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CULTURE, CLASS AND COUNTERFEIT GENEALOGIES IN ANGELA CARTER'S *WISE CHILDREN*

Abstract: *Drawing on concepts from cultural studies and cultural materialism, Angela Carter's novel Wise Children can be interpreted as a text where struggles between dominant and subordinate groups are fought, illuminating thus the markedly leftist undertones of its narrative. Carter foregrounds the family lies of the Hazard household to destabilize the entrenched notions of paternity, culture and class infrastructure in 20th century Britain, exhibiting a postmodern awareness of the multiplicity of truth and its distortion by the culturally hegemonic groups. The novel's narrator, Dora Chance, tells her own and her sister's history of exclusion from the Hazard clan – the British theatrical royalty – and their consequential rejection by the institutions of elite culture. Her account undermines the foundations of the British class system and the low vs. high culture dichotomy by divulging multiple misattributed paternities that underpin these social constructs.*

Key words: *Angela Carter, cultural studies, class, lies, patrilineality*

Introduction

The work of the great late British enchantress of the novel and the prolific cultural and literary critic, Angela Carter, has been hailed as some of the most groundbreaking and substantive work of fiction and non-fiction written in the latter half of the 20th century. A self-professed socialist feminist, Angela Carter explored desire, gender identity and relations of power mainly through fantasy, surrealism and magic realism, in novels such

as *Shadow Dance* (1966), *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Several Perceptions* (1968), *Heroes and Villains* (1969), *Love* (1971), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972), *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984), as well as in several short-story collections, the most notable of which is her re-writing of popular fairytales from a feminist perspective, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Written in her idiosyncratic lurid lyricism, her work aims to demythologize patriarchal stereotypes of femininity and eroticism predicated on female submission, and while it has been praised for its paradigm-shifting toward constructions of female agency, it has also been derided by feminist scholars for re-inscribing misogynist images of the masochistic pleasure of the violated female body, especially prominent in her critical exploration of De Sade's writing (Tonkin 9). Not only her feminist judgment, but also her socialist credentials have been questioned over the years. Her left-wing leanings, although often subscribed to in non-fiction and interviews[1], remain largely unaccommodated by her postmodern aesthetic which, for the largest part, steers clear of overt politics and completely bypasses Marxism's genre of choice – social realism. However, her final and by many her finest novel, *Wise Children* (1992), centering on the lives of two aged Brixton chorus girls, illegitimate daughters of an icon of Shakespearean theatre, is perhaps the most lucid expression of her leftist sentiments that vindicates the "bastard" children of the British class system.

Writing about the demise of class novel in contemporary Britain, Dominic Head acknowledges that class in Britain "remains a topic fraught with contradictions and confusion" today, complicated by the rise of Thatcher's neoliberalism in the 1980s which has done much to demolish working-class solidarity, while introducing a new, more maligned category of the underclass (*Contemporary British Fiction* 232). Head notes that the British novel of the 1980s and 1990s has remained largely silent about the British class dynamics, in contrast to the prominent position it held in the fiction of the previous decades, exemplified by, for instance, Raymond Williams' *Border Country* (1960), John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957) or the original campus novel – *Lucky Jim* (1954) by Kingsley Amis. However, it can be argued that, although written in the playful postmodernist idiom rather than realism of the previous generation, Carter's *Wise Children* is possible to read as a more recent example of the British class novel, or at least a novel highly informed by class consciousness

1 In an interview for *Marxism Today's Left Alive*, she proclaimed: "I'm interested in justice. (…). I suppose I regard myself as just a rank and file socialist feminist really." (n.pag)

and the constructed nature of class and culture which stem from patrilineality, i.e. one's paternal lineage and the accompanying inheritance of property, rights, name, and class. Carter asserted in one of her essays that "all post-sixteenth-century English art contains a subtext concerning class", and nowhere in her fiction is this more palpable than in *Wise Children* (Carter, "Love in a Cold Climate" n.pag). *Wise Children* leaves behind the orgiastic, dystopian fantasies that dominated Carter's earlier fiction and enters the gritty, but jovial materiality of South London, in a novel which, although replete with postmodern stylistic minutae and often asking of the reader to willingly suspend her disbelief, unabashedly explores the material circumstances of the British social life, as well as the tight grip of patriarchal rule that extends from the family domain into the realm of art and culture.

Wise Children, in contrast to much of Carter's earlier work, is a distinctly British novel, with specific temporal and spatial coordinates. All the while balancing its exuberant plot on the tightrope of metafictional historiography and magic realism, Carter produces a *tour de force*, life-affirming tale of a century of the British theatre and entertainment, a culture so distinctly British that its enthusiasts and prime representatives in the form of the Hazard family fail to export it to Hollywood. It also provides a discerning look into the British class system, which the novel suggests is rooted in compromised patrilineality, evidenced by the multiple false paternities in the Hazard household. Instead of eulogizing the lost values of high culture in the Arnoldian sense of "the best that has been thought and said" (qtd. in Bertens 135), and rather than lamenting the loss of class and family belonging, Carter undermines these ideas through the sardonic and sonorous voice of the 75-year old Dora Chance. The novel foregrounds the themes of doubling (multiple twins parade the plot), illegitimacy (both of culture and kinship), identity switching and nostalgia for the England gone-by that is juxtaposed to the multiethnic pastiche and mass culture of the late 20th century, the time when Dora is writing her picaresque memoirs. In so doing, the narrative exposes the lies in which the discrete categories of class and culture are rooted and celebrates the concomitant fusion of the low-brow with the high-brow.

The Project of British Cultural Studies

By delving into the materiality of the Chance sisters' lives, *Wise Children* performs in fiction a similar task to the one British cultural theorists such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Tony Bennett, working in the tradition of critical Marxism and cultural materialism, have taken up as their objective in the past fifty years in critiquing the British society.

Hence, it is necessary at this juncture to briefly outline the project of British cultural studies in order to illuminate the themes and strategies that Carter employs in *Wise Children*. Graeme Turner (2003), writing the historical overview of the British cultural studies as an academic field, notes that for Raymond Williams, the godfather of the discipline, culture is a key category because it links his two overarching interests – literary analysis and social inquiry. Cultural studies broke with the literary tradition's elitism and exchanged its claims of universal values for the analysis of the everyday and the commonplace. Its mission since conception has been to erase the category of "the natural" by exposing historical forces behind those social relations of domination we see as the products of neutral evolution, focusing particularly on the experience of the working class and, lately, on that of women and ethnic minorities as the historically oppressed categories. Its theoretical premises are indebted to critical European Marxism, and culture, mediated through ideology in the critical Marxist sense of the word, is viewed as the site where meaning and social realities are constructed, rather than a mere projection of the economic base. There has been a long-running debate in cultural studies between its two opposing currents: the structuralists (informed by continental philosophers, such as Althusser), who opt for the over-determining role of ideology in the formation of subjectivity, and the British home-grown culturalist school, championed by Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, E. P. Thompson[2] among other notable theorists, who are more optimistic about the possibility of agency and self-invention of the subject of ideology. This chasm has largely been bridged by the rediscovery of the work of Gramsci, who underlined not only the structure that produces the individual, but also the possibilities of agency available to him/her. This attitude dominates the plot of *Wise Children*, whose main protagonists Dora and Nora seem to be conditioned by their (lack of) father, but who nevertheless retain agency throughout the plot, resolving in their realization that it is their idea of the father as an ideological construct they were seduced by all along, rather than the real person.

Class, Culture and Dubious Paternity

The tension between class-shaped notions of high-brow and low-brow culture is extensively explored in cultural studies, and is also a prominent subject of *Wise Children*. Already in 1896,

2 Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958), Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (1957), and E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1978) are some of the seminal works in the field.

Matthew Arnold warned of the consequences of the spread of the new urban culture of the working classes, represented in the novel in the Chance sisters' music hall career, which Arnold called "philistine culture" in *Culture and Anarchy*[3]. The so-called "culture and civilization" tradition of elitist literary criticism led by Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, F.R. and Q.D. Leavis in the first half of the 20th century grew concerned with what they saw as a degeneration of the "organic" communal or folk cultures that thrived under industrialization until the turn of the century. For these critics, the popular culture of the 20th century was a manifestation of "anarchy" (qtd. in Proctor 12). The British cultural studies emerged as a reaction to this elitism, theorizing from the perspective of the "new" post-war and post-imperial Britain that sought to break away from the Arnoldian myth of idealized Englishness and universal values of high art, cultural paradigms that were drowned in the blood of colonialism and two world wars. The emergent culture was one where class was said to be outmoded, where post-war Britain was eager to wash its hands of its imperialist legacy, and where modernity and the Americanization of popular culture heralded a new era of blurred lines between high and low culture. The post-imperial position, critical of patriarchy and the concomitant gender, racial and class oppression, was also taken up by Angela Carter, who took issue with British imperialist myths and their deconstruction from a socialist angle. In an essay called after a famous patriotic song, "So There'll Always Be an England", Carter wrote of Britain's cultural fallacies that gave rise to its imperialist claims:

> "Real familiarity with history cannot coexist with the sense of a special destiny. It must be a fine thing, should such a country exist, to live in a place that does not now, nor ever has had, the consciousness that it has been singled out for a special fate. Or in a place that has lost it to such an extent that one could answer Blake: 'And was the holy lamb of God on England's pleasant pastures seen?' with a resounding No. (Or, in the words of the old joke, to reply: 'I've got news for you. She's black')". (Carter, "So There'll Always Be an England" n. pag.)

Stuart Hall was among the cultural studies leading theorists who particularly insisted on the interdependence of high and popular forms, noting that the false division of these binaries was linked to the maintenance of cultural hierarchies and the

3 This social process is chronicled in *Wise Children* in the portrayal of street performers, "low" comedians, music hall dancers, Hollywood's appropriation of Shakespeare and eventually, in the rise of mass culture perpetuated in the TV show *Lashings of Lolly* hosted by Tristram Hazard.

policing of difference (qtd. in Proctor 31). This theme figures prominently in *Wise Children*, where the narrator Dora Chance narrates the family history from the position of a misbegotten child of low culture who has been wrongfully written out of the official family records, as well as locked out of the classical theatre that is the province of the Hazard clan. Inextricably related to the notions of high and low in culture is the tension between the original and the derivative. If postmodernism's goal is to question the humanist assumption of authorial originality and authority, as Linda Hutcheon has remarked (xii) than *Wise Children* questions the originality of paternal origin and identity rooted in paterfamilias. These ideas are mocked by the narrator when she calls her biological father "the author of our being", although she and her twin sister are active agents who carve out their identities throughout the story without, or better to say, in spite of him.

The narrator Dora Chance, the unauthorized family historian, commences the reconstruction of her life by welcoming the reader to the London district of Brixton, "the wrong side of the tracks" (*WS* 1). The class infrastructure of the novel's universe is established from the onset by Dora's explanation of the North-South divide of which every Londoner is well-aware: to the north of the river Thames live the affluent, while the south of the river belongs to the underbelly. Dora and her twin, Nora, inhabit the latter, "bastard" side of "Old Father Thames" which hints at their bastard status within the Hazard theatrical dynasty whose "legitimate" branch resides in a mansion north of the Thames. The paternal metaphor for the river ("Old Father Thames") invokes the role of patriarchy in the class division between the North and the South. Dora begins her labyrinthine account of her and her sister's dubious inception in the very house in which she is writing her memoirs 75 years later, on the day of their birthday, which they ironically share with the father who has never conceded the paternity, as well as with Shakespeare. In Dora's account, which compresses a century and a half of narrated events into a single day, Carter veers away from the structuring lies of bourgeois realism into the boundless space of magic realism, which collapses the factual and the fantastical and fuses diachrony into synchrony. Her history, written from the margins both in terms of London topography and the Hazard family hierarchy, reveals multiple misattributed paternities that have shaped the class identities and material conditions of existence of all the main characters, gradually disentangling the web of lies in which the "legitimate" children are enmeshed. Dora and Nora are in the know, hence they are the "wise children", although toward the story's resolution they ironically have reasons to doubt their maternal origin: it remains unclear

whether Grandma Chance, of whom Dora says has "invented this family" is perhaps the girls' mother.

Carter makes clear connections between paternal acceptance, respectability and prestige, in a world where patrilineal legitimacy acts as an ideological over-determinant in the characters' lives, only to expose this patriarchal continuum as a sham. Dora narrates about the strong nexus between high art and high class, expressed through Melchior's first marriage to Lady Atalanta Hazard, the epitome of upper-class gentility. The episode where Lady A takes her legitimate twins, Saskia and Imogen, to see a show in which the illegitimate twins Dora and Nora perform, which she does out of pity for her husband's mistreatment of the girls, highlights the chasm between the two worlds: the little Lucky Chances execute their exhausting dance routines before the eyes of their seated, privileged counterparts. This is a class gaze that is filled with indifference in the case of Imogen, and with hatred in the case of the more formidable twin, Saskia, which stems from the girls' rivalry over the father. The antagonism, as the novel implies, is not only about the obtainment of the father's love, but also about the class benefits accorded to one through his act of acknowledgement, which later becomes obvious from the adult Saskia's and Imogen's greed and mercenary behaviour. Unbeknownst to the London society, as well as to Melchior and Peregrine, who all celebrate Saskia's and Imogen's illusory purity and deceitfully angelic looks in the phrase "darling buds of May", these legitimate twins are the paragons of evil, as well as the daughters of the wrong Hazard brother. By contrast, the scorned and unrecognized Brixton twins, Dora and Nora, emerge as the models of loyalty and honour, even taking up the care of Lady A, previously robbed and crippled by her own duplicitous daughters. Dora and Nora remain, however, bastards in the eyes of the society, and they simultaneously stand for the bastardized form of art – while their father treads the respectable path of classical Shakespearean theatre previously set by his own (disputable) father Ranulph, the girls start making their precarious living from an early age performing laborious dance routines in the "low" theatre varieties of the day, music halls and vaudeville, ending their careers in disreputable nude shows. Tiffany, the Chance sisters' grandchild and the emblem of the multiracial Brixton of the nineties is similarly misjudged by the society – her provocative dress and quickness to pose naked overshadow her moral integrity and naivety. On the other hand, Sir Melchior's son by his third wife and Britain's beloved TV host, Tristram, seduces Tiffany and impregnates the young girl before abandoning her, in a long line of the legitimate Hazard children lacking in moral fibre. The topic of counterfeit portrayals of lower-class women written by patriarchy appears

also in Dora's recounting of a relationship with an Irish author Ross O'Flaherty who has a "philanthropic passion for the education of chorus girls" and to whom Dora is indebted for the eloquence of her memoirs. Embittered by Dora's ending of their relationship, we learn that Irish eventually portrays Dora as a deceitful and opportunistic harlot in his *Hollywood Elegie*s that go on to become a hit, thus ossifying a false image of Dora for eternity.

Dora also notes the "delusions of grandeur" (*WS* 16) that went into the naming of all the sets of legitimate Hazard twins – Saskia, Imogen, Melchior, Peregrine, Tristram and Graham – names with an unmistakable air of pretentiousness and upper-class aspirations. Yet, in the course of her account that ends with the grand revelations at Sir Melchior's 100th birthday party, the patriarchal fiction in which these class aspiration are rooted will be revealed: Melchior and Peregrine seem to be the offspring of their mother's affair with an American actor, and not the sons of her husband Ranulph Hazard; Saskia and Imogen are not Melchior's daughters, but the product of Lady A's one-time liaison with his brother Peregrine, while the "the jury is still out" (*WS* 228) on the paternity of Melchior's sons by the third Mrs Hazard, Tristram and Graham. There is also a conspicuous contrast, for example, between the awe and respect that Ranulph Hazard inspires on stage performing Macbeth, allegedly causing "Queen Victoria [to grip] the curtains of the royal box until her knuckles whitened" (*WS* 14) and his brutish private personality. Dora informs us that before marrying her grandmother Estella, Ranulph had "fretted and philandered and beaten and betrayed three wives into early graves" (*WS* 15). Dora thus tears down the masks of decorum of the respectable Hazard clan, foregrounding the confusion of high art with high morals, as well as the transposition of theatrical illusion into real life, and vice versa. The eventual degeneration, or perhaps a continuum, of elite culture into mass culture is portrayed in the novel first by Melchior's desperate attempt to cut a figure in Hollywood. Years later, Dora, Nora and Lady A have the pleasure of witnessing the third Mrs. Hazard's career in commercials as Lady Margarine, where Shakespeare is reduced to the question of "to butter or not to butter?", while the entire Hazard clan eventually becomes employed in the production of a base television show called *Lashings of Lolly*. Dora and Nora have spent their entire lives seeking acceptance into the paternal bosom of Melchior Hazard, only to conclude at the novel's end, once they have finally arrived there, that the man has far less substance than they imagined:

"D'you know, I sometimes wonder if we haven't been making him up all along,' she said. 'If he isn't just a collection of our

hopes and dreams and wishful thinking in the afternoons. Something to set our lives by, like the old clock in the hall, which is real enough, in itself, but which we've got to wind up to make it go." (*WS* 230)

One of the main vehicles of Carter's deconstruction of class constructs based in paternity is the figure of Shakespeare, who storms in and out of the plot, often by means of allusions and intertext, such as the sisters' address in Brixton, 49 Bard Road. In *Wise Children* the great English Bard is reclaimed by the underdogs. He belongs equally to all classes, and is reincarnated on some pages as a Hollywood parody, on others as a low comedy sketch, and yet on others as high theatrical art, thus posing both as the symbol of the waning patriarchal authority in culture *and* as the unifying element of the British cultural life through ages. The novel establishes a cultural continuity from Shakespeare to interwar music halls to the mass media of the 1990s, the final stage symbolized by the vulgar TV show *Lashings of Lolly*. Both suspicious and respectful of Shakespeare's place in the British society, just as she is ambivalent about fathers, Carter pays tribute to him by interweaving what seems to be his entire oeuvre into the underlying matrix of *Wise Children*'s riotous plot. Toward the novel's carnivalesque denouement, however, *Wise Children* uphold the continuity of the British culture, but on new, hard-won terms – the dethronement of its patriarchal idols in whose place Carter crowns the self-fashioned, illegitimate heiresses, Dora and Nora Chance.

Conclusion

Until the advent of cultural studies, popular culture has been left out of academic inquiry, just like the Chance sisters have been excluded from the Hazard clan. In its commitment to exposing the fabrications of official histories and patriarchal metanarratives that have the power to proclaim the bastardy of both children and certain forms of cultural expression, *Wise Children* fits neatly into those postmodern works of fiction for which Linda Hutcheon observes "speculate openly about historical displacement and its ideological consequences, about the way one writes about the past 'real', about what constitute 'the known facts' of any given event" (94). Dora's repudiation of the official family history reveals the gaps in the false totality of the categories of class and culture that stem from the patriarchal order, or to be more precise, from patrilineal genealogy. Stuart Hall wrote that popular culture, represented in the novel through Dora and Nora Chance, "can never be simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still used to habitually map it out: high and low; resistance versus

incorporation; authentic versus inauthentic, experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization" (qtd. in Proctor 13). Analogously, *Wise Children* does not entirely transform the class hierarchy nor cultural paradigms by means of a simple inversion, but in exposing the gaps in the presumed organic unity of these constructs manages to unsettle the boundaries between "high" and "low", thus opening up the fissures in patriarchal power with which these notions are coextensive.

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КУЛТУРА, КЛАСА И ЛАЖНИ РОДОСЛОВ У РОМАНУ *МУДРА ДЕЦА* АНЂЕЛЕ КАРТЕР

Сажетак

Тумачење кроз призму културолошких студија и културног материјализма осветљава левичарске идеале Анђеле Картер у њеном последњем роману, „Мудра деца". Роман тематизује породичне лажи у кући Хазард не би ли пољуљао укорењене представе о очинству, култури и класној инфраструктури у Великој Британији двадесетог века, изражавајући притом снажну постмодерну свест о плуралитету истине и њеној злоупотреби од стране културно-хегемонских група. Нараторка романа, Дора Чанс, са друштвене маргине приповеда своју историју искључења из клана Хазард, чувене британске позоришне породице, као и о последичној дискриминацији у британској културној сфери. Њена прича открива низ лажних очинстава у родослову Хазардових који подривају основе британског класног поретка и омеђеност популарне и високе културе који у великој мери почивају на патрилинеарности.

Кључне речи: *Анђела Картер, културолошке студије, лаж, патрилинеарност*

Рајко Р. Каришић, Фотографија из
циклуса *Венчићи*, 2012.