

In the End was a New « Word »: Carnavalesque Ex-centricity and the Renewal of Cultural Discourse in Angela Carter's *Wise Children*

"The sense of limitless freedom that I, as a woman, sometimes feel is that of a new kind of being. Because I simply could not have existed, as I am, in any other preceding time or place. I am the pure product of an advanced, industrialised, post-imperialist country in decline."¹ It is obvious from these words and from the title of the essay they are taken from, « Notes From the Front Line », that the fact Angela Carter considered England to be in decline was something extremely positive for her as it allowed her to come into existence, to do battle and above all to be heard. Indeed, at the end of the very same essay, she insists on the importance of language and on the fact that, if it had been used by the patriarchal, bourgeois society to spread its culture and ideology, it could also be used to introduce a new type of discourse which could destabilize this society and bring it into question.² She claimed that it was thanks to Joyce's writing that she had understood that the « Word » is not sacred and patriarchal, but is rich and varied and above all profane:

*He disestablished English[...]Joyce Irished, he Europeanised, he decolonialised English: he tailored it to fit this century, he drove a giant wedge between English Literature and literature in the English language and, in doing so, he made me (forgive the personal note) free. Free not to do as he did, but free to treat the Word not as if it were holy but in the knowledge that it is always profane.*³

The decline and fall of everything deemed holy and the promotion of the profane is typical of the carnival world described by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*. Carter specialized in mediaeval literature at university and it is obvious that the subversive carnival spirit of such writers as Rabelais appealed to her. Carnival is a time of complete and utter freedom when people can say and do what they want as all the different social categories mix together in the street, and official dogma, culture and hierarchy are done away with. During carnival time the ex-centric position is no longer a position of weakness but one of strength. Everything is possible in this topsy turvy world; kings can become beggars and beggars can become kings at the shake of a hat or should I say of a crown. It is

¹ Angela Carter, "Notes from the Front Line," *On Gender and Writing*, ed. Michelene Wandor (London: Pandora Press, 1983) 73.

² "But, look, it is all applied linguistics. But language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation." Carter, "Notes from the Front Line", 77.

a time of uncrowning and crowning, of decline and renewal and this is underlined in Carter's last novel, *Wise Children* (1991), by the two catch phrases: "*Lo, how the mighty are fallen*" (WC 10, 16 etc) and "*What a joy it is to dance and sing*" (WC 5, 34 etc). In this novel, Carter uses the carnivalesque to show the decline of traditional culture and the patriarchal « Word » and to impose a new ex-centric, profane culture in which all the outsiders in the patriarchal bourgeois society, and especially women, come into their own and create a new living language, which, instead of being static and in decline, is full of life and verve and in a constant state of renewal. After showing how Carter attacks the old traditional culture head on, I will see how she replaces it with new voices and a new « Word ». Then I will consider how Carter's own voice can be read behind these new voices thus introducing double-voicedness, and how, by playing with the « Word » and words in general, she gives a new life to culture and leaves behind her the aggressive tone of much of her earlier writing for a more optimistic one.

Wise Children tells the story of the trials and tribulations of two sides of one and the same family - the Hazards, the official legitimate side, and the Chances, the illegitimate popular side. It focuses on the world of high and low culture as the Chance sisters, the twins Nora and Dora, are music hall song and dance girls, whereas Ranulph Hazard and his son Melchior are "*the Royal Family of the British Theatre*" (WC 95). They are great Shakespearean actors and therefore stand for official culture and its "King". However, in carnival time kings are always uncrowned, and this is what happens to the Hazard family and, in a different way, to Shakespeare.

Carter doesn't object to Shakespeare himself, far from it, but she does object to the way he is used to impose an official culture on people and to colonize their minds. For example, she attacks the cultural imperialism of the Hazard family, who want to export Shakespeare and his Word for the glory of their country:

One thing you must know about Ranulph. He was half mad and thought he had a Call. Now he saw the entire world as his mission field...the old man was seized with the most imperative desire to spread and go on spreading the Word over-seas. Willy-nilly off must go his wife and children, too, to take Shakespeare where Shakespeare had never been before (WC 17).

³ Angela Carter, "Envoi: Bloomsday," *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writing* (London: Chatto and Windus,

Ranulph's son Melchior follows in his father's footsteps as he wants to export *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Hollywood. In his imperial cultural conquest he even wants to take some soil from Stratford-on-Avon to scatter over that cultural desert, America. Unfortunately, during the journey, a cat chokes the soil as cat litter, thus turning cultural imperialism into something that literally stinks. It is not Shakespeare himself but the Hazard family and the patriarchal culture they represent that become carnivalesque objects of derision. They are quite literally uncrowned as King Lear's crown that Ranulph bequeaths to his son is a fake made of cardboard and symbolizes, as Aidan Day remarks, the family's fake cultural legitimacy.⁴

The decline of the old cultural norms is underlined by Carter in many ways. Melchior's Hollywood version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a complete and utter flop, and the decline of the Hazard family can also be seen very clearly in Melchior's descendants, who aren't interested at all in his fake crown and who all end up in popular culture of some sort or another. For example, Saskia, Melchior's daughter, does a cookery show on TV and Tristram, his son, "*the last gasp of the imperial Hazard family*" (WC 10), appears paradoxically to be a victim of American cultural imperialism as he hosts a TV game-show called *Lashings of Lolly*, in which money replaces culture. To make matters worse, he falls in love with his fellow presenter, Tiffany, a black girl of doubtful origins brought up by the illegitimate Chance family: *Lo, how the mighty have fallen!*

Shakespeare himself, however, is not completely uncrowned as he doesn't disappear with the Hazard family. On the contrary, he is very present throughout the book, but not in the way the Hazard family would have liked. During carnival time, if the mighty fall, the lowly come up in the world and are crowned, and this is what happens to Melchior's two illegitimate twin daughters, Nora and Dora Chance. These daughters are ex-centric four times over - they are illegitimate, they are women, they live in South London on the wrong side of the river and, being music hall singers and dancers, they are outsiders in the official world of culture. Yet Nora and Dora Chance also represent Shakespeare; they live in Bard Road and, like Melchior, they were born on Shakespeare's birthday. However, they represent the side of his writing that official culture neglects. Bastards and incestuous relationships, twins and their high-spirited games abound in Shakespeare's plays and his

1992) 210.

⁴ "The token of kingly authority to which Melchior adhered was a bit of cardboard, a sham, just like his outward show of pure cultural legitimacy." Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998) 207.

writing is not only legitimate and noble but illegitimate and popular. Bakhtin himself insists on the importance of the carnivalesque side in Shakespeare⁵ and in *Wise Children* Carter plays with this popular aspect of his writing which, she regrets, is all too often ignored by intellectuals.⁶

The decline of the Hazards and the official King Shakespeare is, in fact, in large part due to the vitality, life and derring-do of the illegitimate popular branch of the family, the Chances and this uncrowning is to be taken seriously. Dora and Nora by their overwhelming and almost monstrous presence show that other forms of life are possible and, like Bakhtin's pregnant hags,⁷ they bring into question the idea of the norm, and link decline to the renewal of life. They always steal the limelight and at Melchior's hundredth birthday party, a sort of King's jubilee, when Dora, aged 75, goes to bed with Melchior's twin brother, Peregrine, their incestuous, rather grotesque lovemaking almost causes the literal downfall of the House of Hazard:

"What a clatter!" said Nora. "Like cymbals, darling. Don't you think I didn't guess what you were up to?"

There was one ecstatic moment, she opined, when she thought the grand bouncing on the bed upstairs – remember, Perry was a big man – would bring down that chandelier and all its candles, smash, bang, clatter, and the swagged ceiling, too; bring the house down, fuck the house down (WC 220).

However, if Dora does win the show and "*bring the house down*" in all senses of the expression, it is not so much thanks to what she does as to what she says. In *Wise Children* men are almost eclipsed from the scene or stage - they are uncrowned - as the whole story is related in the first person by Dora⁸ and it is the story of her life – it is her story. In Dora's mouth the Queen's English is also uncrowned, as her English is anything but correct. Double negations and mistakes with pronouns abound in her very popular speech and this familiar, ungrammatical tone is set right from the beginning of the book when she

⁵ "The analysis we have applied to Rabelais would also help us to discover the essential carnival element in the organization of Shakespeare's drama. This does not merely concern the secondary clownish motives of his plays. The logic of crownings and uncrownings, in direct or indirect form, organizes the serious elements too." Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (1965; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 275.

⁶ "Intellectuals... are still reluctant to treat him as popular culture" Lorna Sage. "Angela Carter interviewed by Lorna Sage," *New Writing*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury (London: Minerva Press, 1992) 186.

⁷ "In the famous Kerch terracotta collection we find figurines of senile pregnant hags. Moreover, the hags are laughing. This is a typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth." Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 25.

introduces herself to the reader: "*Me and Nora, that's my sister, we've always lived on the left-hand side, the side the tourist rarely sees, the bastard side of Old Father Thames*"(WC 1). As Dora was brought up without a father and his sacred Word, on "*the bastard side of Old Father Thames*", she doesn't have to follow grammatical rules and can create her own language. The "chance" she has lies in the very fact she has the freedom to juggle with words and to use the marketplace language of the carnival described as follows by Bakhtin:

The temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times.⁹

What is striking about Dora's speech is the carnivalesque lack of restraint that characterizes it; it really is *frank and free*. First of all it simply bubbles over with enthusiasm and is typical spoken language. She often uses the historic present to make her stories more lively and her speech is full of exclamation marks, asides, short nominal sentences or never-ending ones, which leave everyone breathless. This enables her, as Bakhtin says, to get rid of the distance between her and her readers who are quickly drawn into her text. She even makes them participate actively by addressing them in person. The beginning of the book is typical in this respect as it begins with a charade:

Why is London like Budapest?

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

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

Put it another way. If you're from the States, think of Manhattan. Then think of Brooklyn. See what I mean? (WC 1)

Dora often asks the reader questions to draw him into her narrative and her speech seems so natural and full of life and verve that, as the following quotation shows, she often just goes on and on until she gets carried away and forgets where she is: "*There I go again! Can't keep a story going in a straight line, can I? Drunk in charge of a narrative. Where was I?*" (WC 158).

Her lack of restraint can also be seen in her language and subject matter. Just as her adoptive mother, the former prostitute Grandma Chance, "*created*" her family from a

⁸ The name Dora no doubt refers to Freud's Dora. Here Dora, the woman, gives her own account of her life.

⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

mixture of unwanted people,¹⁰ so Dora creates her new cultural discourse from a mixture of unwanted words. Carter said James Joyce disrupted the English language by "buggering" it¹¹ and Dora does just this. She uncrowns the Queen's English not just with her mistakes and bad grammar, but also by using such unofficial and unladylike words as *bloody*, *sod*, *fuck*, and *bugger* in nearly every bloody fucking sentence!

Bakhtin says carnivalesque language is liberated "from norms of etiquette and decency" and Dora makes the most of this, not only with her bawdy language but also with the rather crude way she and her sister often play with words. A pantomime they act in becomes "*Goldilocks and the Three Bares*", and Nora even suggests it should be called "*Goldibollocks*" (WC 165). Like stand-up comedians, Dora is also a past mistress of innuendo which she uses to suggest things which tend to what Bakhtin calls "*the lower bodily stratum*."¹² The use of *it* and of onomatopoeia in the following passage are more than suggestive and, because we, the readers, or should I say audience, can't help laughing, they show that the carnival levels out social differences:

Nora's Tony wasn't, as you might say, in our class, he travelled third, so Nora would tippy-toe down the train and climb up to his upper berth, behind the green baize curtains; they did it for hours in there, she said, like snakes. Once he'd got it¹³ in her, they never moved, they let the train do all the work. CHOO-choo-choo-choo, CHOO-choo-choo-choo. The engine would get up steam, the pistons go faster, faster, faster until: WHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE... (WC 118)

It is obvious from this passage how much Dora enjoys playing with language and just how creative she is - in fact there is no restraining her linguistic creation either. She changes the punctuation around in the title of a review she and her sister act in so that the sense changes each time. The review, a popular music hall version of *As You Like it*, is called "*What you will*" but becomes, thanks to Dora's varying punctuation, either "*What? You will?*" or "*What you will?*" or "*What! You Will!*" or "*What You Will!*". She goes as far as to coin new words such as to "*tippy toe*" (WC 118) or a "*funniosity*" (WC 55) and simply loves forming never-ending compound adjectives such as: "*top-of-the-milk-coloured rumpled linen*" (WC 10) and "*those knicker-shifting, unfasten-your-brassière-*

¹⁰ " 'Family,' I say. Grandma invented this family. She put it together out of whatever came to hand – a stray pair of orphaned babes, a ragamuffin in a flat cap. She created it by sheer force of personality" (WC 35).

¹¹ "buggering the English language, the ultimate revenge of the colonized." Carter, "Envoi: Bloomsday," 208.

¹² Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 151.

¹³ My emphasis.

from-the-back-of-the-gallery eyes" (WC 72). She also loves simile and is always comparing things. However, she is never lyrical and poetic. Her creativity lies in the very concrete yet unexpected aspect of her comparisons. She always brings the reader back to earth with a bump. For example, she sees Daisy wrapped round Melchior "*like skin round sausage*" (WC 153), and when she watches Nora dancing at the bar, she says her bum jiggling away in front of her looks "*like two hard-boiled eggs in a handkerchief*" (WC 54). In a word, no-one can deny that Dora is a creative writer of talent - a born artist: *What a joy it is to dance and sing!*

However, although Dora does seem to be a creative artist in her own right, and although all the enthusiasm, bawdiness and vulgarity seem to fit the character, the reader can't help feeling at times that her linguistic prowess seems a bit far-fetched for a music hall song and dance girl brought up by an ex-prostitute. Carter wants to "bugger up" English language and literature in more ways than one and we can't help hearing her voice prompting Dora at times by introducing different registers, foreign languages and intertextuality, thus betraying her presence to the reader with a wink of her crafty eye. The idea that a novel should open up to different voices is a central idea in Bakhtin's work on dialogism or double-voicedness¹⁴; it is by introducing several different registers and types of discourse in a text that he thinks one attains what he calls "*the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities*."¹⁵ No one language must be central, not even Dora's.

The language in *Wise Children* is not only bawdy and vulgar. Many recognizable literary quotations slip into Dora's speech from such sources as Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, Wordsworth, Oscar Wilde, Coleridge and Homer to mention just a few. Their words are always given a new slant to uncrown the serious pretensions of official literature and to show the "gay relativity" of all discourse. Hamlet's famous monologue *To be or not To be* becomes "*2b or not 2b*" (WC 90) in the review *What you Will*, or "*To butter or not to butter*" (WC 38) on a TV commercial for margarine. As for Dora's propensity for inventing long compound adjectives, it could remind the reader of Dylan Thomas, but Dora Chance, the music hall song and dance girl, very surprisingly also knows his poetry and quotes the very moving poem he wrote on the death of his father, *Do not go gentle into that good*

¹⁴ "The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language – that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological world." Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 366.

¹⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11.

night, when referring to all the heavy make-up she and her sister wear to try and stay young: "*The habit of applying warpaint outlasts the battle; haven't had a man for yonks but still we slap it on. Nobody could say the Chance girls were going gently into that good night*" (WC 6). In such a context Dylan Thomas's words lose all their emotivity and Carter uses them to debunk poetical language which, according to Bakhtin, was monologic. Even more surprisingly for someone who has had no education, Dora also refers to Baudelaire's poem *Au Lecteur*. When she meets Irish, a rather randy, drunken author in Hollywood, she actually quotes the poem in French saying: "*I want you to meet my dear friend, mon semblable, mon frère*" (WC 118).

These words aren't the only words in French to appear in *Wise Children*. French words appear on nearly every page of the book and are incorporated into Dora's speech in a very natural way. Sometimes they are written with the English phonetic system like "*toot sweet*" (WC 15, 161, 227), a particular favourite of Carter's, sometimes they are in italics and sometimes they are written in normal print as if they had actually become part of the English language. A few of the French words in the novel such as *coup de grâce* (WC 88), *mot juste* (WC 222) and *pièce de résistance* (WC 37) are actually used in English, and others, such as *fouettés* and *jetés* (WC 85), are used in the dancing world, so it could seem normal that Dora knows them. However, some, which would only be known to well-educated people, seem to slip into Dora's speech very naturally and unobtrusively. This is what she says, for example, about Grandma Chance and her house: "*Not that Mrs Chance was what the French call exigeante. She didn't run the fanciest boarding house in Brixton...the whole place never looked plausible.*" (WC 25) Carter even allows Dora to invent words in French. When talking about the weight problems of her fellow aging music hall dancers, she invents a French noun "*avoirdupois*"¹⁶: "*Some superannuated hoofers put on the avoirdupois like nobody's business*" (WC 6). In fact like Julian Barnes, Carter loved French and admitted that reading this language helped her in her linguistic games.¹⁷ These linguistic games are typically carnivalesque, they underline the fact that no linguistic system is complete in itself, not even the Queen's English, and they level out once again the differences between high and low culture by mixing the two.

Finally Carter also levels out the differences between high and low culture by mixing different registers of language in the same sentence, or the same phrase; her *superannuated*

¹⁶ Spelt in this way in the text.

hoofers is a good example of this. She sometimes starts a sentence with very posh, sophisticated language mixed with a smattering of foreign words, and finishes off with familiar language. For example, this is what she says about Daisy's house in New York: "*It was her own house, her very own New York pied-à-terre, after all! She wasn't one whit abashed to find a naked chorine in the shower, nor a clothed one prone upon her mattress dallying, to all appearances, with her inamorato, but cracked us all her famous grin, kicked off her shoes*" (WC 114-115). As usual Carter no doubt wants to insist on the very down-to-earth aspect of popular language compared to the rather snobbish, long-windedness of official, literary language, which she sometimes even goes as far as to translate into familiar speech so that everyone can understand. "*In a great state of alcoholic euphoria and erotic disturbance,*" for example, is translated immediately, in the same sentence, into the plain everyday English: "*booze and sexy fun*" (WC 117). By her use of different registers, different languages and intertextuality, Carter always insists on diversity and proposes alternative ways of being and speaking. As Margaret Atwood wrote about Carter on her death : "*Nothing for her was outside the pale: she wanted to know about everything and everyone, and every place and every word. She relished life and language hugely, and revelled in the diverse.*"¹⁸

So to conclude, at the end of her life Carter created a new word, a new profane cultural discourse and showed that in the beginning was not the Word. She wanted to renew language and to show that nothing, neither language nor social roles, is fixed once and for all. The Académie Française would be quickly uncrowned by Carter! What Carmen Callil said about Carter's last heroines could have been said about Carter herself: "*Here they come cursing and swearing, making jokes, using every beautiful word in the English dictionary in magical and exquisite ways, to tell much of the world to piss off, and make way for others.*"¹⁹ This is exactly what Carter does. Thanks to her discourse she puts into practice "*the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities*", and "gay" is really the best word to describe *Wise Children* as it is full to overflowing with the gaiety of carnivalesque ex-centric life. Even if she knew full well that a carnival doesn't last,²⁰ even if, to her

¹⁷ "All I can say ... is that I try to understand about grammar from reading a lot of French. I try new combinations. Certain combinations of words act like a spell on me. Like a spell!" John Mortimer, "The Stylish Prime of Miss Carter," *The Sunday Times* 24 January 1982: 36.

¹⁸ Margaret Atwood, "Magic Token Through the Dark Forest," *The Observer* 23 February 1992: 61.

¹⁹ Carmen Callil, "Flying Jewelry," *The Sunday Times* 23 February 1992: 6.

²⁰ "As Umberto Eco said, 'An everlasting carnival doesn't work,' You can't keep it up, you know, nobody could. The essence of the carnival, the festival, the Feast of Fools, is a reconstitution of order, a refreshment...after

horror, Thatcher had been in power for the ten years leading up to the publication of *Wise Children*, and even if she was already suffering from cancer, like Dora Carter could say: "*I refuse point blank to play in tragedy*"(WC 154).

Although carnivals and laughter may not last in real life, once they enter literature they become a force to be dealt with and to be taken seriously and Bakhtin insists on the fact that for a new world outlook to appear carnivalesque laughter "*had to enter the world of great literature*".²¹ When everything goes wrong carnivalesque writing can become a way of resisting a society which lays down all the rules for everyone regardless of their diversity. By incorporating familiar speech and laughter into her writing to destabilize official culture, Carter tries to make people think differently and believe in growth and renewal. Optimism is essential as, if no-one believes in change, official culture will only get stronger and seem indestructible. *Wise Children* is optimistic and ends with a cheerful new word - it ends with words in honour of popular fiction and all the vitality and fight it shows when faced with adversity: "*There was dancing and singing all along Bard Road that day and we'll go on singing and dancing until we drop in our tracks, won't we kids. What a joy it is to dance and sing!*" (WC 231-232).

which everything can go on exactly as if nothing had happened. Things don't change because a girl puts on trousers or a chap slips on a frock, you know. Masters were masters again, the day after Saturnalia ended; after the holiday from gender, it was back to the old grind... " Angela Carter, "In Pantoland Angela Carter's Grand Tour," *The Guardian* 24 December 1991: 6.

²¹ "*The shoots of a new world outlook were sprouting, but they could not grow and flower as long as they were enclosed in the popular gaiety of recreation and banqueting or in the fluid realm of familiar speech. In order to achieve this growth and flowering, laughter had to enter the world of great literature.*" Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 96.