expectation that she will ever be more than a friend; he learns to love a human being who deserves to be loved because she is human.

Finally, Fevvers has to break out of her own cage; she has to learn to love and be loved by a man. After a long quest in which she and Jack Walser both learn the value of love and Jack learns to see the human being beneath the wings, they find one another. Love brings them together, and together they will tell the "histories of those women who would otherwise go down nameless and forgotten, erased from history as if they had never been" (p.285). He will be her amanuensis; she will be his muse.
Fevvers has a vision of a new world and a new woman to be born with the twentieth century, and, although Lizzie tempers Fevvers’s idealism by warning her that she “sees through a glass darkly,” Fevvers’s vision of the new woman nevertheless holds promise for us at the end of the twentieth century that at long last another discourse, the individual female voice, will be heard. She says:

And once the old world has turned on its axle so that the new dawn can dawn, then, ah, then! All the woman will have wings, the same as I. This young woman in my arms, whom we found tied hand and foot with the grisly bonds of ritual, will suffer no more of it; she will tear off her mind forg’d manacles, will rise up and fly away. The dolls house doors will open, the brothels will spill forth their prisoners, the cages, gilded or otherwise, all over the world, in every land, will let forth their inmates singing together the dawn chorus of the new, the transformed – (p.285).

According to Magali Cornier Michle, 'Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* weaves together elements of the carnivalesque and fantastic with those of harsh material realism as vehicles for feminist aims. *Nights at the Circus* purports to usher in the twentieth century. Carter’s depiction of the past is strikingly familiar, however, which suggests that the present is effectively her target and that 1899 and the 1980s are not world apart. The novel is set not only in the past but also in places that are out of the ordinary – a whorehouse, a museum for women monsters, a circus, and Siberia – which enables Carter to
engage in flights of imagination that do not directly contradict the immediate context of the contemporary reader.

The feminism of *Nights at the Circus* is complex in that it brings together more than one strand of feminism, an engaged Marxist feminism and a subversive utopian feminism. Lizzie and her adopted daughter Fevvers serve, respectively, as mouthpieces for each of these two feminisms, although there is an overlap as the two characters influence each other. The novel's omniscient narrative voice strives to conjoin these two stands of feminism in order to posit a feminism that would be liberating while retaining a sociohistorical grounding – a feminism that would free human beings from the hierarchical relations in which Western culture, with its binary logic, has entrapped them, without becoming disengaged from the material situation. In order to analyse the status of women and of existing relationships between women and men within western culture and, more radically, propose possible avenues for change, Carter pits a Marxist feminist realism against postmodern forms of tall tales or autobiographies, inverted norms, carnivalisation, and fantasy. While disruptive strategies usually associated with postmodernism pervade *Nights at the Circus,* it uses these strategies specifically to strengthen and further its feminist aims. Even as she appropriates extraordinary and fantastic elements, Carter retains certain conventions of realism and a firm connection to the historical material situation as means of securing her novel's feminist political edge and ensuring that her novel remains accessible to most readers.
To accomplish its aims, the novel engages and attempts to resolve the tensions that have characterized the uneasy relationship between Marxist feminism and postmodernism. Marxist feminism has generally rejected postmodernism on the grounds that its tendency toward abstractions gives way to a disconnection from the material world and from history, that it rejects metanarratives (such as Marxism and gender theory), and that it dissolves the subject. In contrast, Marxist feminists emphasize the material world in which women are daily oppressed as women and situate their analyses of women’s oppression within specific political, cultural, historical, economic, and ideological contexts.

Postmodernism, however, is a slippery area of contention that cannot be reduced to any oversimplified characterization. Indeed, many critics argue that postmodernism is not inherently antithetical to feminism and Marxism and is very much tied to the material world. In addition, some critics assert that postmodernism does not necessarily invalidate all metanarratives. Similarly, Carter’s novel aesthetically engages and conjoins Marxist feminism and postmodernism in an effort to construct an engaged feminism with liberatory potential.

Carter’s novel highlights its own textuality with its three labeled parts and its presentation of a metafictional narrative in which so many other narratives are embedded those notions of authorship and single-leveled reality are undermined. One of the novel’s central preoccupations is its challenge to the traditional Western opposition between reality and fiction. The novel’s rejection of any neat demarcation between reality and fiction functions as the pivotal strategy for undermining the Western conception of the subject and of traditional
gender categories and for offering forms of liberating power. This liberating power carries with it possibilities for change in the realms of subjecthood and the relations between the sexes and also anticipates potential new forms for feminist fiction.'

*Nights at the Circus* is divided into three parts labeled in terms of geographical location: "London," "Petersburg," and "Siberia". The movement toward increasingly foreign and remote places is accompanied by a movement away from any stable ground of reality and toward the ever more fantastic. The narrative is fragmented by various embedded stories, told by and about women that further destabilize conventional notions of reality, truth, and authorship. Although the omniscient narrator purports to concentrate on the central male character's point of view, the narrative's perspective continually shifts as it is appropriated by women characters telling their stories – histories in long monologues that often include vivid dialogue.

The novel's focus and central character is Fevvers, a huge female "aerialiste" with wings, whose fame rests on her indeterminate identity and origins: her slogan reads. Lizzie, a staunch Marxist feminist, is Fevvers's adopted mother and companion who took her in as a foundling. The "London" segment of the novel consists of an interview of Fevvers, in Lizzie's presence, by a young American journalist, Jack Walser. Walser's initial purpose is to expose Fevvers as "a hoax," as one of the "Great Humbugs of the World" (11). Although Walser is the interviewer, Fevvers and Lizzie control the session by telling Fevvers's life story and challenging his disbelief and skepticism. Walser's curiosity is only awakened by the women's "performance" (p.90) during the
interview, and he decides to join the circus in order to follow up on this story.

The second part, "Petersburg," focuses on Walser's transformation into a clown as he becomes subsumed within the magical circus world and recognizes that he has fallen in love with Fevvers. This segment relies more heavily on authorial narration, although it also includes segments of dialogue as well as embedded stories of the abused female circus performers befriended by Fevvers. By the novel's last section, "Siberia," the fantastic has taken over. The train carrying the circus crashes and the various characters wander around Siberia in various groups, meeting extraordinary people and situations. Walser and Fevvers are separated, and the novel ends when they are reunited. In this segment the narrative shifts among Fevvers's and Walser's stream of consciousness, dialogue, embedded stories, and authorial narration.

Feminist and postmodern elements are so enmeshed in Nights at the Circus that any discussion of either necessarily overlaps with the other. It is, nevertheless, useful to begin with the more overt feminist currents. From its first page, Carter's novel begins to undermine conventional notions of gender construction and sexual hierarchy. Fevvers assets authority over her own story history and evades attempts by Walser to fix an identity upon her. Although Walser is intent upon naming and thus objectifying Fevvers, the fact that his quest begins rather than ends the novel announces from the start the subversion of his attempts to appropriate her. Carter in this way begins to call into question accepted notions of identity and the binary logic on
which they depend, as she attempts to create a new female subject that seeks to satisfy feminist aims.'

Fevvers defies Walser's attempt to prove her a fake not by refusing to answer his questions but by taking command of her own self-definition as she tells him her story and thus assumes a position of authority. According to Michael. Magali Corner. ⁵ By having Fevvers read her own life and write, or rather tell, her own story-history as she chooses, the novel challenges the traditional appropriation of women's lives and histories endemic in Western, male-centred culture. Furthermore, Fevvers deliberately flirts with the boundary between truth and non-truth. Her story is both an autobiography and a tall tale and, as such, destabilizes both male definitions of women and notions of identity, truth and reality.

The novel opens with Fevver's assertion that she "never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched"; and the narrative specifies that she accompanies her statement with direct eye contact "as if to dare him: 'Believe it or not!'. The reference to the mythical Helen, engendered by Zeus in the form of a swan and Leda, ironically links Fevvers's self-definition to the history of Western culture, as it raises her to mythic or at least fantastic proportions. The narrative normalizes the comparison, however, by playfully debasing it to the level of ordinary family resemblances: "Evidently this Helen took after her putative father, the swan, around the shoulder parts" (p.7). Moreover, Fevvers's claim that she was hatched suggests that she "fantasizes a beginning for herself outside the Oedipal triangle" associated with the nuclear family and
subject formation. To more thoroughly mystify her biological origins, Fevvers further asserts that she was a foundling. As a half-woman, half-swan orphan, Fevvers challenges prevailing notions of identity that are grounded in verifiable origins and binary logic.

By allowing her origins to remain a mystery and encouraging speculation about them, Fevvers maintains her status as “Heroine of the hour” (p.8). Her fame depends precisely on her being suspect, whether or not her wings are real. Although Walser is skeptical of Fevvers’s claim that she is a “genuine bird-woman,” he “contemplates the unimaginable” while watching her perform on the trapeze and recognizes the “paradox” that “in a secular age, an authentic miracle” would have to “purport to be a hoax, in order to gain credit in the world” (p.17). Walser’s reflection highlights the precarious nature of the opposition between reality and fiction by suggesting that the concepts are intertwined. Fevvers’s indeterminate identity and her insistence on preserving its mystery threaten the dichotomy between reality and fiction.

Fevvers’s “raucous” voice and her “grand, vulgar” gestures (pp.12, 13) indicate that she is comfortable with herself and has chosen her own codes of behaviour. She takes up a traditionally masculine role by asserting herself as the author of her own actions and words. Having internalized conventional categories, Walser describes Fevvers as having a “strong, firm, masculine grip” (p.89) when she shakes his hand. The narrative also stresses her femininity, however, by describing her dressing room as “a mistresspiece of exquisitely feminine squalor” (p.9), using deliberately feminized language. Moreover, the depiction of one of
her feminine flirtatious gestures, when "she batted her eyelashes at Walser in the mirror" (p.40), again presents Fevvers via the mediation of a mirror. Fevvers is altogether an ambivalent figure who threatens traditional binary categories: she possesses both masculine strength and authority as well as feminine charms and wiles. The interview reduces Walser rather than Fevvers to a passive state: "It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice" (p.43). Carter's novel thus challenges the traditional association of female with femininity and of male with masculinity through the depiction of characters who confound accepted gender norms and polarity. As Sally Robinson suggests, "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." Indeed, the novel does deconstruct the masculine/feminine hierarchical opposition itself by presenting Fevvers as co-opting both masculine and feminine characteristics to establish her power over Walser.

Fevvers and Lizzie assume control of the narrative in the novel's "London" section as they unfold Fevvers's life story-history through long dynamic monologues, interrupted by dialogues between the two women. The customary association of authorship and activeness with the male is her reversed: Fevvers and Lizzie are the active speakers - writers and Walser is the passive spectator - reader. Fevvers is able to "challenge and attack" (p.54) Walser's attempt to fix her identity, and thus objectify her, by controlling and thus constructing her own self and story-history. Fevvers exhibits herself as object for an audience's gaze; yet, as the author of herself as object, she is also a subject and thus has control over how much she will allow herself to be consumed by her
viewers: "Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch." (15) Fevvers begins her working career by posing as a "tableau vivant," thus actively constructing herself as an object to be seen but not touched: as a child she is "Cupid" (p.23), and as she matures she becomes "Winged Victory" (p.25) and then "Angel of Death" (p.70). Although Fevvers objectifies herself, she remains a subject by constructing her own objectified image. By destabilizing and yet retaining the conventional opposition between subject and object, the novel moves toward a nonhierarchical and nonbinary notion of subjectivity while simultaneously engaging and highlighting issues of power relations. *Nights at the Circus* illustrates ways in which postmodern notions of subjectivity can be tapped for feminist purposes without disintegrating subjectivity to the point where it no longer exists. Carter's novel never loses touch with the material oppression of women even while it attempts to offer new forms of subjectivity that are not based in the binary thought system that has helped to oppress women in Western culture.

Carter's novel differentiates among those who are performing the objectification of women and for what purposes. Fevvers's existence as both subject and object challenges the type of objectification by which Fevvers vehemently rejects her own objectification by men: "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!" (p.39). The threat of being forced into the position of static object to be viewed and dominated is all too tangible for Fevvers, who is again and again faced with attempts to fix the ambivalent figure she presents to the world.
The novel contains two separate instances in which men literally attempt to objectify Fevvers. In both cases, the men seek to dominate her by depriving her of control over her own life. Their attempts to transform her into a corpse in one instance and into a toy in the other support the notion that. In the first episode, a wealthy gentleman purchases Fevvers from the museum of women monsters and attempts to kill her with a blade. Viewing her as a "reconciler of opposing states." He tries to sacrifice her on May Day to ensure his own life and power. But Fevvers rejects the role of passive victim and of male-constructed object and pulls out her own sword to save her life. She thus asserts her authority and subject-hood by matching his phallic power – located in his weapon rather than in his genitals - sword for sword. The novel in this way emphasizes the violence that is part of male domination and that is tried to the realm of sexuality.

Later in the novel, a Russian grand duke attempts to cage Fevvers among his collection of exotic toys, but again she fights against objectification. After the Grand Duke breaks her sword and thus deprives her of phallic power, Fevers resorts to feminine wiles to distract him: “a deep instinct of self-preservation made her let his rooster out of the hen-coop for him and ruffle up its feathers.” Then she escapes. According to Magali, 9 The novel does not throw away the conventions of realism, even if it does push toward the postmodern, since it ultimately grounds seemingly extraordinary incidents – such as her narrow escapes from the wealthy gentleman and the Russian grand duke – in the daily victimization of women and thus challenges accepted notions of women as naturally and inevitably passive objects.
Although Fevvers is presented as a fantastic being whose experiences encompass the extraordinary, the novel never severs the connection between her exploits and the material situation: Fevvers is fantastic but recognizable. Her relationship with Lizzie is in this respect crucial, since Lizzie functions as the novel’s didactic feminist voice. As a staunch Marxist feminist and former prostitute, Lizzie keeps the novel’s focus from diverging too far from the economic aspects of material existence. Fevvers’s story also indicates that Lizzie’s politics have influenced her adopted daughter, particularly in the depiction of the whorehouse in which Fevvers was raised as “the common daughter of half-a-dozen mothers” (p.21)

Indeed, one of the means by which the novel begins to call into question the status quo and construct new notions of the subject is through its inversion of accepted norms in its treatment of prostitution and marriage. When Fevvers challenges Walser to print in his newspaper that she was raised by “women of the worst class and defiled,” Walser’s reply reveals his firm entrenchment in western binary thought: “And, I myself have known some pretty decent whores, some damn’ fine women, indeed, whom any man might have been proud to marry.” Walser retains and even re-emphasizes the dichotomy between good women and bad women, wives and whores, by asserting that some whores are good enough to become wives. The novel rejects these oppositions through the voice of Lizzie, who asserts that wives and whores have more in common than not and, thereby, undermines the Western ideology of marriage: “What is marriage but prostitution to one man instead of many?” (p.21).
Lizzie's words echo *The Sadeian Woman*\(^{10}\) proposes that "sexual relations" are "necessarily an expression of social relations" and that, like prostitutes, Carter undermines the conventional hierarchical opposition between wives and whores by stressing that "Prostitutes are at least decently paid on the nail and boast fewer illusions about a hireling status that has no veneer of social acceptability" (p.9). *Nights at the Circus* fictionalizes this criticism of the bourgeois notion of marriage and of the traditional dichotomy between wife and whore by using prostitutes as its positive female characters, thus reducing marriage to nothing more than an unquestioned custom grounded in a false ideology of happiness: "The name of this custom is a "happy ending" (p.281). Lizzie cynically defines marriage as forcing a woman to give to a man both herself and her "bank account"(p.280), thus highlighting the economic exploitation of women within the institution of marriage that is covered over by fictions of romance.

The novel's Marxist feminism and its stress on the economic as well as ideological oppression of women surface in the descriptions of prostitutes as "working women doing it for money," as "poor girls earning a living" (p.38, 39). Fevvers challenges the myths of whores as degenerates or nymphomaniacs by asserting that economics rather than pleasure informs the prostitute's work,

....though some of the customers would swear that whores do it for pleasure, that is only to ease their own consciences, so that they will feel less foolish when they fork out hard cash for pleasure that has no real existence unless given freely – oh, indeed! We knew we only sold the *simulacra.*
No woman would turn her belly to the trade unless pricked by economic necessity, sir (p.39).

In addition, the assumption that sexual favours can be both “real” and “simulacra” of themselves calls into question the opposition between reality and fiction. Fevvers’s words undermine the conventional association of sex with pleasure or desire by highlighting the contractual nature of all sexual relations. Sex is designated as a business transaction rather than a moral category. Carter suggests that both the prostitute and the wife engage in sex as an economic exchange; the only difference lies in the prostitute’s explicit acknowledgement of the contract. The prostitute comes out ahead in the novel, precisely because she is depicted as more aware of her position within an economic system in which all women necessarily participate.

Carter transforms the whorehouse into a “wholly female world,” a “sisterhood” of active, ambitious women, whose lives are “governed by a sweet and loving reason.” The prostitutes are “all suffragists” (p.38-39) – not “suffragettes” – and professional women. They engage in “intellectual, artistic or political” (p.40) pursuits before the whorehouse opens each evening and are thus active subjects as well as sexual objects. By making the prostitute its version of the feminist, the novel disrupts accepted norms and dualisms – including conventionalized notions of feminists. The term “whore” becomes ambivalent as it is dislocated from its position as polar opposite of wife, good woman, and even feminist. Furthermore, although her use of the term “honour” to denote selfhood is conventional, Fevvers’s explicit questioning of the common reduction of women to their bodily orifices challenges traditional stereotypes:
Fevvers's words also emphasize the ways in which the biological body has been co-opted in the service of those in power.

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter strengthens her feminist position through the use of various destabilizing aesthetic strategies. The novel's subversion of the notion of prostitution, for example, goes far beyond its overt analysis through the voices of Fevvers and Lizzie; it is reinforced by a thorough carnivalisation of the whorehouse itself. Indeed, Carter's use of carnivalisation and her creation of carnival spheres strengthen the novel's more subversive feminism.

By constructing the whorehouse, the museum for women monsters, the circus, and Siberia as versions of carnival, the novel disrupts and challenges traditional Western notions of reality and provides an aesthetic vocabulary for delineating possibilities of change. Since the carnival is a space within which the dominant hierarchical system and its laws and prohibitions are suspended, the carnival allows for ambivalence and relativity as well as for new forms of interrelationships — a primary feminist aim. The whorehouse in the "London" section of *Nights at the Circus*, for example, functions as a surrogate carnival and, as such, reinforces the novel's disruption of the accepted notion of prostitution and of the binary logic on which it depends.

The novel's presentation of prostitutes in a positive light and of prostitution in nonmoral terms as well as its use of an extraordinary heroine with wings are carnivalesque disruptions of established norms. The physical description of the whorehouse itself further establishes its carnival status. The house's "staircase that went up with a flourish like,
pardon me, a whore's bum" and its "drawing room [that] was snug as a groin" are comic touches that transform conventional imagery by inserting a whorehouse world view within a traditional descriptive style. Fevvers's outrageous depiction of the house as having an "air of rectitude and propriety" and as being "a place of privilege" in which "rational desires might be rationally gratified" (p.26) further challenges the status quo by deploying adjectives generally reserved for officially sanctioned institutions. The novel thus brings together high and low culture, destabilizing the distinction between them. The whorehouse of the novel's "London" section is a carnival sphere, in the sense that it defies established conventions and codes; it becomes other than what it is generally thought to be and thus challenges the ruling order.

Fevvers is herself an ambivalent figure of carnival stature, disrupting established conventions of female characters. Not only are her identity and origins nebulous, but her reputation as "Virgin Whore" (p.55) defies the highly charged opposition between virgin and whore used by Western culture to name, objectify, categorise, and marginalize women. By claiming that she is the "only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world" (p.294), Fevvers participates in her own social definition. Her admission at the end of the novel that she is after all not an "intacta" demonstrates that, in the absence of an essential self or soul, the possibility of self-construction exists alongside construction by others; Fevvers is able to create the being that others see her to be. The outrageous nature of Fevvers as a character thus heightens the novel's challenge to Western culture's version of women as passive objects.
Lizzie's declaration lends a Marxist tinge to the novel's feminism, with its implication that women's oppression will not end until social structures are radically altered. Carter uses the novel's two central female characters, Lizzie and Fevvers, to conjoin a material analysis of existing means of subject construction and a carnivaleskized version of female self-construction, as a way of exploring the possibility of a new female subject.

As a fantastic and indeterminate being, Fevvers can never be pinned down as a subject; her status is always in the process of becoming other than itself. Her identity is unstable, since she is a site of apparent contradictions: woman and bird, virgin and whore, fact and fiction, subject and object. Fevvers begins to lose her power and her subjecthood, however, when she questions her own status – “Am I what I know I am? Or am I what he thinks I am?” – and regains it only when she reasserts her indeterminate identity by spreading her wings and recognizing herself through “the eyes that told her who she was” (p.290). Once again, she creates herself as the object of her spectators' desire and is thus both subject and object of desire. Fevvers's subjectivity pushes toward the postmodern in the sense that her multifaceted and fluid identity destabilizes the rigid boundary between subject and object. Her indeterminate nature challenges these dichotomies and heralds the advent of new female subjectivities that are not grounded in binary logic and are thus released from the hierarchical relations implicit in binarism.

Desire is linked to a new version of subjecthood, as delineated by Fevvers, and to feminist liberating powers. By the end of the novel,
Fevvers defines herself as a “New Eoman” (p.273) in relation to not in opposition to both Walser, as the object of her desires, and desire itself. Her linking of Walser’s “beloved face” to “the vague, imaginary face of desire” (p.204) suggests that the novel posits desire as an elusive but life-affirming notion. The novel rejoins desire and love, which it depicts as divorced from sex in most instances – since it depicts sex as most often nothing more than pornography – and presents love and desire as containing emancipatory potentials.

The novel distinguishes between pornography and desire. The pornographic nature of the “museum of woman monsters.” (p.55) As the Angel of Death, Fevvers claims that she does not engage in sexual intercourse itself; she merely poses as one of the “tableaux vivants” (p.60) staged on “stone niches” in a “sort of vault or crypt” (p.61). The museum’s male visitors indulge in a pornographic voyeurism; they don costumes and look at the female “prodigies of nature” arranged as spectacle (p.59). The gentleman who favors Fevvers, for example, never touches her but, rather, looks at her while “playing with himself under his petticoat” (p.71). The male engages in sexual actions without the female in this pornographic situation and thus remains in control; she serves merely as a visual stimulus. The novel’s depiction of pornography as a staged representation of sexuality rather than as sexuality itself.

According to Magali,¹¹ The museum of women monsters in Carter’s novel reinforces the notion that pornography is a representation of male domination. The museum is an artificial arena in which men occupy the position of dominance with no hindrances, since women are literally cast as museum objects to be viewed and consumed: Fevvers claims
that the men visitors “hired the use of the idea of us (the women)” (p.70). Carter’s depiction of the pornographic museum functions as a critique of male domination and the oppression of women; it supports her claims in *The Sadeian Woman* that pornography has a liberating potential, if it is used “as a critique of current relations between the sexes,” and that “sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer.” In other words, if pornography is a representation of male domination, then it is implicit that pornography can be used to criticize that very domination. Indeed, *Nights at the Circus* depicts the misogyny inherent in pornography as a means of criticizing male domination and its sexist ideology in general.

Fevvers's assertion that the women freaks in the museum had “hearts that beat, like yours, and souls that suffer” (p.69) is an indictment of a society that objectifies women and treats them as less than human. The association of pornography and the dominant male-centred ideology surfaces through Fevvers's statement that "there was no terror in the house our (male) customers did not bring with them" (p.62). The novel depreciates male dominance with its depiction of men who are so fearful of losing their positions of mastery in the hierarchy of conventional heterosexual relationships that they are reduced to jerking themselves off while looking at women freaks in a damp basement. *Nights at the Circus*'s strategy of turning pornography on its head manifests both feminist and postmodern impulses: feminist in the sense that it uses a conventionally misogynist discourse pornography to criticize the male-centred ideology
that produces it; postmodern in its subversion of the supposed dichotomy established between pornography and daily life. Fevvers’s assertion, for example, that it was “those fine gentleman who paid down their sovereigns to poke and pry at us who were the unnatural ones. not we. For what is “natural” and “unnatural,” sir?” (p.61) both criticizes and calls into question the conventional dichotomy between that which is natural and that which is unnatural and thus exposes the opposition as an ideological construction. Within the world of the museum, sexual gratification occurs through staged means and is devoid of interpersonal connections or, in some cases, contacts.

The novel’s depiction of pornography exceeds the bounds of the museum scenes, however, which heightens its criticism of male domination in its suggestion that sexual relations are for the most part pornographic in a culture that objectifies women. The attempted rape-murder by sword of Fevvers by a gentleman is a good case in point; it is a pornographic *mise en scene* of a sexual act. He makes her “Lie down on the altar” naked and approaches her with something that “was a sight more aggressive than his other weapon, poor thing, that bobbed about uncharged, unprimed.” and that “something was – a blade” (p.83). This scene demonstrates the utter divorce between sexuality and interpersonal love and/or desire and the explicit link between sexuality and violence that exist in a male-dominated world. Fevvers’s description of the gentleman’s useless and passive masculine genitals both ridicules the notion that man’s dominating position is grounded in his natural aggressiveness and exposes the means by which men dominate in actuality: through violence.
The gentleman dominates the situation only through his possession of a lethal sword, a phallic power that Fevvers appropriates, "she has her own sword" to extricate herself from his power. Fevvers also uses her wings to escape the gentleman's grasp by simply flying out of his window and, therefore, uses a power that is not phallic in nature. The fantastic enables Carter to bypass and undermine phallic power and to posit other forms of power. Although flying away from an aggressor is not a practical solution for most women, Carter's use of the image indicates the liberating quality of strategies of empowerment that are not phallic and violent. Fevvers's use of her wings is a form of power similar to her use of storytelling, which she rins of its phallic associations—pen as masculine genitals—as well as of its reliance on strict distinctions between fiction and nonfiction; in both cases, self-empowerment is achieved through means that are nonviolent and that subvert Western binary logic.

The life stories of various abused women, which are retold by Fevvers within her own narrative, also contain depictions of events that are both part of everyday life and pornographic. Carter in this way makes explicit the link between pornography and the system that produces it. The story of the diminutive Wonder, one of the museum's women monsters, is punctuated by a description of how a company of comic dwarfs mistreated her: "I traveled with them seven long months, passed from one to another, for they were brothers and believed in share and share alike. I fear they did not treat me kindly, for, although they were little, they were men." The dwarfs' passing around of Wonder highlights the objectification of women inherent in Western culture. For the male dwarfs, Wonder is a commodity to be used by all and then
discarded, "abandoned" (p.68). Mignon's story is more explicit in its depiction of the violence inflicted on women by men to assert their authority. Mignon is a battered circus wife, who is literally treated as an object: "the Ape-Man beat his woman as though she were a carpet" (p.115). She is also "abandoned to the mercies of a hungry tiger by her lover" (p.127), the Strong Man, when an escaped tigress intrudes upon their sexual encounter. Mignon's body itself, with its skin that was "mauvish, greenish, yellowish from beatings" and showed "marks of fresh bruises on fading bruises on faded bruises" (p.129), testifies to the horrifying violence that daily ensures male dominance.

The novel does not merely point out the oppression of women by a male-dominated system, however; it offers potential solutions. Mignon, for example, acquires self-confidence and steps beyond her role as eternal victim. Fevvers and Lizzie help clean her up and find her a new position free of "The cruel sex that threw her away like a soiled glove" (p.155). Mignon is teamed up with the Princess in the dancing tigers act: the Princess plays the piano and Mignon sings. The two women quickly become friends and lovers, cherishing "in loving privacy the music that was their language, in which they'd found the way to one another" (p.168). Mignon is strengthened through the music that she believes they have "been brought together, here, as women and as lovers, solely to make" (p.275). The novel thus offers lesbian relationships as a possibility for women to find love and purpose in a world in which violence dominates heterosexual relations and women are kept from assuming control of their lives and talents. Fevvers reacts to this flowering of Mignon by asserting that "Love, true love has utterly
transformed her” (p.276), in the sense that love has enabled Mignon to reject the role of victim and create herself as an active subject.

The transformative powers of love and the potential of lesbianism take on a larger and more fantastic force in the novel’s depiction of a Siberian asylum for women who murdered their husbands and the revolt of these prisoners sparked by the vitality of desire. Designed and run by a countess who “succesfully poisoned her husband” and sought to assuage her conscience by serving as

....a kind of conduit for the means of the repentance of the other murderesses,” the prison is a “panopticon”: “a hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a round room surrounded by windows. In that room she’d sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderesses and they, in turn, sat all day and stared at her (p.210).

Carter playfully presents the paradox in the depiction of the countess who is “trapped as securely in her watch-tower by the exercise of her power as its objects were in their cells,” since she must always keep watch over her prisoners: “the price she paid for her hypothetical proxy repentance was her own incarceration” (p.214). The wardresses are also imprisoned and watched, so that everyone within the system of the asylum is, in effect, a prisoner, regardless of her official position. Carter’s depiction of the prison configuration implicitly serves as a
parallel to the existing social structure, in which all human beings are effectively imprisoned.

In the prison chapter, the novel’s omniscient narrative voice is totally separated from the voices of Fevvers and Walser, who are not present. Although the narrative does not condone murder, it analyses the murderesses’ acts as responses to the historically specific condition of women:

There are many reasons, most of them good ones, why a woman should want to murder her husband; homicide might be the only way for her to preserve a shred of dignity at a time, in a place, where women were deemed chattels, or, in the famous analogy of Tolstoy, like wine bottles that might conveniently be smashed when their contents were consumed (p.210-11).

The narrative voice’s feminism surfaces in this discussion of the murderesses as victims of an inequitable system. The mock-rational tone emphasizes the absurdity of a world in which violence is the only recourse for women, since they are dominated and oppressed by men through violence. The narrative zooms in on one of the inmates, Olga, “who took a hatchet to the drunken carpenter who hit her around once too often” (p.211). Having “rehearsed in her mind the circumstances of her husband’s death” and attributed them to things outside of her control, Olga “exonerated herself” (p.214, 15) and set out to communicate with the wardress who brought her food daily. The relationship between Olga and her guard, Vera, quickly moves from a touch of the fingers, to “a
free if surreptitious exchange of looks," to an exchange of notes. Having no pen or pencil, Olga "dipped her finger" in "her womb's blood" to write an answer to Vera's "love-words" (p.216).

Olga's use of her menstrual blood to assert herself as an active subject challenges the traditional association of menstrual blood with dirtiness and inferiority to men. Later in the novel, Carter provides evidence of this conventional devaluation of anything to do with women's reproductive selves in the depiction of a tribal woman banished to a "primitive hut" outside the village to give birth to her child. Lizzie aptly describes the scene with the submissive "prone woman" and her baby alone in the freezing hut as a "tableau of a woman in bondage to her reproductive system" (pp.282, 283). Olga thus uses one of the most overt emblems of femaleness, traditionally used to set women apart as inferior to men, as a means of empowerment; she literally writes herself into subjection with her menstrual blood. This specific instance of a woman's assertion of power through an innovative writing process is linked to the novel's general presentation of creative storytelling as a strategy for empowerment and self-construction that challenges the established order.

Moreover, desire has generative powers within the world of the prison. It engenders love, which in turn feeds desire. The desire and love that develop between Olga and Vera spread to the other inmates of the asylum:

Desire, that electricity transmitted by the charged touch of Olga Alexadrovna and Vera Andreyena, leapt across the
great divide between the guards and the guarded. Or, it was as if a wild seed took root in the cold soil of the prison and, when it bloomed, it scattered seeds around in its turn. The stale air of the House of Correction lifted and stirred, was moved by currents of anticipation, of expectation, that blew the ripened seeds of love from cell to cell (p.216-17).

The novel depicts desire as a force strong enough to destroy the artificial divisions that culture establishes between human beings to uphold a given hierarchical social order. Desire and love becomes agents of hope that have potential liberating powers. Within the world of the prison, that potential is actualized when the women prisoners and guards rise up against the countess and escape the asylum.

The image of “an army of lovers” striking out on foot across the Siberian tundra to “found a primitive Utopia” is both fantastic and freeing. Carter’s novel uses this extraordinary situation to asset the possibility of change; “The white world around them looked newly made, a blank sheet of fresh paper on which they could inscribe whatever future they wished” (p.217-18). The new sisterhood of women sets out to forge a new social order that excludes men and rejects the notion of “fathers” and the “the use of the patronymic” (p.221). This new “republic of free women” is not totally independent of men, however, since the women are forced to ask a passing male traveler for “a pint or two of sperm” to ensure their community’s survival. When Lizzie hears the traveler recount his meeting of the women, she sarcastically asks what they will do if they give birth to baby boys “Feed’em to the polar bears? To the female polar bears?” (p.240-41). Lizzie’s question highlights the
impossibility of severing ties between the sexes if humanity is to continue, since both sexes are necessary for reproduction. While the narrative voice cannot be equated with Lizzie’s specific words, Lizzie’s challenging of the female utopia indicates that the novel does not view a separatist lesbian community as a final answer to the problems faced by women within a male-centred culture. The novel clearly to go beyond separatism to a restructuring of the whole system in such a way that men would no longer dominate and women would no longer be oppressed.

The novel ends on the liberating note of Fevvers’s carnivalesque laughter, brought on by Walser’s question as to why she went “to such lengths” to convince him that she was the “only fully-feathered intacta in the history of the world.” She is delighted by this question, to which she gleefully retorts, Fevvers’s subjecthood is assured through Walser’s question, since it proves that she has the power to construct her own version of herself. She attributes her ability to fool even a skeptic, such as Walser was at the start of the novel, to her spirited determination to define herself: “To think I really fooled you!” she marveled. ‘It just goes to show there’s nothing like confidence” (p.295). Laughter thus functions as a liberating strategy that is useful in the process of developing new versions of the subject.

Fevvers’s loud, uncontrollable laughter problematizes the meaning of the novel’s ending at the same time that it releases a liberating energy. It is an ambivalent form of laughter in that it exceeds its context and its meaning is plural and dynamic. Fevvers’s laughter salutes the end of Walser’s skepticism and dis-engagement, as well as her feelings
of diminishment, and welcomes the fresh winds of change. The laughter that physically ends Carter's novel thus creates a sense of beginning. Uncontained, it "spilled out of the window" and infects everyone and everything: "The spiraling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing" (p.294-295). This ending, which is also a beginning, offers ambivalent laughter as a means of approaching twentieth-century life, since Fevvers's laughter rings out as midnight passes and ushers in a new century.

According to Magali, "Carter's exploration of carnivalistic laughter indicates that it can help propel feminist aims. Fevvers's laughter over her ability to fool Walser into believing that she is a virgin bird-woman challenges male domination as well as Western binary logic. Fevvers resists male-centered definitions of her by assuming control of her own self-construction and undermining the conventional opposition between reality and fiction. Her laughter thus disrupts the male-centered established order; it is a manifestation of release from the status quo that is directed toward an as yet undelineated feminist version of a new and better world. Ending the novel on a note of carnivalistic laughter does not diffuse the subversive nature of Nights at the Circus; rather, it provides a vital image, one that is divorced from Western rationality and logic, to carry the potential for change urged by the novel. Carnivalistic laughter helps to explain why it is a useful vehicle for feminist fiction writers who wish not only to expose the ills of the established order but also to posit ways in which that order is being undermined and changed. Carnivalistic laughter supports the notion that
a feminist appropriation of carnival laughter opens up the way for the formation of new types of feminist fiction that would be subversive and liberating both at the level of narrative and of politics. Since ambivalent laughter and the carnivalesque in general bring together the ordinary, sensory, physical world and the visionary and thus allow a space for change and for the future without divorcing themselves from the material situation, they make ideal strategies for the furthering of subversive feminist aims. Laughter also anticipates potential new forms for feminist fiction. By subverting expectations, carnivalisation both exposes and challenges the established male-centered order and offers possibilities for change. But Carter is careful to keep her narrative grounded in the material situation by maintaining a balance between depictions of daily life and of fantastic occurrences, even if they are intermingled. While carnivalisation propels forward the novel's more utopian feminism, other strategies, such as embedded stories-autobiographies and inverted norms, also serve subversive functions, notably as vehicles for the novel's Marxist feminism. A variety of strategies usually associated with postmodernism thus enable Carter to bring the two strands of subversive feminism together and to posit a feminism that blends their best qualities and avoids their pitfalls: *Nights at the Circus* adopts Marxist feminism's emphasis on the material situation, which utopian feminism tends to ignore; and it adopts utopian feminism's creative and hopeful dynamism, which Marxist feminism often lacks. By establishing a materialist, socio-historical grounding for its utopian vision, of new women and men creating a world that would be better in feminist terms, the narrative explains why the present world is still far from being a feminist utopia and, yet, still offers some hope for the future.
Wise Children

I start this novel with Merja Makinen's words "This is not to argue that latter novels are not also feminist but their strategy is different. The violence in the events depicted in the earlier novels (the rapes, the physical and mental abuse of women) and the aggression implicit in the representations, are no longer foregrounded. While similar events may occur in these last two texts, the focus is on mocking and exploding the constrictive cultural stereotypes and in celebrating the sheer ability of the female protagonists to survive, unscathed by the sexist ideologies."\(^{14}\)

According to Linden Peach, Wise Children is concerned with the tangled history of two theatrical families: the Hazard dynasty, which has dominated English (Shakespearean) theatre for one-and-a-half centuries, and its illegitimate progeny, represented by Dora and ora Chance who had a novelty act but also worked as extras and took part in strip shows............Although the action of the novel takes place in one day, which is Dora and Nora's birthday and Shakespeare's birthday-it takes up one hundred and fifty years of family history. Apart from the fact that the action takes place on Shakespeare's birthday, the novel is written around a mock Shakespearean plot involving disguises, the search for true parentage and false trails.\(^{15}\)

Dora and Nora Chance are the illegal children of Shakespearean actor Melchior Hazard, who himself has a twin brother, Peregrine. While Melchior denies his fatherhood, Peregrine supports the sisters and becomes their substitute father. Dora records over 100 years of Hazard and Chance family history, and because both branches of the family are in show business, she plans the changing trends and fashions in the entertainment industry as well. The novel takes place over one day, April 23, the shared birthday of the Chance sisters, the Hazard brothers, and Shakespeare. Dora and Nora are celebrating 75 years; Melchior and Peregrine, 100: in the course of the day, while Dora and Nora wait to go to their father's festival birthday ball, Dora unties the complicated web of their lives. The novel includes a "Dramatis Personae," a handy reference guide to the genealogy (family tree) of the cast, for familial relations are by no means what they seem. fatherhood is everywhere in dispute, although motherhood, too, is surrounded in some mystery. The "natural" daughters of Melchior, Dora and Nora never knew their mother, who died at their birth. They are raised by the woman who ran the hostel for down-at-the-heel actors where their mother was a housemaid, and although they call the woman Grandma and take her name as their own, she may or may not be a blood relative. All the twins know of their mother is her name, Kitty, and what they know of their birth comes entirely from what Grandma Chance has told them. Peregrine has been asked by Melchior to acknowledge the twins publicly as his own, Peregrine becomes Dora and Nora's sugar daddy. He sends them money for dancing lessons, takes them on tour, performs wonderful magic tricks, and makes every visit seem like Christmas. He has, however, little tolerance for boredom: "Life had to be a
sequence of small treats or else he couldn't see the point" (p.61). Although he is much loved by his nieces, his presence in their lives is only irregular.

Dora and Nora's career on the stage begins when they play birds in a pantomime at the age of 12, and by the time the twins reach their 16th birthdays, they are old pros. As identical twins, they are a star turn in the music hall, and they become worldly-wise in matters of both performance and sexuality. Once Dora and Nora return to England, they find that the demand for dancers has diminished. They end their careers playing in nude reviews.

Despite the rise and fall of their fortunes, a long list of former lovers, the death of Grandma Chance and the presumed death of Peregrine, their father" lack of recognition, two world wars, and a host of other tragic events, According to Grandma Chance, wars are the revenge of old men on young ones because "they can't stand the competition" (p.28). When the bombs fall during World War I, she rebukes the sky because she knows the old men "hated women and children worst of all" (p.29). Dora's is an unofficial history, one that the old men might consider illegitimate, although many things of which these old men might approve are eliminated from, or parodied by, Dora's narrative. Not that legitimate — that is, officially sanctioned — history doesn't impinge on the story, but Dora refuses to treat it without irony. The disappearance and possible suicide of Dora and Nora's godchild, Tiffany. She and Tristram Hazard, Melchior's son by his third wife, host a live game show, but on a special birthday tribute to Tristram's father, Tiffany appears unscripted in an Ophelia-like trance. Her feet bleeding from a long walk in dagger heels, she carried handfuls of flowers and sings as she descends the studio.
staircase. It becomes clear that she is pregnant, but Tristram, who feels he is not ready to become a father, has rejected her. When the police call to say that the body of a young woman has been found in the Thames, it seems as though the worst has happened.

Linden peach\textsuperscript{16} says, "the controlling consciousness of both \textit{Nights at the Circus} and \textit{Wise Children} is female. The female narrator of each novel assumes a position of authority, taking control of her own story-history and asserting herself as the author of her own words and actions. Through a narrator who is both elderly and a woman, Carter conflates feminist appreciation of the importance of autobiography to women and the changing values ascribed to oral histories of the elderly from the 1970s. As Pam Morris points out, autobiography helped women discover that their emotions, circumstances, frustrations, and desires were shared by other women.\textsuperscript{17}

In \textit{Wise Children}; Dora is energised by her past. In depicting those aspects of women's lives which in Morris's words, 'have been erased, ignored, demeaned, mystified and even idealized.'\textsuperscript{18}

According to Linden peach\textsuperscript{19} 'Autobiography is one of the strategies by which women can take responsibility for their own sense of self in a restricted and restrictive environment or milieu, challenging the traditional appropriation of women's lives and histories by men. Self-making is an essential element in women's autobiography and the notion of the self.

Michwel Hardin\textsuperscript{20} points out that, in a patriarchal, dualistic culture the male needs the female in order to define himself. Consequently, if
the female is to define herself outside of the male structure, she must find a new basis for personal identification. It is being other in a group that is already other that Angela Carter establishes as a means for that self-identification.' 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 her self. Nora and Dora Chance are conscious of their common individuality, and they direct events to confuse their public or external identities at the same time that they affirm and define their personal or individual identities. They recognise that knowledge is power, and so long as they have knowledge of themselves, they will maintain their control; their identity is their power. By veiling their differences, both between themselves and between themselves and others, they assume power to direct and to initiate events. Carter further alters the definition of woman by removing her central female characters from the standard roles and stereotypes associated with them, especially marriage and motherhood. By looking at Carter's unraveling of the patriarchal definition of woman, we will see that in a post modern world, identity, like any other means of signification, becomes more and more tenuous. Through the rupturing of the strict definition of woman, Carter opens up a surplus of space in which women can find and create new definitions of self, and, at the same time, through her excessive use of otherness.

Harden\(^2\) argues that '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. Nora and Dora are other first because they are female. From this position as other Carter begins her assault on the masculine need for a signifying/
significant other; the male is forced to create an external definition of himself. By placing her protagonists obviously in the place of other, Carter nearly mocks the need for otherness, which is actually a veiled desire of the male for an origin; she shows that otherness is not the sign of an origin, but the sign of a lack of origin. Once the signifying or identifying process is exposed as original and other (composed of multiple elements), the process becomes impossible to limit.

She emphasizes this lack of origin in *Wise Children*, primarily through the lack of definitive fatherhood and, in a sense, maternity. Nora and Dora are not acknowledged by their true father, Melchior Hazard, but are instead said to be the daughters of his twin brother, Peregrine, who is himself more absent in their lives than he is present. Nora and Dora’s half-sisters, Imogen and Saskia Hazard, although claimed by Melchior, are actually the biological daughters of Peregrine. These two examples of Carter’s dissolution of conventional means of identity – the name and identity of the father – provide access to one of the major functions of this work, to challenge the very notion of true or final identity. How can a patriarchy exist if the very patriarchs / fathers themselves are not known? Without a clear patriarchal lineage, there can be no patriarchal privilege.

Since Carter has removed Nora and Dora from the traditional bond of the father’s identity, she has had to locate the means of identification elsewhere; she has chosen to place their identity not in their individual selves nor in some other person but in one another. This is not to say that they are without differences by which they can be told apart; they do have differences that they control – primarily the choice of their
perfume and the colour of their hair ribbons – and can thus switch, effectively giving them complete control over who can know them. Although both recognise this ability, Dora utilises it first. She asks Nora, the sexually active and comfortable one, if she can “become her” in order to sleep with a certain man:

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 this came quite naturally to her. To me, no .... Now I was Nora, who was afraid of nothing provided it was a man” (p.84-85).

Dora is transformed into her sister by the mere application of perfume. In this simple change Dora and Nora effectively change their identities – a shift known only to them; they have removed the societal perspective from which identity is imposed. After they realise that the way to control their futures is to control their identity, they determine to maintain the same physical appearance:

Nora often talked wistfully about going blonde. She felt the future lay with blondes. Should we? Shouldn’t we? One thing was certain – she couldn’t do it unilaterally. On our own, you wouldn’t look twice. But, put us together .... (p.77).
Identity is their commodity, and they have learned how to market it. By hiding their difference, they are an anomaly; their individual otherness is denied to the outside viewer."

Carter challenges this masculine ideal through her creation of women who reflect each other and whose identities exist in the reflections; this refusal to accept the ideal denies the patriarchy the ability to define them according to its paradigm. Not exhibiting otherness is a threat to the dominant culture which must define itself by what it is not; as more individuals obscure their otherness, they force the dominant culture to recognise the imaginary nature of its privileged signifier. This is most evident in the fear and discomfort exhibited by many when dealing with transvestism and cross-dressing.

To be able to take another’s life and identity, to be able to lose one’s self and find a new self, is to challenge the very idea of personal identity. Melchior Hazard, Nora and Dora’s father, is a Shakespearean actor, and later in the novel he works in the movies. Nora and Dora music hall girls who perform musicals based on Shakespearean comedies, also end up working in the movies. Imogen and Saskia, identical twin daughters of Peregrine (although claimed by Melchior), are actresses in London. Tristram and Gareth, identical twin sons of Melanchior, are in their own way actors or persons who take on another identity as their vocation; Tristram is a television game-show host and Gareth is a priest. Taking on other identities is a form of cross-dressing and denying of any sense of originary identity or signification. This entire family, not only Nora and Dora, is a threat because each member
denies or conceals one identity while he or she puts forward and promotes another.

Carter creates an entire family of others who are obviously other, but once the reader begins to understand the characters, the reader is forced to realise that other is merely a semantic designation, not an inherent characteristic. In Western society where sexuality is primarily a private characteristic, the signifiers for sexuality, maleness and femaleness, are not the sexual organs themselves, which are so prudently concealed, but are instead superficial and substanceless signifiers such as clothing, makeup, hairstyle, and even occupation. The signifying chain is dependent upon the individual's adherence to the socially constructed external appearances for male and female. The idea, not necessarily the action, of cross-dressing exposes the fragility of the entire signifying system and calls into question the very essence of significant identity; this idea is best expressed in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, or *What You Will*, which Nora and Dora perform under a variety of titles: What You Will; What? You Will?; What! You Will?; What! You Will; and What You Will? (p.87-90). The shifts in the titles themselves are indicative of makeup and a costume, so can a play or title by the application of punctuation. While this fragility of identity is most evident in cross-dressing, it also results from actors and entertainers who take on different character. Carter's characters all take on other identities; each one challenges the idea that there can be an originary signifier or identity. If identity is so easily taken on and dismissed, as it is in acting, then it cannot be transcendent but instead is susceptible to the same problems inherent in all signifying processes. There can be no privileged or essential signifier Carter places all her
characters in overtly acting and performing environments; this encourages the reader to look at the entire novel.

In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter says of the position of women in an unfree society (which I interpret as patriarchy), a position even more removed from society than the other or the member of the carnival: “A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster”\(^{22}\). Although this is more literally evident in *Nights at the Circus*, in which Sophie Fevvers, a trapeze aerialist, has wings, it is equally relevant to *Wise Children*. Nora and Dora are not monsters in the physical sense, but they are monsters; societies tend to label as monstrous that which they cannot know. The recognition of being other, of existing as a member of the carnival, as a monster, is integral for the individual to have an active identity apart from and influence on the dominant culture. Only through consciousness and activity can the individual express herself, or himself, as anyone other than a predetermined stereotype.

Having exposed the inherent fallacy of the phallus as privileged signifier, Carter then proceeds to explore the role and position of woman and in doing so removes from her the traditional definitions and limitations of mother and wife. It can be argued that both Nora and Dora are forced to find identity in themselves because they are denied the traditional first source of identity, the mother: “our mother died when we were born” (p.164). Lacking a mother, Nora and Dora are removed from the role of wife; to Dora and, to a lesser degree, Nora, marriage, with all its consequences, is a game not to be entered without a means of escape or victory. Just prior to Nora and Dora’s wedding, Dora sees herself, but this time it is not Nora but another imposter posing as her:
I saw my double. I saw myself, me, in a Peaseblossom costume, large as life, like looking into a mirror. First off, I thought it was Nora, up to something ... when I saw was a replica ... [S]he looked very lifelike, I must say, if not, when I looked more closely, not all that much like me, more like a blurred photocopy or an artist’s impression. (p.155).

This poseur turns out to be the ex-wife of the man whom she is marrying. Dora decides that having three identical Chance sisters appear at a wedding would be too disruptive and would also expose the identity game that she and Nora are playing, so she shifts identity again, allowing the ex-wife to become her and marry her former husband without ever letting the groom know the bride’s real identity. Dora removes herself from the marriage and participates as an observer to her own wedding; being a wife does not mean enough for Dora to stay within the game. As if this wedding did not contain enough acting and posing already, Peregrine arrives dressed up as a cowboy to perform the ceremony. Peregrine is their father dressed up as a cowboy playing a spiritual father. Dora escapes the excessive patriarchal symbolism of marriage by not going through with it. Dora avoids marriage and its reaffirmation of the patriarchal structure, but this does not necessarily imply that Nora supports it. Nora’s marriage, which does take place, loses all sense of seriousness and sacredness because all of the participants attend, but still in character, revealing marriage to be not a sacred institution but only another site for play and deception; it is another signifying system which must be exposed because it lacks original meaning.
Motherhood is the final women's role that Carter re-evaluates. Dora thinks to herself "a mother is always a mother, since a mother is a biological fact, whilst a father is a movable feast" (p.216). She recognises the inherent and integral role of the mother in the transmission of identity; however, since the mother is responsible for passing on identity, she is also implicated when she passes on the patriarchal mode of identification. Although Dora states that "mother" is dependent upon biology, she and Nora become mothers when they turn seventy-five by taking on as their own the twins of the priest/father Gareth. Peregrine gives the three-month-old twins – their day of conception is the same as Nora and Dora's birthday – to them in an act which functions as a very nonbiological birth: Peregrine takes the babies out of his pockets and gives them to Nora and Dora. Motherhood is no longer purely biological; Nora says to Dora, "We're both of us mothers and both of us fathers .... They'll be wise children, all right" (p.230). Although the birthing process is not gender independent, the roles of mother and father are no longer limited to biology or gender. Having mother and father be interchangeable allows the child to escape, or have diminished, the culturally imposed stereotypes and roles assigned according to gender. These children will be wise because they will create their own identities, more so even than Nora and Dora. One twin is male and the other is female; this will allow for the opportunity to remove gender as the basis for identification. It is possible that Carter has created one male and one female so that when these children see each other as their own mirrors, each will see him – or herself, not the gender difference. Identity will have, on this microcosmic scale, removed itself from gender. Harden argues that Angela Carter in *Wise Children* challenges the very ideas of definition, identity, and origin. By creating a novel in which otherness
is the standard, she provides a new perspective from which one can see that original and other are merely signifiers that have no essential meaning. Identity changing and masking both serve to expose patriarchal identity as an institution that bases its authority on the belief that there is an origin and that the origin is the phallus. Once it is realised that, in the postmodern world, there cannot be an origin or a privileged perspective and thus a basis for external identity, then the individual is forced to find a new space in which to exist. For Nora and Dora, and most likely for their children, the new personal identity is communal; the opposing forces exist together, not as self and other but like the two halves of the Tao, simultaneously separate and integrated: good and evil, male and female, white and black, us and them.
REFERENCES


18. Ibid.


21. Ibid.
