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“What a joy it is to dance and sing!”

Camp Sensibility as Antidote to Bardolatry in Angela Carter’s Subversive *Wise Children*

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# Table of Contents

Introduction 1

‘A Dissident Taste’ 6

Angela Carter, Connoisseur of Camp? 9

Reframing Shakespeare 11

Bardolators in Cardboard Crowns 17

The Pleasures of Being ‘Too Much’ and the ‘Theatricalization of Experience’ 26

Conclusion 33

Works Cited 36
Introduction

Angela Carter’s oeuvre reveals her preoccupation with perhaps the most famous figure in the Western literary canon, namely William Shakespeare. Her final novel, *Wise Children*, published just a year before her untimely death in 1992, may be Carter’s most overt and thorough engagement with the Bard. The novel takes the form of a boisterous memoir, spanning decades as Dora Chance reflects on the family history and unconventional upbringing of her and her twin sister Nora. The novel begins with the following question and answer: “Q. Why is London like Budapest? A. Because it is two cities divided by a river” (1). Dora goes on to describe the North/South divide of London as also having served to separate the classes, claiming that the now retired showgirls have always resided on “the bastard side of Old Father Thames” (1), also known as South London. However, Dora notes that there has been a “diaspora of the affluent” (1) in more recent years, and that the class lines that have historically divided North from South have been dissipating. It is a similar breakdown that Carter engages with in the novel as she blurs the lines between high and low culture. While the Chance twins have performed in ‘illegitimate’ or low culture art forms such as vaudeville and pantomime, their biological father, Melchior Hazard, is an acclaimed Shakespearean actor, thus performing within what is typically viewed as a high culture art form. However, the Chance twins are also illegitimate in the sense that they were born out of wedlock with Melchior refusing to acknowledge them as his own biological daughters. Throughout the novel, Dora describes the twins’ longing for their famous father’s acceptance and the prestige that can accompany ‘legitimate’ art. Still, in her old age,
she finally realises the beauty of ‘illegitimate’ found families and art which celebrates the simple joys of singing and dancing.

In “Notes from the Front Line”, Carter establishes her belief in the power of language, stating that language is “the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation” (43). Thus, she recognised both the oppressive and emancipatory power of language. Carter aligned herself with writers within the emancipatory tradition of using “fictional forms inherited from the colonial period to create a critique of that period’s consequences” (“Notes from the Front Line” 42). This is illustrated by Carter’s prolific use of intertextuality throughout her writing which frequently referenced and rewrote classical texts. For instance, her collection of short stories, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, consists of feminist reworkings of fairy tales and folklore. Carter essentially twists these fairy tales to fit her own modern views of femininity, sexuality, and horror, thereby critiquing her chosen inherited forms from within. Moreover, she famously warped a biblical parable when stating that: “Most intellectual development depends on new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the new wine makes the old bottles explode” (“Notes from the Front Line” 37). As this suggests, Carter’s use of intertextuality goes beyond mere imitation, or pastiche. She aimed not to replicate the old texts and their ideas but rather aimed to explode them, that is, reveal new ways in which they can be read or rewritten to create something entirely new. *Wise Children* is no different, and Carter’s intertextual engagement, primarily with Shakespeare, is often done with specific parodic purpose.

Linda Hutcheon finds parody to be a central feature of postmodernism. She defines parody as a form of “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference
rather than similarity” (6). Therefore, while both parody and intertextuality are dependent on previous texts, the ‘difference’ marked by ‘critical distance’ of parody makes it distinctive. In the revised introduction to Hutcheon’s A Theory of Parody, she draws attention to the aesthetic sensibility called camp. She writes that: “In the queer rethinking of a newly politicised version of Susan Sontag’s idea of camp, parody took on the kind of edge that was also evident in how indigenous artists in the Americas have ‘written back’ to Empire” (xiii). In this manner, Hutcheon aptly identifies a shift that has occurred in how camp had been perceived since Susan Sontag declared camp to be ‘apolitical’ in her 1964 seminal essay “Notes on ‘Camp.’” While Sontag’s essay primarily focused on the aestheticism of camp, other scholars, as Hutcheon remarks, have offered revisions of Sontag’s essay, arguing for a political and critical camp. On the topic of contemporary camp, Katrin Horn states the following:

…camp—at its most basic level—is the inversion of taste in favor of the neglected, the other, the marginalized. From this playful shift in aesthetic judgments camp derives its broader potential ‘as a way of making cultural, social and sexual critique under guise of harmless humour’ (5).

This is idea of camp entailing a ‘shift in aesthetic judgement’ is also reflected in the following statement by Sontag in “Notes on ‘Camp’”:

The whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious’. One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious. (26)
This is illustrated in the novel as Carter parodies those who place Shakespeare on a pedestal while celebrating what can be gained from playing with Shakespeare's works through ‘camping’, that is embodying the spirit of ‘too much’ and ‘life as theatre’. It is with this dualistic view of camp as both an aesthetic sensibility and as a means of social and cultural critique that this thesis will operate.

As Carter has become a canonised author in her own right, her works have received a great deal of scholarly attention. *Wise Children* is no exception and as such the novel has been analysed from a series of theoretical perspectives, none perhaps as pervasive as postmodern and poststructuralist concepts such as intertextuality. On the topic of intertextuality, Julie Sanders writes that Carter’s engagement with Shakespeare is “a gesture of liberation as opposed to eschewal; it is an act of reanimation rather than rejection” (“Bubblegum and Revolution” 121). This is a point of view that is reinforced by Sarah Davison’s article on the novel, in which she states that Carter’s parody “affirms even as it criticises, enabling her to remonstrate with the patriarchal values that Shakespeare’s plays encode, while simultaneously restoring him to what Sage calls his ‘pre-canonical self’” (204). In her article “The Stars That Spring from Bastardising”, Anne Hegerfeldt similarly argues that Carter deconstructs the binary oppositions of high and low culture in the novel, thus promoting a “non-hierarchal, pluralistic society” (351). Therefore, previous research has established Carter’s relationship to Shakespeare in *Wise Children* as being quite paradoxical—which is a key aspect of postmodern parody—, and scholars have argued, although in different nuances, how Carter manages to achieve this levelling of high and low culture in the novel.
Moreover, several of Carter’s works have been discussed in relation to camp. This ranges from *Shadow Dance*, *Several Perceptions*, and *Passions of the New Eve* (Gamble). However, mentions of camp have only ever been peripheral in relation to *Wise Children*. Sanders briefly addresses the topic in “Bubblegum and Revolution”, noting that Carter’s metaphorical placement of Shakespeare within quotation marks (‘Shakespeare’) illustrates that Carter embodies the postmodern aspect of camp which sees everything in quotation marks: “It’s not a lamp, but a ‘lamp’; not a woman, but a ‘woman’” (Sontag 9). Additionally, Kate Chedgzoy tangentially discusses camp in relation to gender performance in her chapter on the novel in *Shakespeare’s Queer Children*, although this reference to camp takes place within her chosen analytical framework of psychoanalysis. It is therefore the aim of this thesis to fill this gap in research on camp in Carter’s final novel. This will be accomplished by expanding the existing scholarly attention on *Wise Children* by discussing these aspects of camp more in depth. It will also explore aspects of camp in the novel that have previously gone entirely undiscussed, such as an emphasis on surface, style, and artifice.

This thesis will argue that Carter employs a camp sensibility throughout *Wise Children* in order to deliver a social and cultural critique. This is a novel about illegitimacy in several senses as it features both illegitimate children and illegitimate art forms. Throughout this thesis it will be argued that Carter’s references and allusions to the Bard essentially amount to her reframing of Shakespeare as she celebrates the versatility of his works and explores what can be gained by revisiting his works and rewriting them in an exploratory and playful manner rather than faithfully adapting them. The term *bardolators* will be used when referring to the
Shakespeare idolisers in the novel which Carter frequently parodies and pokes fun at. Bardolator is a portmanteau coined by George Bernard Shaw in disdain of writers such as Thomas Carlyle who hailed Shakespeare as “an English King, whom no time or chance, Parliament or combination of Parliaments, can dethrone!” (qtd. in Smith 20). Finally, it will be argued that Carter engages with camp as an aesthetic sensibility in order to shift aesthetic judgements from favouring the purely ‘serious’ and instead choosing to celebrate the ‘frivolous’. Thus, she affords some legitimacy, and expresses some love, for illegitimate, untraditional family structures, and the lower, popular arts which emphasise the joys that can be found by singing and dancing.

‘A Dissident Taste’

The introduction grazed camp, however, such an elusive and contentious concept necessitates a more thorough account. Sontag is usually discussed as a central figure in discourse surrounding camp due to the massive impact of “Notes on ‘Camp’” on the topic. The essay sought to loosely define camp by providing fifty-eight ‘jottings’ on how camp may be recognised. Before the publication of the essay, camp was primarily “a code word in the gay subcultures of New York and London” (Schreiber 79) without major recognition beyond these closed circles. In a sense, Sontag’s essay sought to legitimise camp, as is indicated by her making camp a proper noun throughout the essay (writing ‘Camp’ rather than ‘camp’) which Daniel Schreiber claims to imbue the concept with the status of other styles such as Dadaism and Renaissance. However, Sontag’s essay is not without its detractors and several scholars have responded to certain claims made by Sontag in “Notes on ‘Camp.’”
Specifically, while Schreiber states that Sontag was inspired to write about camp because of how “her gay friends … had adopted the camp attitude and turned it into a mark of distinction” (79), Sontag denied that camp was an inherently homosexual taste although she did acknowledge “a peculiar affinity” (30) for camp within the queer community. This statement, alongside her claim that “the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical” (5) have been criticized by scholars who felt that these statements undercut the subversive and political aspects of camp, especially in relation to queerness.

In fairness, Sontag’s essay can also be stated to engage with the subversive potential of camp; however, this was primarily limited to the aesthetics of the sensibility. As Schreiber notes in his biography on Sontag, the year “Notes on ‘Camp’” was published, 1964, was a time when radical movements fought their battles “in the arenas of politics, the press, art, theater” (71). It was a time of rebellion, and Sontag’s rebellion with her essay was its resistance to “traditional aesthetic categories” (Schreiber 81) within the arts. Sontag’s idea of camp was as “a notion of dissident taste, a sensibility that acknowledges high culture while undermining it at the same time” (Schreiber 79). Ann Pellegrini has attempted to reconcile the aesthetics of camp that Sontag argues for in her essay—emphasising mass culture, stylization, exaggeration, and a love for the out-of-date—with what she claims to be the political potential of camp. Pellegrini suggests a middle ground approach where camp can be seen as having moral seriousness—which she dubs ‘camp sincerity’—while still exhibiting the aesthetics of camp. Therefore, Pellegrini acknowledges camp as an aesthetic sensibility while also acknowledging that camp can have a political edge. Similarly, Horn cites Pamela Robertson who coined the
term *feminist camp*, claiming that “women can ‘reclaim camp as a political tool and rearticulate it within the theoretical framework of feminist,’ since ‘camp offers a model for critiques of gender and sex roles’” (24). It is therefore worthwhile to dwell on the topic of camp in order to realise its full potential as social critique beyond camp as potential cultural critique as established by Sontag.

Daniel Harris rebuffs Sontag’s claim that camp is not an inherently queer sensibility. In his 1996 article in which he predicted the death of camp, he states that as homosexuality becomes more mainstream accepted in society, camp will no longer be necessary. While a camp sensibility may have been used to signal a queer identity—with even the word itself previously having been gatekept by, or at the very least predominantly used by, the queer community—he suggested that the need for this ‘language’ of camp would cease. This can be compared to how Andrew Ross summarises the need for camp within the queer community during the 1960s, claiming that camp was a “commentary on feats of *survival* in a world dominated by the taste, interests, and definitions by others” (144). Perhaps this is why camp has not perished as Harris foretold. By creating this ‘dissident taste’, an inversion of taste was occurring, but as Moe Meyer and Hutcheon suggest, camp can also be connected to postmodern parody in that it is usually dependent on previous texts to deliver its critique. As Meyer states, parodic camp “becomes the process whereby the marginalized and disenfranchised advance their interests by entering alternative signifying codes into discourse by attaching them to existing structures of signification” (258). Without this parody, Meyer claims, the marginalised would have no access to representation. Horn ostensibly agrees with Meyer’s reclaiming of ‘camp-as-critique’ as she writes that: “At its core, camp is defined as a parodic
device that uses irony, exaggeration, theatricality, incongruity, and humor to question the pretext’s status as ‘original’ or ‘natural’” (6). Therefore, camp can be identified as distinct from ‘plain’ parody in how this particular kind of parodic camp is achieved.

These different perspectives on camp have to be reconciled for the sake of this thesis. This will not be achieved by wholeheartedly accepting any single scholar’s definition of the concept but rather by taking a more holistic approach to the sensibility, acknowledging the variety of ways in which camp can be, and has been, employed and discussed. It was mentioned in the introduction that this thesis takes the stance that camp can be seen as both an aesthetic sensibility and as a means of social and cultural critique. As such, the aim of this section was to explore the history of camp while also illustrating the critical potential of camp as a means of subversion in matters of taste, and as a mode of achieving representation by building on existing works and through postmodern parody.

Angela Carter, Connoisseur of Camp?

The impact of camp on Carter’s works should also be afforded a more in-depth examination. In Lorna Sage’s discussion of camp and Carter, she emphasises its presence in Carter’s early novels. She writes that the people in these early works “dress up (or down) to play themselves; they parade their characters as ‘acts’” (9). She exemplifies this in Carter’s first novel, Shadow Dance, which she states embodies a ‘camp tone’ from the very first line, which reads: “The bar was a mock-up, a forgery, a fake: an ad-man’s crazy dream of a Spanish patio” (10). Additionally, Sage stresses the following about Carter’s works: “If there was nearly
nothing ‘natural’ about her style, this was because her kind of family background introduced you early on to the notion that the culture was a dressing- up box” (8). This can be connected to Sontag’s statement that camp “sees everything in quotation marks” and that to “perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (9). Sage also references an interview with Carter, in which she asked how Carter felt that her middle-class environment helped shape her, to which Carter replied that she speculated endlessly about it, asking: “How is it possible such camp little flowers as ourselves emanated from Balham via Wath-upon-Dearne” (8). Therefore, it is evident that Carter identified with camp to some extent, viewing herself as having emerged with a perhaps uncommon sensibility considering the environment she grew up in.

Another aspect of camp that Sage identifies in Carter’s works is Sontag’s claim that camp taste is defined by a love of the out-of-date, the démodé. Sontag explains that: “It’s not a love of the old as such. It’s simply that the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment” (20). Sage claims that Carter’s fiction exhibits this same relationship to the past’s debris. “This is not a matter of nostalgia, but connects with a quite different contemporary sensation: of coming at the end, mopping up, having the freedom of anomie” (Sage 9). Anomie refers to Durkheim’s concept of moving away from norms or values in a set society (Sanders A Dictionary of Gangs). Carter touches on this love of the old and her detachment from it in “Notes from the Front Line”:

I feel free to loot and rummage in an official past, specifically a literary past, but I like painting and sculptures and the movies and folklore and heresies, too. This past, for me, has important decorative, ornamental functions:
further, it is a vast repository of outmoded lies, where you can check out what lies used to be à la mode and find the old lies on which new lies have been based. (41)

She not only views the past as ornamental, drawing attention to her detachment, but also as a repository of ‘outmoded lies’. Therefore, she views the past in both aesthetic terms and in critical ones. As this thesis will illustrate, *Wise Children* engages with the past in similar ways. Carter rummages in an ‘official’ literary past throughout the novel in order to reject some of these ‘old lies’ that she finds within them. However, she also interacts with an ‘unofficial’ past. That is, with the ephemera of low culture theatre which has often been discarded as soon as the shows were over, and she places these performances in the same space that Shakespeare inhabits. Sontag wrote that: “The connoisseur of Camp has found more ingenious pleasures. Not in Latin poetry and rare wines and velvet jackets, but in the coarsest, commonest pleasures, in the arts of the masses” (27). While Carter’s oeuvre reveals her fascination with both the high and the low arts, *Wise Children* is all about celebrating the arts of the masses, and she firmly places Shakespeare in this popular category. *Wise Children* thereby illustrates that Carter is a true connoisseur of camp.

**Reframing Shakespeare**

Christopher Isherwood wrote that camp is the expression of “what’s basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance” (qtd. in Ross 146). While Shakespeare becomes a representative of high culture and ‘the serious’ in *Wise Children*, Carter’s appropriation of Shakespeare throughout the novel seeks to turn him into something quite different. In “Bubblegum and Revolution”, Sanders argues
that imitation, homage, parody, burlesque, and pastiche are inadequate terms to describe Carter’s responses to Shakespeare throughout her oeuvre. This is evident in the term that Sanders employs in her chapter on the novel, namely, ‘hybridity’ which she claims can only begin to gesture at the numerous ways in which [Carter] alludes to, cites, critiques, revises, and appropriates Shakespeare, and in which she is in turn influenced, haunted, possessed, and obsessed by his texts and their seemingly unstoppable afterlife (130 emphasis added).

Sanders highlights an important aspect of Carter’s relationship with Shakespeare in that Carter not only frequently appropriates Shakespeare but that she is also deeply influenced by him. Sanders also states that it is exactly this hybrid approach to ‘Shakespeare’, deliberately within quotation marks, that signals “the element of camp in her allusions” (110). Because, as has been previously mentioned, Carter engages with both Shakespeare’s works and with Shakespeare as a symbol of status and high culture. Carter’s perspective on the versatility of Shakespeare and his works is evident in the following quotation from an interview with Sage:

The extraordinary thing about English literature is that actually our greatest writer is the intellectual equivalent of bubblegum, but can make 12-year-old girls cry, can foment revolutions in Africa, can be translated into Japanese and leave not a dry eye in the house (Carter in Sage 187).

Carter thus removes Shakespeare from the pedestal he is often placed on by emphasising the versatility and popularity of his works. Rather than simply hailing him as “an English king” (Carlyle qtd. in Smith), Carter’s comment on Shakespeare is double-edged as she calls him both England’s “greatest writer” and “the
intertwined intellectual equivalent of bubblegum.” From Carter’s perspective, Shakespeare can be both things at once, and this is evident in Wise Children. While Shakespeare is a serious figure to Carter in the sense that, as Sanders writes, she is haunted by his texts and their afterlives, she chooses to express her fondness for him in a camp manner that emphasises fun, and thus she avoids an overtly reverential approach to her appropriation. As such, her appropriation of his works throughout the novel can be viewed as her reframing the Bard as she can be stated to engage with Shakespeare in a manner which seeks to reclaim him as a popular figure as opposed to a gatekept high culture status symbol.

The choice to centre the literary references and appropriations around Shakespeare can be identified as meaningful beyond Carter’s apparent preoccupation with the Bard. Notably, Shakespeare is one of the central figures of not only the Western literary canon but of Western culture at large. Sanders compares Shakespeare’s oeuvre to the “communal, shared, transactional, transcultural and frequently transnational art forms of myths and fairytale” (Adaptation and Appropriation 58). Thereby, he is comparable to the kind of folklore and fairy tales that Carter previously appropriated in The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories. When writing about how parodic camp allows the marginalised to be represented, Meyer addresses Anthony Giddens’ concepts of power and domination through signification. Meyer writes that “value production is the prerogative of the dominant order, dominant precisely because it controls signification and which is represented by the privilege of nominating its own codes as the ‘original’” (257). In the context of the novel, Shakespeare’s texts are the ‘originals’ as his works have been firmly placed at the centre of the Western literary canon. In manipulateing
Shakespeare’s works in the manner that she does, Carter emphasises the versatility of Shakespeare as she sees him, as well as what may be gained from rewriting and reframing his works with a critical edge.

One of the ways in which Carter reframes Shakespeare in *Wise Children* is by questioning the representation of female characters in his plays. Carter’s previous novels and short stories have also touched on issues surrounding feminism and gender, and these matters are addressed in *Wise Children* as well. Taking the stance that Shakespeare’s works are Carter’s ‘originals’ that control signification throughout the novel, using Shakespeare affords Carter the space and agency to rewrite his works in manner that calls attention to previous slights against marginalised groups, specifically women. This can also be noted as an aspect of what Robertson calls feminist camp, in that “camp offers a model for critiques of gender and sex roles” (in Horn 6). For instance, Dora poses the following question to the reader: “Speaking of which, has it ever occurred to you to spare a passing thought as to the character of the deceased Mrs Lear?” (224). Additionally, there is the character Tiffany in the novel who becomes a vessel for Carter’s social critique. Tiffany is the twins’ goddaughter who has unfortunately fallen into a relationship with their nephew Tristram Hazard. Tristram, who has been having an incestuous affair with one of his sisters (actually half-sister, as it is later revealed), impregnates Tiffany but refuses to marry her. This leads to Tiffany making a live appearance on Tristram’s game show where she is singing and carrying flowers, a reference to Ophelia’s famed scene in *Hamlet* where she has gone mad following poor treatment from the eponymous prince. Only Carter’s Ophelia, Tiffany, strips herself bare on stage:
It was a shock to see her breasts under the cruel lights – long heavy breasts, with dark nipples, real breasts, not like the one she’d shown off like borrowed finery to the glamour lenses. This was flesh, you could see that it would bleed, you could see how it fed babies. (46)

Tiffany becomes viscerally real in these descriptions. There is nothing romantic about this version of Ophelia, and yet, as Sanders notes this is a “new Ophelia, one who escapes self-destruction and a watery grave to a new life” (174). While Tiffany is presumed dead after the body of a young girl is discovered in the river following her game show appearance, she is miraculously revealed to be alive at the end of the novel. Moreover, despite Tristram begging her to take him back, and saying that he will in fact marry her, she rejects his proposal. *Wise Children* celebrates found families and families born out of love rather than blood, and this is exactly what Tiffany chooses. As this ending suggests, her life was not ended due to a man, nor will the rest of her and her child’s life be defined by one. This revised ending for Carter’s Ophelia is ultimately a kinder one which stresses female resilience and independence.

Another way in which Carter can be seen to engage with critiques related to gender and gender roles is through gender performance, which Cynthia Morrill identifies as a key aspect of the postmodernity of camp. She writes that “Camp has become recognized as an example par excellence of a postmodern denaturalization of gender categories” (110). However, Carter’s engagement with denaturalising gender categories can be identified as not only referencing traditions within camp but within Shakespeare’s oeuvre as well. As Douglas Lanier discusses in *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, the norm of the early modern English
stage was to have men cross-dressing to play the female roles. The novel twists this to be the other way around, thus possibly side-stepping what used to be a form of gender oppression in Shakespeare’s time, by having Dora and Nora’s paternal grandmother, Estella, cross-dress as a man in order to perform in the eponymous role of Hamlet. However, Estella’s agency is limited, and her ‘masquerade’ can only go so far. As Dora notes, Estella was eventually forced out from the part when she got pregnant with Melchior and Peregrine as “a female Hamlet is one thing but a pregnant prince is quite another” (16). Another aspect of cross-dressing in Shakespeare’s plays that Lanier mentions is that several of the heroines of Shakespeare’s comedies would “masquerade as men to gain temporary access to power” (125). Arguably, the power Estella gains is getting to perform one of the most prestigious roles within Western theatre—Hamlet. However, Estella’s gender performance is ultimately limited by her irrefutable physical display of femininity in pregnancy. This is ultimately a failure shared by her granddaughters who reflect on their own gender performances as women, rather than cross-dressing, in their old age. As they prepare to attend Melchior’s birthday party, Nora misquotes Oscar Wilde when claiming that it is every woman’s tragedy that “‘after a certain age, she looks like a female impersonator’” (192). While the twins go all out on their outfits for the affair, the result leaves something to be desired:

It took an age but we did it; we painted the faces that we always used to have on to the faces we have not. From a distance of thirty feet with the light behind us, we looked, at first glance, like the girl who danced with the Prince of Wales when nightingales sang in Berkeley Square on a foggy day in London Town. The deceptions of memory. (192)
The twins end up looking like quite the spectacle, not dressing at all ‘appropriately’ for their ages, which is a ripe seventy-five at the time, but instead embracing their maternal heritage of what essentially amounts to drag. Additionally, this mention of Wilde is notable as Sontag dedicated “Notes on ‘Camp’” to the writer, with witticisms from Wilde recurring throughout the notes.

Sontag stated that the camp sensibility can be ‘frivolous about the serious,’ which is exactly what Carter achieves with her playful revisions of Shakespeare’s works throughout the novel. Her utilisation of the Bard and his works is frequent and multifaceted. Carter uses the Bard as a symbol of status and high culture through which other marginalised groups may be given voices and visibility. She appropriates his works in order to engage with critiques of gender in a manner that coincides with Hutcheon’s definition of postmodern parody, namely “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity” (6). In a sense, she is repeating the story of Ophelia, but her repetition is marked by difference, as is her reversal of on-stage cross-dressing. Throughout the novel, the most interesting aspects of camp in relation to Shakespeare is not how Carter is faithful to his works, but rather how she diverges from them in order to deliver her social critiques.

**Bardolators in Cardboard Crowns**

This section is dedicated to the subject of Carter’s harshest parody in the novel, namely its bardolators. Meyer states that: “By inverting the process of appropriation, Camp can be read as a critique of ideology through a parody that is always already appropriated” (258). In *Wise Children*, Carter illustrates how Shakespeare has been appropriated as a symbol for high culture whereas she sees him as a popular figure
who wrote plays for a wide audience. This section will explore the bardolators that are being parodied but also their ‘camp’ counterparts who exhibit a different relationship to ‘the serious’, thus inhabiting a camp sensibility as opposed to bardolatry. As Sontag writes, “one cheats oneself, as a human being, if one has respect only for the style of high culture, whatever else one may do or feel on the sly” (23). Throughout the novel, Carter mocks those who hold Shakespeare in extreme esteem and essentially use him as a form of literal and figurative currency. Then again, Carter shows a great deal of affection for Shakespeare and the theatre; however, she also pays respect to ‘lower’ styles of culture. She both respects and disrespects Shakespeare enough to appropriate his works. It is exactly the versatility of Carter’s Shakespeare—who can break the hearts of preteen girls and incite revolutions—that she wants to promote; not the Shakespeare being gatekept from popular culture through the pretence of protecting ‘high art’.

Throughout the novel, bardolatry and general pretentiousness are firmly attached to the Hazard side of the family. This pretension has its origin in the Chance’s paternal grandfather, namely Melchior and Peregrine’s father—Ranulph Hazard. Like Melchior after him, Ranulph was a Shakespearean actor. Concerning Ranulph, it is stated that: “Shakespeare was a kind of god for him. It was as good as idolatry. He thought the whole of human life was there” (14). In other words, Ranulph is described as holding Shakespeare in extreme esteem, believing that all of human life could be found in his works. Ranulph has a counterpart, however, in his aforementioned wife Estella, who was also a Shakespearean actor. The pair met while doing a production of King Lear. Ranulph was playing the eponymous Lear and Estella was playing Cordelia. Whereas Ranulph is presented as someone who
takes himself very seriously, a bardolator to the core, Estella is described in quite different terms. For instance, she is described as often breaking out into giggles in the middle of serious scenes, Dora claiming that their grandmother was both “a marvel” and “a mess” (12) and this account is offered with no shortage of affection. On the topic of Estella’s acting career, Dora guides the reader through their collection of photographs and newspaper clippings: “Here she is in drag as, famously, Hamlet. Black tights. Tremendous legs. Wasted on a classical actress. We’ve got the legs from her. She’s emoting with the dagger: ‘To be or not to be…”’ (12). Thereby, Estella is connected to another aspect of camp, namely the previously mentioned concept of gender performance through cross-dressing. While Ranulph’s career is described in more typical terms, with his reverence for Shakespeare in the foreground, Estella is rather marked by this playful approach to Shakespeare and acting. She may be participating in ‘high culture’ theatre, but she is not engaging with ‘the serious’ with the veneration of Ranulph.

The marriage between Estella and Ranulph is not an entirely stable affair. Ranulph, being the Shakespeare zealot that he is, becomes convinced that he needs to ‘spread the gospel’ of the Bard overseas, dragging his family along for the ride. Dora notes that:

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 overseas. Willy-nilly, off must go his wife and children, too, to take Shakespeare where Shakespeare had never been before. (17)
This contributes to the heightened nature in which Shakespeare exists in the novel not only as a writer but as a symbol and as a means of contributing to the Imperial project of spreading English culture, and thereby values, overseas. This mission is not especially successful, however, due in part to Ranulph’s drinking and gambling. This further illustrates the hypocritical artifice of Ranulph’s endeavour. While he believes that he is aiding overseas cultures through his self-imposed spreading of ‘the Word’, he himself is engaging in less than desirable behaviour. Any moral high ground is thereby forfeited.

Finally, the family troupe ends up back in America where: “One night, in a bar at Tucson, Arizona, [Ranulph] gambled away his crown from Lear and Estella put together a new one for him out of a bit of cardboard. She dabbed on some gold paint” (20). This cardboard crown becomes a symbol throughout the novel for the false and misguided appropriation of Shakespeare. It is not the crown from Ranulph’s crowning achievement of a production, but rather a cheap imitation. The gold paint illustrates both the pretensions of class while also highlighting the artificial and performative element of the bardolators in the novel whose engagement with Shakespeare reaches beyond mere appreciation for his works. In fact, it is precisely Ranulph’s obsession with Shakespeare that ultimately leads to his demise as Dora notes that he finally “couldn’t tell the difference between Shakespeare and living” (21). When Ranulph is offered the chance to put on a Broadway play by an old colleague of theirs, Cassius Booth, Ranulph chooses Othello. Just like the actual play, the production ends in tragedy. Dora recounts how Ranulph went on to murder Estella, Cassius, and finally himself after the performance on opening night: “All the same, her husband killed them both, first
her, then him” (21). Thus, Ranulph’s obsession with Shakespeare became so extreme that it ended in a jealousy-fuelled tragedy. The necessary distance between life and fiction was ultimately lost to Ranulph who raised Shakespeare’s works to the status of gospel. This can be contrasted with the depiction of Estella who showed great affection by staying with Ranulph despite his struggles throughout their travels. Ultimately this was not enough for Ranulph, and it did not suffice for him to end only his own life—it had to be all consuming, which, again, illustrates his self-importance channelled through Shakespeare.

The difference between Estella and Ranulph’s sensibilities can also be found in their twin sons—Melchior and Peregrine. While Peregrine is identified as being “his mother’s boy” (18), Melchior is described as having favoured his father’s company. This mirroring between the twins and their parents is evident in their respective characterisations. As Dora remarks: “Even as little scraps, Melchior was for art and Peregrine was out for fun” (21). While Peregrine becomes a kind of magical and mythologised paternal figure for the twins, Melchior’s legacy in their lives leaves a lot to be desired. He is a relentlessly self-absorbed Shakespearean actor, having followed in Ranulph’s footsteps in respect to the Bard rather than Estella’s. As he had for Ranulph, Shakespeare morphs into something beyond himself in Melchior’s eyes, that is, he has become a symbol. For Melchior, however, his engagement with the Bard has less to do with any kind of perceived mission but rather with his attempt to restore his family name to a certain level of status which seemingly only a firm connection to Shakespeare can provide.

Following the pregnancy of Dora and Nora’s mother, Melchior achieves great success as a Shakespearean actor and this becomes part of his ‘brand’, a brand
which his illegitimate daughters do not fit into as he instead favours his ‘legitimate’
daughters, Saskia and Imogen. Another pair of twins. Nonetheless, Dora and Nora
manage to receive invitations to a party at the Hazard manor where the cardboard
crown makes a reappearance during a tryst between Dora and Nora’s unsuspecting
boyfriend. Under a glass case on the mantelpiece of the master bedroom they found,
“instantly recognisable by my father’s fetish, the cardboard crown once worn by Old
Ranulph as Lear” (99). The pair get on with their lovemaking, but it is abruptly
ended by the eruption of a fire and Dora instantly fears for the safety of her beloved
twin sister. As Dora finds Melchior on the lawn, she laments losing her sister,
fearing the worst for her, when Melchior replies that he has just lost his crown.
“From the way he said it, I knew the loss of a natural daughter weighed less heavy
on his heart than the loss of the old Hazard heirloom I’d just seen in his bedroom”
(104). Melchior begins a heartfelt and absurd lament considering the stakes that
Dora had just mentioned, he says: “That cardboard crown, with the gold paint
peeling off. Do you know, can you guess, my dear, how much it meant to me? More
than wealth, or fame, or women, or children…” (105). Here, Carter mocks the value
that Melchior would place on a decaying object, over another living being—his
daughter, at that. Just like Ranulph, Melchior’s obsession with the non-living
outweighs his actual living relations. Thus, while Ranulph and Melchior are
connected to status and high culture throughout the novel, the picture painted of
them is not at all a flattering one. Rather it is Dora and Peregrine—two of the figures
linked to camp—who have more human responses to the situation.

In the end, the crown is saved from the flames, as is Nora, by Peregrine who
emerges from the burning building completely unmarked by fire. While Dora frets
over her sister, Melchior has no such inclination and is fixated on the crown in his brother’s hands. This leads to a game of ‘keep away’ rife with references to Shakespeare’s works:

‘Give me that crown!’ [Melchior] rasped, having suddenly transformed himself into Richard III. ‘Give me the crown, you bastard!’

Peregrine threw his brother a marvelling look; then he laughed out loud.

‘Now, God, stand up for bastards!’ he crowed (107).

Peregrine is described as growing larger in this scene while Melchior, usually tall, becomes a child, jumping for the crown that Peregrine is keeping out of reach. A crown, which Dora describes as “shabby as a prop in nursery charades” (107). When Peregrine finally tosses the crown to Melchior, having lost interest in the game, Dora recounts that: “It was a toy, he was playing a game, Melchior was a fool to take the game so seriously, a fool to clasp the thing as if it were alive, and kiss it. A fool” (108). The symbol of the cardboard crown is important as it represents the paternal legacy of both Ranulph and Shakespeare. The crown from Lear being remade in cardboard can be viewed as symbolising the appropriation of Shakespeare into a ‘cardboard’ version of what he actually was by bardolators such as Melchior and Ranulph. Carter allies herself with camp sensibility through characters such as Peregrine and Estella, who exhibit a playful attitude toward Shakespeare and life in general. Melchior may have achieved critical and financial success throughout his career as an actor, but this scene reveals that this respectability is just a façade hiding something much more sinister, and pathetic, underneath.

The scene ends with the announcement of a Hollywood production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that Melchior will direct while the script will be written
by Peregrine “with additional dialogue by William Shakespeare!” (108). This is Carter’s version of the Shakespearean *play-within-a-play* which becomes a *film-within-a-novel* in *Wise Children*. Sanders calls the film an “example of the adaptation and shameless commodification of Shakespeare by the modern era” (“Bubblegum and Revolution” 115). However, she does not engage with why the film fails to succeed from a camp point-of-view. Namely, the production of *Midsummer* in the novel is hailed as a ‘masterpiece of kitsch,’ which causes the twins to cringe when viewing it at the cinema in their old age. As schlock, kitsch, and camp can at times be confused and conflated, it would be appropriate to consider how Ross separates the concepts. He writes the following:

> While schlock is truly unpretentious—nice, harmless things—and is designed primarily to fill a space in people’s lives and environments, kitsch has serious pretensions to artistic taste, and, in fact, contains a range of references to high or legitimate culture which it apes in order to flatter its owner-consumer. The producer or consumer of kitsch is likely to be unaware of the extent to which his or her intentions or pretensions are reified and alienated in the kitsch object itself (145-146).

Considering this definition of kitsch, it becomes apparent that this is exactly what Melchior and Genghis Khan, the producer of the film, end up creating. This is a film with ‘serious pretensions to artistic taste’ in abundance. Moreover, the film misses the mark of what Ross defines as camp in contrast to kitsch. He writes that camp “involves a celebration, on the part of cognoscenti, of the alienation, distance, and incongruity reflected in the process by which hitherto unexpected value can be located in some obscure or exorbitant object” (146). Therefore, the film can be seen
as being a failure not necessarily because of its medium, but because of the misguided pretensions of its filmmakers. What further complicates Carter’s depiction of *Midsummer* in the novel is her self-proclaimed adoration of the play. In a 1991 interview, she stated the following: “I like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* almost beyond reason, because it’s beautiful and funny and camp – and glamorous, and cynical” (Sage 56). This is far removed from how Carter depicts the adaptation of the play in *Wise Children*. Instead, as Sanders notes, Dora appears to “espouse regret for the demise of Shakespeare and the theatre” (“Bubblegum and Revolution” 115) throughout the novel. However, this can also be seen as what Carter is attempting to revive with her novel—a camp engagement with the Bard which finds worth in playing with—that is rewriting and reimagining—his works in order to allow new interpretations of them, rather than ‘aping’ them. Moreover, Hegerfeldt highlights the inherent commercialism present in the production. This adds to the hypocrisy of the ‘high art’ pretensions of its filmmakers. Their motivations for wanting to adapt Shakespeare’s works are not driven by a true affection for his works but rather financial and critical success, of which they ultimately achieve neither.

There is a saying in comedy that one should always ‘punch up’ rather than down, meaning that humorous critique should always be aimed at the privileged or entitled (Schwartz). This ‘punching up’ can be identified in the novel as Carter chooses to target bardolatry and high culture fanaticism in the novel. Rather, Carter allies with characters who inhabit a more playful relationship to ‘the serious’ which is mirrored in Carter’s own approach to appropriating Shakespeare throughout the novel.
The Pleasures of ‘Too Much’ and the ‘Theatricalization of Experience’

While contemporary definitions of camp have emphasised its critical potential, Sontag’s definition of the concept primarily relied on it being an aesthetic sensibility. She wrote that: “Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style — but a particular kind of style. It is a love of the exaggerated, the ‘off’, of things-being-what-they-are-not” (8). Of course, this style that Sontag discusses can have a subversive potential. As Meyer notes: “Camp in its expression of social and aesthetic offensiveness can, with a prepared audience, attain a certain transcendence, providing a significant comment on art and society through a combination of parody and sincerity” (169). Moreover, the choice of aestheticism implies Carter’s allying with popular forms of entertainment rather than with what Sontag called ‘the serious’. A consistent definition of camp aesthetic is an emphasis on surface over content. Davison cites an interview with Carter in which she claimed that: “From The Magic Toyshop onwards I have tried to keep an entertaining surface to the novels, so that you don’t have to read them as a system of signification if you don’t want to” (199). This illustrates Carter’s awareness of the surfaces of her novels being separate from their actual meaningful content. This section will explore aspects of camp that relate to the aesthetic style of the sensibility. It will explore some of the aesthetic choices Carter made in terms of depicting a world filled with exaggeration, artifice, and theatricality. It will also illustrate how these choices can be identified as subversive due to Carter’s consistent expression of ‘social and aesthetic offensiveness’ in the novel.

Performance is an important aspect of Wise Children. While the novel is generally preoccupied with the theatre, this idea of performance runs deeper than
the stage and is often present throughout the characters’ everyday lives. Sontag claimed that camp taste responds to ‘instant character’, that is “a person being one, very intense thing” (21). She stated that this attitude towards character is “a key element of the theatricalization of experience embodied in the Camp sensibility” (21) which favours instant character over character development and nuance. What Sontag is referring to here as ‘theatricalization of experience’ is that these depictions cannot come close to actually representing the complexities of human nature, but instead offer this instant and incandescent version of actual human experience. Sontag references opera performances in this instance as an example of where this type of instant character can often be found. Typically, novels can offer more insight into their characters than their stage counterparts due to nature of the medium allowing for deeper insights into the characters minds beyond dialogue and acting. However, while penned as a first-person novel, Carter emphasises performance throughout *Wise Children*, illustrating how several of the characters constantly perform even while off-stage. She does this in a few different ways, one of them being the aforementioned references to gender performance, but she also achieves it through the framing of the novel and through character descriptions. For instance, Chedgzoy notes ‘a certain campness in the novel’ in that life is always already “a performance, a self-creating artefact” (76-77). She identifies this performance in the twins, but also in their father Melchior who is positively obsessed with his public image. This is illustrated by the way his palatial residence is described by Dora:

He couldn’t help it, but that manor house always retained a look of here today, gone tomorrow; he was a player to his marrow so he lived in a
permanent stage set. He wanted a house that looked as if each leather armchair in the library had been there at least half a century (95).

This can be identified as an example of Sontag’s ‘things-being-what-they-are-not’ as his interior decoration skills only go so far in imitating what an actual lived-in space should resemble. The theatricality of Melchior thus bleeds into other aspects of his life where the very world becomes a stage. Chedgzoy uses the example of his centennial birthday also being filmed for posterity thus becoming more of a performance than an actual party. Unlike his illegitimate twin daughters, his performances are commonly used to highlight the deceitfulness of his ‘legitimate’ status which is contrasted with Dora and Nora’s illegitimacy. While Dora exhibits a level of self-awareness, especially in her old age, Melchior is often depicted as living a wilfully ignorant life. For instance, Dora suggests that Melchior himself may be the illegitimate son of Cassius Booth, and it is established towards the end of the novel that Melchior’s darling twin daughters—Saskia and Imogen—are actually Peregrine’s daughters. Therefore, his ‘performance’ of legitimacy, and rejection of Dora and Nora due to their supposed illegitimate status, highlights his own hypocrisy.

Moreover, the very novel itself can be seen as a kind of performance by Dora. Rather than writing the novel in a more traditional form, Carter chose to write it as a fictional memoir, thus playing with a famously fickle genre. Horn explains “camp’s connection to metareferentiality”, that is “how texts draft awareness to their mediated status, foregrounding their own constructedness and thus the discursive, rather than the ‘natural’ quality of their represented contents” (5). By presenting the novel as a memoir, Carter draws attention to the mediated status of the text while
also highlighting its subjectivity. On the topic of memoirs and memoirists, Thomas Larson writes the following: “It cannot be the record of the past as the autobiography tries to be. Memoir is a record, a chamber-sized scoring of one part of the past” (5).

This view of the memoir cements it as a subjective and narrow form of storytelling which adds another layer of performance to the novel. Rather than giving the reader any form of objectivity, Carter chooses to emphasise subjectivity and thus the variety of possible other perspectives on any given situation being relayed by Dora.

Joyce Carol Oates notes this subjectivity and possible constructed nature of the narrative as a whole in her review of the novel. She writes that “Dora is an engagingly unreliable narrator, wholly unpretentious and modest in her claims, however confusing, and purposefully so, the story she recounts.” There is an interesting doubling happening here. Because while the genre of memoir, like autobiography, is rooted in relaying actual events, the very memoir itself is a kind of performance that Dora puts on for the reader. As Dora claims: “Romantic illegitimacy, always a seller. It ought to copper-bottom the sales of my memoirs” (11). Roger Apfelbaum remarks that this solidifies that the “value of claiming legitimacy” by invoking Shakespeare “is questioned by Dora viewing her illegitimacy as a positive quality that will help sell her memoirs.” She thus makes her illegitimate status work in her favour. However, it also serves to add another layer of uncertainty related to how truthful she is being in her account. At times, such as when Dora and Nora are going through their collection of Estella’s memorabilia, Carter emphasises the physicality of these objects. These are not merely stories that Dora is telling but also archival artefacts. However, Dora herself calls attention to her own fallacies at certain points, such as when claiming that: “At
my age, memory becomes exquisitely selective. Yes; I remember, with a hallucinatory sensitivity, sense impressions” (195). There is thus an interesting tension between references to physical objects and the more abstract references to the malleability of memory. As such, Carter engages with both the surface of artefacts in the novel, and with the mediated status of texts, including her own.

Moreover, the fourth chapter of the novel begins with a quote from Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, namely: “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery” (163). This is an example of an omnipresent metareferentiality throughout the novel which alerts the reader to view the content of the novel with a touch of scepticism of what may be omitted by Dora. It also clues the reader in on what Carter is attempting to accomplish with *Wise Children* in terms of its morals. At one point of the novel, Dora laments that tragedy will forever be ‘more class than comedy’, yet Carter rejects that proposition by consistently choosing to engage with comedy rather than tragedy throughout the novel. If tragedy denotes class, then Carter will have no part in it, at least not in this particular novel. As Sontag noted, “Camp and tragedy are antitheses” (25) with camp favouring irony over tragedy. In turn, Carter favours the characters who engage with a camp sensibility in the novel, and it is therefore unsurprising that she chooses to end *Wise Children*, not with tragedy, but with comedy.

The finale of the novel is rife with references to Shakespearean plays and theatrical tropes. The novel takes place over a single day but spans decades as Dora explores her and Nora’s family history over the course of the birthday they share with their estranged father and the Bard himself. Sontag claims that
When something is just bad (rather than Camp), it’s often because it is too mediocre in its ambition. The artist hasn’t attempted to do anything really outlandish. (‘It’s too much,’ ‘It’s too fantastic,’ ‘It’s not to be believed,’ are standard phrases of Camp enthusiasm.) (16)

*Wise Children* is anything but mediocre in ambition, and this is beautifully and bizarrely illustrated in the crescendo of the novel. Dora, Nora, and Melchior’s first wife who resides with the twins, dubbed ‘Wheelchair’ by the Chances, arrive at Melchior’s hundredth birthday party where most of the characters that have been introduced throughout the novel are finally brought together. For instance, there is the return of Peregrine, who arrives late at the party in a rather dramatic fashion. As Dora reflects when a knock is heard on the door just as the cake is about to be cut: “A thrill ran through the room. Something unscripted is about to happen” (206). The doors fly open, wind rushes into the room, and Peregrine is revealed, having risen from the ‘dead’, his laughter entering the room before he does, in true Peregrine fashion. He speaks the following lines, referencing *The Tempest*: “‘Thunder and lightning!’ sang our Peregrine. ‘Did yez think I was dead?’” (206). However, Peregrine is not the only person coming back from the beyond. Indeed, he has brought the twins’ darling goddaughter Tiffany with him. After Tiffany rebuffs Tristram’s futile attempts at reconciliation, it is revealed that Saskia—one half of Melchior’s supposedly legitimate twin daughters—has attempted to poison Melchior with the birthday cake. This is also when Saskia and Imogen’s true parentage is revealed as Peregrine finally claims them as his daughters. As Dora puts it when this causes laughter to erupt from some of the other guests: “Comedy is tragedy that happens to other people” (213). However, while Saskia and Imogen
get their comeuppance, Dora and Nora are finally acknowledged by Melchior as his biological daughters. Again, this illustrates the hypocrisy of Melchior’s claims to legitimacy through favouring his supposedly legitimate daughters. It also highlights the duplicity of Saskia and Imogen and destroys the false sense of superiority their legitimate status has afforded them over the Chance twins.

It does not end there, however. Instead, Dora and Peregrine slip upstairs for a little familial tryst between niece and uncle, Dora hinting that this may not be the first time the two have been intimate. Their encounter ends up causing quite a stir as “the agitations of the steel bed began to make the chandelier downstairs directly beneath it shiver” (220). However, there are still more revelations to be had. Peregrine has also brought with him the new-born twins of Melchior’s son Gareth, a minister. It is the perfect gift for Nora who has always wanted children. Meanwhile, Dora refuses to reveal who the mother of the children was as this information does “not belong to the world of comedy” (227). Moreover, Dora reflects on the joyous moments of late motherhood that Nora achieves, claiming that “these glorious pauses do, sometimes, occur in the discordant but complementary narratives of our lives and if you choose to stop the story there, at such a pause, and refuse to take it any further, then you can call it a happy ending” (227).

While Dora and Nora claimed that they had been “doomed to sing and dance” (193) due to their poor upbringing in South London, the novel ends with celebrating this fact rather than lamenting it. As the novel ends in the spirit of a Shakespearean comedy, it is only fitting that it also concludes with the Chance twins celebrating their popular heritage rather than mourning it: “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!” (232). Singing, dancing, and kicking their legs may not have awarded them any accolades, but there is a joy in it, nonetheless. It is a joy separate from status and legitimacy. Camp can be a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation of things that are seen as out-of-date or simply ‘frivolous’ and finds value in them. Thus, camp finds value in objects and art beyond legitimate and high culture, as does Carter in Wise Children.

Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to illustrate how Carter engages with camp throughout her final novel Wise Children. While some previous scholarly attention has been dedicated to examining aspects of camp in Carter’s early works, the topic has only ever been tangential in discourse surrounding Wise Children. Therefore, this thesis sought to more thoroughly account for the ways in which Carter can be seen to engage with camp, viewing camp as both a form of cultural and social critique, and as an aesthetic sensibility.

From its very title, which references The Merchant of Venice, and temporal setting, Shakespeare’s birthday, Carter is overtly engaging with and appropriating Shakespeare. As such, Carter is writing within a large tradition of Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation. However, rather than focusing on fidelity, Carter works within her own tradition of ‘exploding’ previous works in seeking to reveal something new within them. That is, revising them and reframing them to make the reader view them differently. In this process of reframing the Bard, Carter highlights aspects of gender performance that existed in Shakespeare’s own works and time, while twisting it in the novel to reveal the limitations of this kind of gender
performance while also acknowledging the possibilities it may afford women. In
doing this, she is engaging with camp as a form of social critique. This is also
accomplished through her parody of bardolatry throughout the novel where she
mocks figures such as Melchior and Ranulph who hold Shakespeare in an
exaggerated esteem. Meanwhile, she favours characters such as Peregrine and
Estella whose relationships to the Bard are more playful and less all-consuming and
pretentious.

The novel is presented as being wholly subjective, performative, and
persistently choosing comedy over tragedy. Carter’s final novel celebrates the baser
pleasures, employing a camp sensibility when intertextually referencing and
revising Shakespeare rather than engaging with him with any sense of ownership or
overt reverence. Instead, Carter celebrates his works as she best saw fit, by reframing
them and realizing their greater potential beyond being gatekept as purely ‘serious’.
Sontag wrote that if camp was cynical then it was a ‘sweet cynicism’. Wise Children
is not bitter. There is a lot of affection throughout the novel for ‘lower’ art forms
and unconventional or ‘illegitimate’ forms of family that operate outside of tradition
and convention. It is a celebration of theatre and theatricality which seeks not to
scorn Shakespeare but to expand how his works can be interpreted and played. It is
a novel that emphasises the joys of playing with inherited art forms and using them
to create a new relationship not only to Shakespeare and ‘the serious’, but also to
low culture art forms or ‘the frivolous’, as Sontag called it. Carter invites the reader
to re-examine Shakespeare’s works in a way that invites them to consider their
potential versatility rather than their fixity. ‘Shakespeare’, ‘gender’, and indeed
‘life’ itself are all placed within quotation marks in Carter’s subversive and irreverently camp *Wise Children*.
Works Cited


