"Bringing Things to Life by Talking to Them": The Creative Power of Story in *Howl's Moving Castle*

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On the dedication page of *Howl's Moving Castle*, Diana Wynne Jones writes, "The idea for this book was suggested by a boy in a school I was visiting, who asked me to write a book called *The Moving Castle*. I wrote down his name, and put it in such a safe place, that I have been unable to find it ever since. I would like to thank him very much."

Everything moves in *Howl's Moving Castle*. The castle, of course, moves, and even when it stays relatively fixed, the latch on the door moves, so that it can open upon Porthaven, Kingsbury, or Wales. Spells abound, so that Sophie changes from young girl to old woman, and back again; Lettie becomes Martha, Martha becomes Lettie, both become Lettie. Howl changes his name, his form, his wardrobe, and his hair color, once with disastrous results of the sort not seen since Anne Shirley tried a similar experiment, and he changes his mind about any woman he is pursuing as soon as she decides to begin pursuing him.

Suzanne Rahn calls this insistent mobility that characterizes Jones's fantasies "postmodern": "Rules change without warning; basic assumptions turn upside-down; the world itself may be unstable, shifting between total alternate versions of reality, or tilting toward total chaos" (147). She concludes, "Jones writes for today's children who face a future no one can foresee," providing a "vaccine against future shock" (147).

I would like to offer a different reading of the perpetual motion of this particular moving castle. To read *Howl* is to be confronted with an abundance of creative energy that overflows any boundaries set for it, that first draws the lines and then colors outside of them, so that the story itself becomes a metaphor for the creative process, for the power of the storyteller to tell a mountain, or a castle, to remove hence to yonder place and be obeyed. In her account of her own creative process, Diana Wynne Jones uses the image of perpetually moving parts in a way that seems to mirror the motion of Howl's castle.

"Often I have the makings of a book sitting in my head maturing for eight or more years, and when I am considering that collection of notions, I am aware of exercising a great deal of conscious control, trying the parts of it round in different ways, attempting to crunch another whole set of notions in with it to see if that makes it work, and so on. . . moving the pieces of idea around until they reach a configuration from which I, personally, can learn" ("Profession" 3). She writes, "The excitement generated by magic is incalculable and should never be underestimated. It is of the same order as creativity" ("Profession" 9).

Sophie's magical gift, she discovers as the story unfolds, is the gift of bringing life to things, by talking to them. This is exactly what the writer does, through the power of the language of story. Just as Sophie talks life into her walking stick, and into the hats in her shop—not only making them be, but telling them how to be ("You have mysterious allure," "You are going to have to marry money," "You have a heart of gold, and someone in a high position will see it and fall in love with you (10)), so does Jones talk life into Sophie, and Howl, and Calcifer, and the Witch of the Waste. Deborah Kaplan observes that, "In the books of Diana Wynne Jones, characters who are able to write or tell stories have immense power over their own lives and the lives of others" (53). Kaplan calls this "the world-shaping power of language" (53).

This power is certainly on display in *Howl's Moving Castle*, and indeed it is the power behind all storytelling and all stories. The author says it, and thereby makes it so. If the author says we are in Kingsbury, we are in Kingsbury; in Porthaven, we are in Porthaven. The inhabitants of the moving castle can merely turn the knob on the door to enter any of the available worlds; the author can merely scribble a few words, type a sentence or two—"Meanwhile, back at the ranch"—to transport her readers, which is not to say that this life-giving power does not have its limits. When Sophie commands a handful of ferns and lilies, "Be daffodils! Be daffodils in June, you beastly things!" (268), the spell does not take: "She went to look at her daffodils. Something had gone horribly wrong with them. They were wet brown things trailing out of a bucket full of the most poisonous-smelling liquid she had ever come across" (275). I think it is safe to say that all authors will ruefully recognize this moment.

Jones calls attention to the world-shaping power of story in several striking ways in *Howl*. First, the characters seem to be aware that they are living within a self-consciously fairy-tale world, bound by the literary conventions of the genre. Jones, when asked why she makes such extensive use of myths and folktales in her writing, explains, "there are times when everyday life echoes or embodies traditional stories. These are more frequent than most people think. Anyone who does not believe this ought to ask themselves how often they have felt like Cinderella" ("Profession" 7). On the very first page of *Howl's Moving Castle*, we learn that in the land of Ingary, "it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortunes" (1). In real life, especially under the laws of primogeniture, it is usually the eldest who is most successful; birth-order studies confirm this to this day.

Thus, in fairy tales, the expectations of real-life have to be unsettled: it has to be the least-likely to succeed who succeeds, that is to say, the youngest. But then, if you are living inside of a fairy-tale world, where the least-likely succeed, the very notion of least likeliness becomes displaced. In a world where the first become last, and the last become first, the first, having become last, will then once again become first, in a dizzying defiance of the literary convention's defiance of actual expectations. At the end, Howl proposes to Sophie, "I think we ought to live happily ever after" (328), thereby both acknowledging their debt to fairy tales but also their independence of them, for to say, "I think we ought to do x," is to acknowledge the

genuine possibility of not doing x. Sophie knows that "living happily ever after with Howl would be a good deal more eventful than any story made it sound" (328) or just as eventful as this counter-story has made it sound.

Next, there is the telling scene of Howl's visit to the real-world, modern-day land of Wales, where his nephews are seen busy playing their video games. Sophie overhears one boy reading aloud from the screen: "You are in an enchanted castle with four doors. Each opens on a different dimension. In Dimension One the castle is moving constantly, and may arrive at a hazard at any time" (161-62). Maria Nikolajeva attributes Jones with being "among the first fantasy authors ever to use the computer game metaphor" here in *Howl* (39f3). She interprets this passage to imply that "Howl is a computer-game character, the projected Self of this young boy, while the magical country of Ingary, where the novel. . . takes place, is merely cyberspace, a painted landscape on the computer screen" (39f3).

As a mother who is heartily sick of her sons' obsession with video games, I can't bear this deflationary reading of *Howl* as just one more video game! But the computer game analogy calls attention to the deliberately constructed nature of Howl's story, to Howl's story *as* story. Moreover, because, in a video game, the choices of the players influence what scenario unfolds, this reinforces the idea, which I touched on above, that an author is in a collaborative rather than strictly dictatorial relationship with her characters. Sometimes you just cannot tell lilies to be daffodils. Howl suggests at one point that Sophie is complicit in her own enchantment: when he is unable to break the Witch of the Waste's spell on Sophie, he comes to the conclusion that she "liked being in disguise" (283). Jones comments that her own characters "often surprise me by acting autonomously out of inward impulses I have not learnt" ("Profession" 8) or that she can discover, along with her characters, as she writes.

The Witch of the Waste's curse on Howl takes the form of an actual poem from the literary canon, John Donne's famous poem:

Go and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me where all past years are,
Or who cleft the Devil's foot.
Teach me to hear the mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy's stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind. (134)

Sophie and Michael's failed initial attempts to interpret the poem as the spell Michael needs to perform owe a great deal to parallel amateur attempts at literary interpretation: "What are past years anyway? Does it mean one of those dry roots must bear fruit? . . . Could the wind

be some sort of pulley?" (136-37). Jones has a good bit of fun here with the device of poems being given to Howl's nephews as a homework assignment ("Decide what this is about/Write a second verse yourself" (134)), and so viewed by the boys as a curse in that respect as well. When, during his visit to Wales, Howl shows the boys the assignment sheet, which has gone missing, and asks them what it is, Neil says, "'It's a poem,' in the way most people would say, 'It's a dead rat'" (160). Literature made into homework assignments becomes dead; but it has living power when recognized for what it is, a text with the power, for better or worse, to change persons' lives. (One might here compare Jones's explanation of why she doesn't plan out a book before she starts it: "No, that kills it dead" ("Profession" 2).)

As Sophie tries her hand at dispensing spells to some of Howl's customers, Calcifer, the obliging fire demon, gives her directions: "Yellow powder, fourth jar along on the second shelf... Those spells are mostly belief. Don't look uncertain when you give it to him" (144). So is the spell of story mostly a matter of the reader's willing suspension of disbelief. In fact, belief can be the whole of a successful spell, as when Sophie hands a frightened dueler a generous heap of cayenne pepper, which so far as she knows has no magical properties whatsoever. Although she confesses to feeling like a fraud, she also says, "But I would like to be there at that fight!" (146). The dueler does indeed live to see another day, or another chapter, of his and Howl's story. We, believing in the real existence of Sophie and Howl and the inept dueler, continue to read on.

Calcifer, who wields the underlying magical power that moves Howl's castle, can also be read through this lens of story. Calcifer is bound to Howl by a contract, wherein Howl secures Calcifer's lifelong exercise of his magical powers, in exchange for Howl's giving up to Calcifer his own heart. Many a writer would view herself as having made a similar desperate bargain with the muses, giving her heart in exchange for the power to create. (And many a writer's contract with his publisher may seem like an extortionate bargain with a demon!) And what of the bare and barren Waste, where the only growing things are "occasional dismal gray bushes"? That sounds a lot like the writer's blank page, or blank computer screen, to me.

Finally, *Howl's Moving Castle*, in its extended meditation on the role and power of story, invites the question of what counts as truth in a fictional world. Jones considers the question of whether the writers and readers of fantasy may have problems telling fantasy apart from reality ("Profession" 9), which provokes the question: what *is* real? what *is* true? Within the book, as the witch's curse comes to turn on the crucial lines "And find/what wind/serves to advance an honest mind," the question of what would count as honesty, and thus truth, for Howl becomes prioritized. Sophie, in her first groping notes on the curse, scribbles, "Do not think Howl's mind honest" (136). When the honest mind becomes the last remaining condition for the curse to be fulfilled, Sophie thinks, "If that meant *Howl's* mind had to be honest . . . there was a chance that the curse might never come true" (261). This last condition for the curse appears to fall into place when during the book's climactic scene, Howl yells, "I'm a coward. Only way I can do something this frightening is to tell myself I'm *not* doing it," Sophie thinks, "Oh, dear! . . . he's being honest! And this is a wind. The last bit of the curse has come true!" (318-19).

Certainly Howl has been artificial, or false, throughout the book with his disguises, aliases, endless lies, and hours spent perfuming himself and dying his hair. But even at the end of the book, he refuses to repudiate such artifice: "I've never seen why people put such value on things being natural," he says, "and Sophie knew then that he was scarcely changed at all" (327). To repudiate all artifice would be repudiate the art of fiction altogether. And despite his many lies, the one thing Howl *doesn't* seem to lie about is his cowardice. He almost cheerfully accepts Sophie's description of him as a "slitherer-outer": "Well, now, we both know each other's faults" (75). He is quite open about his mission of sending Sophie to "blacken his name" to the king so he can slither out of being sent on a dangerous mission to the Waste to rescue Wizard Suliman. What Howl *has* tried to hide is his kindness; he has tried to create a reputation as a Bluebeard-like monster who sucks the souls out of young girls. It is a surprise to Sophie when she comes to the recognition that Howl has been kind to her: "Do listen. He's not wicked at all! He isn't!" (293). He has tried to hide his growing affection for Sophie, keeping up his endless stream of insults focused on her unattractive long-nosed appearance. The honesty of his mind is not shown, in my view, so much in his eleventh-hour confession of his cowardice, but in his risking life and limb, despite his contracted-for heartlessness, to rescue Sophie.

What is true in a fictional world, then, is what is true in our world: that love matters, and can move castles, and change lives. Jones, in her musings on fantasy, celebrates the creation of fantasy stories for allowing readers to stretch the bounds of their imaginations and then bring their imaginations to bear on their own lives: "A book for children . . . is really a blueprint for dealing with life" ("Profession" 11), and we might add, for dealing with real life with grace, with generosity, with courage, with kindness.

In *Howl's Moving Castle*, Diana Wynne Jones talks Sophie Hatter and Wizard Howl into life through a spell that gets the reader to believe in them and so to believe in castles that can move, and curses that can be broken, and love that can conquer all. If she ever does manage to find the name of the child who by chance inspired the story, we can join with her in giving him our heartfelt thanks.

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