

Howl's Moving Castle: Romance Subverted

In *Howl's Moving Castle*, Diana Wynne Jones carefully subverts the idea of the traditional romantic heroine by deconstructing the dominant tropes of the genre¹. *HMC* is not generally described as a romance novel, but as a fairy tale-fantasy novel, part of a series written for young adult readers. It has short chapters and a limited reading age, like many romantic novels (Parrish, 611), and as Linda Lee has convincingly argued, romances can be viewed as “Reworked Fairy Tales” (52). Both genres are “highly formulaic; invoke a fantasy realm; focus on the creation or reconciliation of a romantic pair; exist in an infinite variation of texts [...] and are often dismissed as being ‘trivial’” (Lee, 52).² Much of Diana Wynne Jones’ *oeuvre* might be defined as reworked fairy tale, with her comedic tone and parodies of common tropes. Moreover, if one follows Pamela Regis’ basic definition that a romance novel is “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of a courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines” (19), then *HMC* is unquestionably a romance novel, albeit one that continuously seeks to undermine the genre’s typical characteristics. The most important and continuous subversion at work in the novel is the undermining of the image of the traditional romantic heroine.

HMC was first published in 1986, at a time when teen romance fiction was booming following its recognition as category fiction in 1979 (Parrish, 610). Jones’ book tells the story of “developing love” (Kutzer, 91) in a very different way to how her contemporaries tackled the same topic in books addressed to readers “aged ten to fifteen” (Kutzer, 90). In these serialised novels, the heroine was by definition “ordinary, middle-class, suburban girl of about sixteen” (Kuznets, 29) who lives in a world of “realistic detail” (Kutzer, 91). Sophie Hatter is middle-class, but she is not suburban in the American sense, nor is she ordinary. She lives in a fantasy realm characterised by minimalistic description. Perhaps most significantly, Sophie is not a young woman for most of the novel, as she is under a curse that gives her the

¹ Although my focus will be on Jones’ deconstruction of the traditional romantic heroine, David Rudd’s excellent “Castles in the Air” discusses deconstruction in the novel more widely. See

² Linda J. Lee and Maria Nikolajeva have discussed the relationship between fantasy, romance and fairytale at length. See Works Cited.

appearance of a ninety year old woman. Her original appearance is only briefly described; she wears “a demure grey dress” (Jones, 18) and has eyes “red-rimmed with sewing” (19). Jones only gives one description of Sophie as an old woman, with “soft leathery wrinkles [...] skinny, decrepit ankles [...] the gaunt face of an old woman, withered and brownish, surrounded by wispy white hair” (32-33). This sparse use of description serves to heighten its importance. At the novel’s opening, Sophie describes her hair as “a reddish straw colour” (19), however, by its end her perspective has changed, and she calls her hair “red-gold” (299). The hero does not motivate Sophie’s realisation of her beauty, as he does in other teenage romance fiction: Howl teasingly asks whether she would call her hair ginger (299). Sophie does not require the love of a man to validate her appeal as a woman; she gains self-confidence through her own actions. As David Rudd argues, “It is precisely because Sophie is prematurely aged that she is freed from the patriarchal plot that enslaves most young females” (258) in both teen and adult romance fiction. Sophie’s aged appearance allows her to act in ways that would be unacceptable for the younger heroines of teen romance fiction. It is because of her will that Howl is unable to restore the heroine to a conventionally attractive state. She subconsciously maintains the curse – “I had several goes at taking it off when you weren’t looking. But nothing seems to work. [...] I came to the conclusion that you liked being in disguise” (261).

Sophie is a heroine with a high degree of agency and a will of iron, which is only allowed to grow stronger, unlike many romantic heroines’. Initially, Sophie is “characterized by filial obedience and adherence to traditional romantic conduct” (Christian-Smith, 365) – exemplified by her acceptance of “how little chance she had of an interesting future” (Jones, 10), as well as her duty to look after her younger sisters (10). She is totally resigned to her inheritance of the hat shop once Fanny retires (14, 27). Antonia Levi proposes that “Sophie is wasting her life by refusing to challenge the norms of the fairy-tale society in which she lives” (261), a thought reiterated by Debbie Gascoyne, who argues that “Sophie Hatter puts herself at a disadvantage because she too readily accepts [...] fairy-tale tradition” (212). Jones shows her readers that cowing to the dominant ideology may not be useful or beneficial. Once she is cursed, Sophie’s perspective on the world

changes. She is no longer obligated to act as the eldest of three ought, and refuses to play the damsel-in-distress. Jones is able to tell a very different story to the traditional fairy-tale romance, precisely because her book is situated on the boundary between fairytale-fantasy and romance fiction. Sophie becomes an “overactive old thing” (75) and “terrible old biddy” (68), occupying herself physically from the moment she sets out from Market Chipping. This intense physicality contravenes the passivity and captivity that tend to characterise romantic heroines.

The height of Sophie’s physical movement occurs in the three episodes where she is wearing the seven-leagued boots. In them, she is able to cover huge distances at great speed, in a “Zip! Blur” (114) heightening the sense of activity. However, during her first outing in the boots, Sophie mismanages herself, and goes further than she intends, “off again with her own momentum [...] right down to the end of that valley in a field somewhere” (114). The incident is highly comedic, with Sophie stumbling on multiple occasions, glimpsing “Michael diving to catch her” (114) and finally “landing in a cowpat” (115), but this does not undermine its physicality. Sophie’s heart is left pounding “in the way hearts do when you have done a lot rather quickly” (115), and she is neither afraid nor deterred from her goal. Her second outing in the boots, to aid Michael with his ‘spell’, is managed much better, and by the time she journeys out to the Waste to save Miss Angorian, she is able to “stride”, and for the first time wears both boots, meaning that the journey is “even more blurred and breathless” than before (282). Sophie carefully manages her steps until she reaches her destination, having finally learned how to control her intense physicality. The fact that Sophie’s physical activity culminates in a journey to save her apparent rival, as opposed to the hero, must also be given some significance. Her journey is motivated by Howl’s apparent love of Miss Angorian – “He’s not going to forgive me for this in a hurry” (281) – but also by a realisation that this is her fault – “I have a genius for doing things wrong! [...] I only needed to talk to her politely, poor thing” (281). More significantly, at no point in the novel is our heroine in need of the

hero's rescue.³ She is able to work independently to right herself, much to Howl's exasperation. This is exemplified when Sophie is captured by the Witch of the Waste, and Howl rushes to save her: "I break my neck to get in here, and I find you peacefully tidying up!" (290).

It should be noted that on all occasions where she makes use of the seven-leagued boots and launches into heightened activity, Sophie is directly contravening Howl's wishes – first knowingly, then unknowingly – making her movement all the more significant. Unlike the captive (Diana Mayo in *The Sheik*) or dependent women (Léonie St Vire in *These Old Shades*, Baptista in *Signpost to Love*) found in other romance novels, Sophie is not bound by Howl or his desires. She seems, indeed, to go out of her way to disobey him – for example, by attempting to clean his room for a second time whilst he is out: "He's locked it [...] He told me to tell you if you tried to snoop again" (83). Howl is not a threatening male presence, in fact, he is portrayed as excessively cowardly and a serial "slitherer-outer" (76). Sophie's gender is negated by her age, and so does not prevent her from pitting her will against him on multiple occasions. Their most direct confrontation occurs when Sophie attempts to tidy the castle's yard, then offers to mend Howl's suit (75-76). Howl curbs Sophie's activity out of necessity: "I won't be able to find the things I need for my transport spells if you tidy them up" (75), and uses domestic magic to mend his sleeve (76) to prove his point – he is just as powerful as Sophie, and is allowing her to co-exist within his limits.

David Rudd proposes an interesting argument surrounding Sophie's cleaning, arguing that Jones deliberately pits "domestic magic which involves traditional female arts" against Howl's more traditional wizardry, and that its power to "evoke fear in all the male members of the household" demonstrates its clear subversion of "the traditional fairy tale stereotype of meek and servile domesticity" (262). While this reasoning is valid, and I agree that Sophie does transform "traditional female arts" into an agency that subverts a picture of meekness and servility, I would argue that Sophie is not using domestic magic when cleaning, because her magic is dependent on speech and will.

³ Both hero and heroine are powerful enough to save themselves, without the help of the other, with the exception of Howl's final confrontation with the Witch's fire demon (Jones, 295)

Moreover, Howl is just as able to employ domestic magic, and Sophie is not speaking when she cleans, only when she sews. Her couturial creations do not create fear in the male, although they do have powerful effects. Instead, I would propose that it is Sophie's excessive movement that prompts Michael to "gloomily [accept her] as a sort of natural disaster" (Jones, 72). She is a "one woman force of chaos" (86), bringing about change through sheer force of will. Her physical effort is evident in the descriptions of her cleaning, and in her subsequent "aches and pains" (262).

Although Sophie is only highly physically active after the Witch of the Waste has cursed her, Jones does give her a great deal of agency even when she is shy and retiring: she is a creator, and her hats shape others' decisions. Sophie unknowingly sews enchantments into them, and later, Howl's suit, and her spells are mere words – "She told pink bonnets that they had dimpled charm and smart hats trimmed with velvet that they were witty" (17). Heroines are too often silent in other romantic novels, occupied with their inner dialogues and thoughts. Sophie, on the other hand, "relishes the freedom to speak her mind given her as an old woman" (Gascoyne, 215), and moreover is given "words of power" (Jones, 301), that have the ability to shape the world around her. This powerful speech is an unusual characteristic, but I would argue that it is used in some conventional ways. Her power first manifests through her sewing, a domestic art. Sophie is also able to use speech to create and maintain life – in her stick (259) and her flowers (238) – fulfilling a rather traditional female role. Nevertheless, this conventionality of action is undercut by Sophie's physicality and personality as discussed above. She is also able to exercise powerful control over animate objects – she orders the scarecrow away (259), something which Howl attempts and fails (109-110).

Sophie's status as an unconventional romantic heroine is underlined by the actions of her sisters. As Antonia Levi states, this is a novel in which "three young women challenge their society's assumptions and expectations and using different stratagems to build lives for themselves" (261). Lettie and Martha also display characteristics of the traditional 'spirited' heroine, but take the personality to extremes. They swap apprenticeships (Jones, 25) so that Lettie is able to become a witch while Martha seeks a husband, contravening their mother's and society's prescribed destinies (26) and once again showing

that this is a novel where the wills of young women are not to be bent. Martha, like Sophie, is constantly in motion, living in a hive of activity. She is also given the power to speak, “looking back under her own elbow with a smile and an answer for each bag she twisted for a suitor” (22). Lettie initially appears to be beguiled by Howl, but it is revealed that she is seducing Howl for her own ends (119). Sophie and her sisters are strong-willed female characters who are able to operate within patriarchy to gain what they desire. They are not dependent on men’s approval to validate them or their desires, and act both independently and in co-operation with men and other women as required. *HMC* puts forward a very female-positive message with strong ideological intentions, enabled by its apparent generic position as a fantasy fairy-tale. It offers young female readers a very different experience of falling in love and growing up to that espoused by teen romance fiction. Nevertheless, Jones is not writing purely for girls. The sequel, *Castle in the Air*, was written from the third-person point of view of Abdullah, and moreover, the title of *Howl’s Moving Castle* prevents the novel from being specifically targeted towards young girls who should follow Sophie Hatter’s journey to love.

2200 words

Works Cited

- Cartland, Barbara. *Signpost to Love*. Barbara Cartland Ebooks Ltd: 2014. Print.
- Christian-Smith, Linda K. "Gender, Popular Culture, and Curriculum: Adolescent Romance Novels as Gender Text". *Curriculum Inquiry* 17.4: 1987. 365-406. JSTOR. 1st Oct 2014.
- Gascoyne, Debbie. "'Why don't you be a tiger?': The Performative, Transformative, and Creative Power of the Word in the Universes of Diana Wynne Jones." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 21.2: 2010. 210-220. LION. 28th Oct 2014.
- Heyer, Georgette. *These Old Shades*. Arrow Books: London, 2004. Print.
- Hull, EM. *The Sheik*. Zingoor Books. Print.
- Jones, Diana Wynne. *Howl's Moving Castle*. HarperCollins: London, 2009. Print.
- Lee, Linda J. "Guilty Pleasures: Reading Romance Novels as Reworked Fairy Tales". *Marvels & Tales* 22.1: 2008. 52-66. JSTOR. 24th Oct 2014.
- Levi, Antonia. "Howl's Moving Castle". *Mechademia* 3: 2008. 261-263. Project MUSE. 31st Oct 2014
- Nikolajeva, Maria. "Fairy Tale and Fantasy: From Archaic to Postmodern" *Marvels and Tales* 17.1: 2003. 138-156. JSTOR. 24th October 2014.
- Parrish, Berta. "Put a Little Romantic Fiction into Your Reading Program". *Journal of Reading* 26.7: 1983. 610-615. JSTOR. 1st Oct 2014.
- Rudd, David. "Building Castles in the Air: (De)Construction in *Howl's Moving Castle*." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 21.2: 2010. 257-270. LION. 29th Oct 2014.