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The Wit and Wisdom in the Novels of Diana Wynne Jones

Elizabeth A. Crowe

Brigham Young University - Provo

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by

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

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Chapter One: Introducing Diana Wynne Jones—a Short Biography

To my mind, Diana Wynne Jones is one of the greatest living fantasists; that the knee of every book lover does not bow at the sound of her name has always puzzled me. [Jones] is a master of the unexpected and never fails to surprise. . . . Her powers of imagination are quite breathtaking, while her ability to create strange, quirky, offbeat, mind-tickling worlds is absolutely astonishing. (Cart 1546)

I remember the first time I read a novel by British author, Diana Wynne Jones. The illustration of a ferocious looking red-eyed demon riding a griffin on the cover of Dark Lord of Derkholm (1998) intrigued me. So I took the book home and in a quiet moment began to read.

“Will you all be quiet!” snapped High Chancellor Querida. She pouched up her eyes and glared around the table.

“I was only trying to say—” a king, an emperor, and several wizards began.

“At once,” said Querida, “or the next person to speak spends the rest of his life as a snake!” (1)

The story that began with so little reverence for kings, emperors, and wizards continued to break the traditional fantasy mold throughout a rollicking and humorous tale of a

minor wizard who reluctantly accepts an assignment to be the Dark Lord of Derkholm. I was immediately drawn into the story, charmed by its unusually realistic characters, and amused by its humor. Dark Lord of Derkholm seemed unlike any other book I had ever read. It was unique, witty, and creative. But the characters proved most attractive; they seemed like real, down-to-earth, unconventional people. Jones even portrays the griffins in the story three-dimensionally. I quickly became a Diana Wynne Jones fan. Since then, I have read most of Jones's forty books and continue to be impressed with her versatility, humor, and invention.¹

Nor is my appreciation unique: so far in her career, which began in 1970 with the publication of the adult novel, Changeover, Jones has received many awards, including three Carnegie Medal Commendations, four Mythopoeic Fantasy awards, a Hugo Award nomination, the British Fantasy Society's Karl Edward Wagner Award, two Guardian Children's Fiction Awards, and two Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor awards.² The phenomenal success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books has prompted the republication of Jones's early work from the 1970s and 80s as well as its translation into foreign languages: Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Spanish; and the number of her fans including fan-based websites and list-serve groups continues to grow internationally.

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Jones admits that the years she spent growing up in Wales and England influenced her writing. Her childhood was a mix of atrocious and humorous experiences that illustrate the old adage, "truth is stranger than fiction." As she says, "naturally a

¹ For a list of Jones's works, see Appendix 1.

² For a list of Jones's awards, see Appendix 2.

childhood like that has to be an influence somewhere. In a way, it lies behind everything I write in that it has to expand your notions of what is credible and make your reader believe that extremely odd things can happen” (“Profession” 9). Fortunately, Jones’s creative mind finds meaning and humor in mundane experiences, even in her sometimes bizarre childhood: “Enough of it was hilariously funny, too, to make me aware that humour is essential when things get wild” (“Profession” 9). Her unusual childhood experiences have in turn contributed to such recurrent themes in her work as alienation, empowerment, and identification, all thoroughly grounded in the fantastic and humorous adventures of her characters.

Jones once noted, “I think I write the kind of books I do because the world suddenly went mad when I was five years old” (“Diana” 155). She was born August 16, 1934, in London. In 1939 at the beginning of Britain’s involvement in WWII, Jones’s father, Aneurin, took her and her three-year-old sister, Isobel, from their home near London and left them in Wales with their paternal grandparents with whom the girls never felt at home: “They were kind to us, but not loving. We were Aneurin’s English daughters and not quite part of their culture” (“Diana” 155). Her grandfather was a strict minister, and Jones describes her grandmother as “a small browbeaten lady who seemed to us to have no character at all” (“Diana” 155). The grandparents would speak English to the children but switch to Welsh when they wanted to talk about something they deemed important. Jones recalls that her grandfather, a famous preacher, had an

almost bardic tendency to speak a kind of blank verse—*hwyl*, it is called, much valued in a preacher but the splendor and the rigor of it nevertheless went into the core of my being. Though I never understood one word, I

grasped the essence of a dour, exacting, and curiously magnificent religion. His voice shot me full of terrors. . . . I still sometimes dream in Welsh, without understanding a word. And in the bottom of my mind there is always a flow of spoken language that is not English, rolling in majestic paragraphs and resounding with splendid polysyllables. I listen to it like music when I write. (“Diana” 156)

Jones’s mother, Marjorie, later joined the girls in Wales, bringing her newborn baby, Ursula, with her. Marjorie was dismayed to find her daughters speaking with Welsh accents and Isobel calling her aunt “Mommy.” Jones felt her mother’s disapproval and realized that her mother saw her “as something other, which she rather disliked” (“Diana”156). To end the Welsh influence, Marjorie moved her daughters to Westmorland in England’s Lake District in 1940. Even so, Jones’s relationship with her mother did not improve, and Jones recalls that her “mother resisted all my attempts to hug her on the grounds that I was too big” (“Diana” 156). Such seeming neglect made Jones conclude that her parents also disliked or at least disapproved of her, and she wished she could have been the son they never had. These feelings intensified her sense of alienation, leading her to interpret life on terms unique to herself.

Jones was an active child, always questioning the curiosities of a world gone mad with war. She recalls an incident when her imagination confused several warnings adults had given her sisters and herself:

We were not allowed to drink water from the washbasin because it came from the lake and contained typhoid germs. The maker’s name on the washbasin was Twyford. For years I thought that was how you spelled

typhoid. I had a terrifying recurring dream of the typhoid Germans—always dressed in cream-coloured Anglo-Saxon tunics—running across the surface of the lake to get me. (“Diana” 157)

In later years this tendency to conflate the meanings of several different ideas found voice in her work; part of her uniqueness stems from her creative ability to see various ways of interpreting disparate incidents, details, and people.

During the war, Jones and her sisters also found themselves victimized by the adults who could have helped care for them. For example, they caught the ire of the children’s writers Arthur Ransome and Beatrix Potter who lived near them. Ransome complained about the noise the children made while playing at a nearby lake, and Jones well remembers when Isobel, then four years old, was walking home with a friend; they hooked their feet on [a gate] and had a restful swing. An old woman with a sack over her shoulders stormed out of the house and hit both of them for swinging on her gate. This was Beatrix Potter. She hated children, too. I remember the two of them running back to us, bawling with shock. Fate, I always think, seemed determined to thrust a very odd view of authorship on me. (“Diana” 158)

When Jones began publishing her work some twenty-five years later, she translated this “odd view of authorship” into singular stories.

Jones was an avid reader, though books were scarce because of her father’s “intense meanness with money” and her mother’s censorship (Jones “Profession” 8). Aneurin severely restricted the number of books bought for his daughters, and Marjorie, who was suspicious of the value of fiction in general and fantasy in particular, limited her

daughters' reading to books of which she approved. "Luckily for us," comments Jones, "the Alice books, Winnie the Pooh, and Puck of Pook's Hill qualified, but nearly everything else did not. In addition, I was allowed Greek myths, Malory's Morte D'Arthur in the original language and a massive book called Epics and Romances of the Middle Ages which my grandmother had won as a Sunday school prize. I also read most of Conrad" ("Profession" 8). Despite such imposed limitations, by the time she was ten she had managed to read Hawthorne's Tanglewood Tales (1853), Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress (1678, 1684), some of Hans Christian Andersen, Tales from the Arabian Nights, and Homer's Odyssey and Iliad (Jones "Heroic" 129). Starved for books as she was, Jones studied the few books she did have access to with more than usual intensity.

What Jones learned from this study, especially from myths and folktales, she later integrated with her sense of what makes a story. She recalls that while reading Malory, her mother informed her "that knights didn't really wear armour in King Arthur's day" ("Inventing"). Jones reconciled the incongruity between what she was reading in Malory and what her mother told her was reality by recognizing Malory's images of knights in armor as "story-time": "My pondering led me to locate that sense that everyone acquires, that there is a 'story-time' which has nothing to do with history. 'Story-time is when things bizarre or adventurous or enchanted can happen, as in the 'Once upon a time' of fairy tales" ("Inventing"). Because of her active imagination, she appreciated the ability of "story-time" to give meaning to real-life experiences.

In time she realized that she could create her own "story-time." She recollects, as an eight-year-old, sitting "up from reading in the middle of one afternoon and [knowing] that I was going to be a writer one day. It was not a decision, or even a revelation. It was

more as if my future self had leaned back from the years ahead and quietly informed me what she was” (“Diana” 159). When she was thirteen and had read all that was available to her, she privately started writing epic-length stories and reading them aloud to Isobel and Ursula at night.

In 1943 the Jones family moved to the rural village of Thaxted in East Anglia where Jones’s parents managed a conference center for young adults. Here, from the time Jones was nine years old, she and her sisters slept by themselves in a two-room shack one hundred yards from their parents’ house. The main house, set up as the conference center, became her parents’ primary concern. Jones based The Time of the Ghost (1981) on this period in her life, though she admits, “what I failed to get over in that book was how close we three sisters were” (“Diana” 165). Their parents left the sisters to their own devices, which resulted in many mishaps. Several times they almost set fire to the building when they accidentally knocked over the propane heater. For six months Ursula kept her hair out of her eyes by tying it into knots and was almost killed when Diana and Isobel hung her from the ceiling with a rope tied beneath her arms because she wanted to pretend to be a fairy. Both Ursula and Diana contracted juvenile rheumatism, Diana suffering heart damage. The girls went to school with chicken pox, scarlet fever, and German measles, and for part of a year Jones suffered from untreated appendicitis. Yet Marjorie continually insisted that all of her daughters’ problems were psychosomatic.

Jones’s difficult existence continued even in school. Although she was an excellent student partly because of her photographic memory, school offered few pleasant experiences for her, further contributing to her by now familiar alienation. She and her

sisters wore school uniforms their mother had sewn, and Jones says that “Other children jeered, because our uniforms were always the wrong style and material. . . . Other clothing my mother got from the local orphanage” (“Diana” 162). In addition to feeling like an outsider because of her strange clothing, Jones says that at the village school she became acquainted with the rigidities of the English class system: “As children of intellectuals, we ranked above village kids and below farmers or anybody rich, but sort of sideways. This meant we were fair game for all. The headmaster had only contempt for us” (“Diana” 163). But despite her continuing alienation, Jones excelled at her studies and exams, and her mother decided that she should go to Oxford, her own alma mater, when the time came for college. Jones recalls that

After that, pressure mounted on me to succeed academically. In my anxiety to oblige, I overworked. I did nothing like as well as expected. I did scrape an interview at my mother’s old college. There a majestic lady don said, “Miss Jones,” shuddering at my plebeian name, “you are the candidate who uses a lot of slang.” She so demoralized me that, when she went on to ask me what I usually read, I looked wildly round her shelves and answered, “Books.” I failed. At the eleventh hour, I applied for and got a place at St. Anne’s college, Oxford, where I went in 1953. (“Diana” 166)

Jones struggled during her years at Oxford but not because of her studies. Her father died from cancer, and she worried about her sisters who were finding their mother increasingly difficult to live with. “However,” Jones says,

C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien were both lecturing then, Lewis booming to crowded halls and Tolkien mumbling to me and three others. Looking back, I see both of them had enormous influence on me, but it is hard to say how, except that they must have been equally influential to others too. I later discovered that almost everyone who went on to write children's books—Penelope Lively, Jill Paton Walsh, to name only two—was at Oxford at the same time as me; but I barely met them and we never at any time discussed fantasy. Oxford was very scornful of fantasy then. Everyone raised eyebrows at Lewis and Tolkien and said hastily, “But they're excellent scholars as well.” (“Diana” 166)

After her graduation in 1956, Jones married John A. Burrows, a graduate student at Oxford and an old acquaintance from her parents' youth conference center. He took a job at Bristol University as a professor of medieval literature. Their son Richard was born in 1958, followed by Michael in 1961 and Colin in 1963. Jones focused her attention on her young family, delaying her writing until after Colin was born. She explains that those early years of being a wife and mother taught her “more about ordinary human nature than I had learned up to then. I still had no idea what was normal, you see. After that I found the experiences of my childhood easier to assimilate and could start trying to write. To my dismay, I had to learn *how*—so I taught myself doggedly” (“Diana” 168). Jones considers her children an important part of her development as an author. For instance, in 1963, while she was bedridden with the pregnancy of Colin, she read Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy and realized the possibilities of longer fantasy. “Then,” she notes,

as the children grew older, they gave me the opportunity to read all the children's books which I had never had as a child and, what was more, I could watch their reactions while we read them. Very vigorous those were too. They liked exactly the kind of books—full of humor and fantasy, but firmly referred to real life—which I had craved. . . . Somewhere here it dawned on me that I was going to have to write fantasy anyway, because I was not able to believe in most people's version of normal life. (“Diana” 167-68)

But publishers returned the manuscripts she sent to them, accompanying them with shocked and puzzled rejection letters. Jones finally broke into publishing in 1970 with Changeover, a novel written for adults. Soon, however, she met Laura Cecil, a children's literature literary agent, who encouraged her so much that she wrote three books in quick succession: Wilkin's Tooth in 1972 and Eight Days of Luke and The Ogre Downstairs in 1973. Since then, she has established a remarkable publishing record, with at least one book and sometimes two appearing almost every year. For Jones, “Each book is an experiment, an attempt to write the ideal book, the book my children would like, the book I *didn't* have as a child myself. I have still not written that book. But I still keep trying” (“Diana” 169). Through a kind of perverse serendipity, Jones's childhood, though a difficult one, has led to books that surprise and delight readers with their humorous originality and thoughtful themes, qualities she sought in her own childhood and seems to have found as an adult.

Chapter Two: Defining Jones's Work

Since the mid 1970s, Jones has continued to weave patterns of discovery and reversal, though with such originality that each book comes as a surprise. At the same time, without losing its pace, humor, and suspense, her work has grown increasingly complex in plot and theme, making strenuous intellectual demands even on adult readers. More and more it seems to reflect not only universal truths but the quality of life in a fast changing, unstable world, where 'reality' itself is transformed from one moment to the next. (Rahn 156)

Jones admits that "I get unhappy if I don't write. Each book is an experiment, an attempt to write the ideal book, the book my children would like, the book I didn't have as a child myself" ("Diana" 169). Through her writing, Jones addresses issues that stem from her childhood and uses her unique viewpoint to share her life's lessons through her fiction. In 1976, Jones identified her purpose as a writer: "What I am after is an exciting—and exacting—wisdom, in which contemporary life and potent myth are intricately involved and superimposed. I would like children to discover that potent old truths are as much part of everyone's daily life as are—say—the days of the week" (Commire 117). As a young mother starting her writing career, Jones wanted to write books that her own children would enjoy, books through which she could share the wisdom she had acquired with her readers, while simultaneously entertaining both a young and an adult audience. A reflective writer, she often articulates her insights on her

writing process, her feelings on the value of fantasy and myth, and her conclusions on what has influenced her work.

The immense grounds of the youth conference center in Thaxted, where she lived as a girl, stimulated Jones's imagination and creativity. She describes the influence those grounds with their three separate gardens had on her writing:

The main fact about the house—the thing that lives with me and truly does provide the basis for all I write—is that it had extensive grounds, divided into three sections: 1) A huge graveled yard—the place of ordinary Life and Death. The place where real people and everyday friends existed. The place where everything starts when I'm writing a book. 2) A brick walled formal garden—with this garden you moved among imaginary friends and into the formal patterns of fantasy, the place where stories get made or adapted and most of the quieter fun or lunacy happened. I suspect this is the place where the central part of what I write gets made. 3) A magical locked stone walled garden—the seat of mystery and the beauty that should be, if possible, at the heart of every story. It stands for the old tales and the life enhancing magics that ought to be there, too. And no idea for a book ever seems to me good enough if it doesn't have something of this at the heart of it. But it has to have the other two places as well. You can't exist—or write—purely on this strange and elevated plane. (“Birthing” 391-92)

As a child, Jones would wander around the magical garden when she could convince her father to give her the key to unlock the door. It was a private place, off limits to the

conference guests, and became a symbol to Jones of the powers inherent in imagination and fantasy.

Jones's curiosity also plays a major role in her writing process. She notes that "the driving force [in writing], as far as I see it, is me wanting to know what happens next" (qtd. in Butler 165). Her short story, "nad and Dan adn Quaffy" (1990), illustrates how Jones's curiosity keeps her creating at her keyboard. The story tells about an author who is learning to use a word processor rather than her old typewriter. As she struggles, she finds herself "becoming interested in what might be going to happen to the starship *Candida*, not to speak of the reasons that had led up to the mutiny aboard her. She continued writing furiously until long after midnight" (16). Similar to the experience of her character, Jones reports, regarding characters in two of her own books, Hexwood (1993) and Archer's Goon (1984), "I hardly knew what they were going to do from one page to the next. They kept taking me by surprise" (qtd. in Butler 165). Thus, especially in the invention stage of writing a book, Jones allows her creative abilities to take her stories places she may not initially have planned for them to go, realizing in the process how little control she has over her ideas, how much her creativity drives from her subconscious. For example, in her essay "The Heroic Ideal" Jones analyzes in some detail the creation of Fire and Hemlock (1985), citing underlying myths, poems, and heroic themes that coalesced as inspirational material for the book; yet in a later essay, "Birthing a Book," she says, "I realized that [Fire and Hemlock] had not been written in at all the analytical way I had tried to describe. The second draft might have been . . . but the first draft had been written at white heat in a state where I was unable to put it down" (381). Jones's pleasure in being surprised by her characters suggests additional

possibilities for her imagination, and the twists and turns that occur in the actual writing process add their own distinctiveness to her writing.

In creating a book, Jones combines the fruit of her imagination with her understanding of her own writing process. She says that creating her books is a process that combines contradictory endeavors: “So the first truth about the creative process is that one is doing two mutually incompatible things” (“Birthing” 382), that is, giving up control of the book to one’s creative energies while staying within boundaries that will make the story work.

Although she admits that her books seem to have “a life of [their] own,” Jones also explains that she needs various elements in order to write a book (“Inventing”). She deems three such elements essential when she is ready to start writing any book: “First and most important, is the taste, quality, character—there are no words for it—nature of the book itself, a sort of flavour that has to start on the first page and will dictate the tone and style and the words used, as well as the sort of action to take place” (“Profession” 6). Second, she must have some ideas which act “as counterweight or control”: ideas of the beginning and ending of the story and specific details of “at least two scenes from somewhere in the middle” (“Profession” 6). The final element is

impossible to describe in any other way than that a book (often not the one I thought I was about to write) shouts to me that it is ready and needs to be written NOW. Then I have to find paper—and there are never any pens—and do it at once. I write longhand for the first draft, because I find that easiest to forget. I do not, at this stage, wish to be interrupted by self-conscious notions of myself writing a book. (“Profession” 6-7)

Because Jones is able to work with the contradictions of creative invention and control, her novels exhibit a depth and complexity that are rare in children's and young adult literature.

The nature of invention under control provides a lively exploratory aspect to Jones's writing. She marvels that "The human brain can lay one contradiction upon another and make the two things match without any trouble at all and be aware of strict logic at the same time. This is what I find so fascinating" ("Birthing" 380). Jones's fascination with the contradictions inherent in the creative process encourages her willingness to ask, "What if?" She sees the ability to explore answers to that question as a basic part of human nature: "Man, before anything, is a problem-solver" ("Profession" 13). She uses her understanding of the importance of questioning as a tool for writing, noting that her "best ideas conflate three or more things, rather in the way dreams do, or the minds of very small children" in much the same way that as a child herself she confused Germans with germs and typhoid with Twyford ("Profession" 5). Then, "as writer, I go on and say *What if this were true?* and then try to compose the story" ("Profession" 6). Creatively combining various texts into new ones and questioning common assumptions contribute to the foundation of Jones's novels. Her stories come from her own experience or reality, as she sees it, as well as from her imagination; she realizes that "You need hooks to hang your story onto. We all do. And my hooks happen to be two fold: my imaginary friends and my childhood" ("Birthing" 388). Finally, Jones summarizes her own writing process:

I am living in a place where I am not actually living, leading a double life, while doing two incompatible things at once. I am controlling characters

that behave like real people, a story that behaves like a self-programming entity, a landscape in which the seasons change as seasons should.

Beneath this is an underpinning from my own experience containing the nitty-gritty of everyday life, formally patterned fantasy, a dose of lunacy, and the deep magic of myth. Almost enough to get a book moving, but not quite. Along with the season(s) the book is set in, you need also a quite indescribable taste-in-the-head, a feeling about this particular narrative that no other narrative has. . . . But if you have that taste, as it were, and with it a sufficiently dynamic idea, you are off. (“Birthing ” 392)

When asked why she writes fantasy, Jones is quick to answer that she writes the kinds of books that she would like to have read as a child (“Diana Wynne Jones: Award”). Unlike her mother, who, Jones says, was “trained . . . to despise all fantasizing,” Jones at an early age realized that stories have value even though they differ from historical facts (“Profession” 14). These ideas led her to enjoy fantasy as a child. Not surprisingly, then, when she first began writing, she found herself again drawn to fantasy: “Somewhere it dawned on me that I was going to have to write fantasy anyway because I was not able to believe in most people’s version of normal life” (“Diana” 168).

In her work Jones uses the multileveled meanings typically inherent in fantasy to communicate to a wide audience. She finds realistic books too confining, commenting that “It seems to me that a lot of very realistic books are like journalism and feeble as a result, telling you one thing about the present day” (qtd. in Jones, N.). Instead, Jones attempts to communicate with her readers on many levels and feels that many

characteristics of fantasy are especially significant and effective in engaging the mind. She has said several times that fantasy echoes the way the brain works, particularly in using the imagination, solving problems, and answering the question, “What if?” (Butler 168; “Profession” 13). Because the mystical power in fantasy is open for interpretation, critics and readers often disparage it, but Jones recognizes that fantasy has recently become more acceptable: “It is marvelous that a whole lot of adults have now realized that this is good stuff to read. Seems to have swept away the idea that was still extant when I started writing that fantasy was very bad for you because you ended up not knowing what was true.” (qtd. in Jones N.).

So, far from being deleterious, Jones finds fantasy beneficial. Having observed children playing in the woods on the hill by her home, Jones feels that their games of fantasy reflect both the way their brains work and the needs they have to work out social situations in their imaginations:

They really do seem to need some sort of ‘*Let’s Pretend*’ to make them combine [socially]. And the thing which seems to allow them to get along together is the thing which makes the games seem so mad to an onlooker: they at once seem to enter a sort of enchanted circle, where they are in control and nothing outside matters.

Now a book is another form of this enchanted circle. . . . Whether fantasy or realistic, the reader is in control. . . . My feeling is that children get most from books which work along the same lines as they do—in other words, by ‘*Let’s Pretend*.’ . . . Above all, it should be as exciting and engrossing as the games in the woods. (Senick 178)

Because of the neglect and alienation she experienced as a child, Jones is particularly concerned with empowering young readers, and she believes fantasy offers an effective vehicle for helping readers discover important elements in life: “It does seem that a fantasy working out in its own terms, stretching you beyond the normal concerns of your own life, gains you a peculiar charge of energy which inexplicably enriches you” (Senick 178). Because fantasy requires a twist in a reader’s suspension of disbelief—that is, suspending the usually insistent thought that not only did this not happen, it *could not* happen—readers of fantasy participate with an author in the creative existence of a text. Jones finds this creative activity particularly helpful for modern children who “are rushed from ballet to elocution and are never given a spare moment to be themselves”; she adds that children “need to extract [themselves] from the turmoil of other people’s inventions” (qtd. in Jones, N.). Fantasy gives children an opportunity, as Jones says, to “think for themselves” and “provides a space where children can relax and walk round their problems and think ‘Mum’s a silly fusspot and I don’t need to be quite so enslaved by her notions’” (qtd. in Jones N.). Since Jones creates her work with her own children’s needs in mind, she consistently demonstrates her desires for children to be empowered through her fantastical stories.

Jones has identified two specific parts fantasy can play in empowering readers to deal with life’s challenges. First, through fantasizing they can recognize their problems and solve them miraculously, thereby lowering the amount of stress and pain they experience. As for the second part, she terms it “the actual practicing of situations in our heads. Reading a book constructed on these lines is only an augmented form of this. Both prepare you for a version of the situation in actuality (“Profession” 14). Fantasy is

built on the unexplainable, and because it does not try to dissect itself or resolve its complexities, readers learn to appreciate and accept the complexity and inexplicability of their own life experiences. According to C. S. Lewis,

The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers . . . At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of ‘commenting upon life,’ can add to it. (74)

Readers typically hope for a rollicking ride and expect fantasy to open up a new world for them, to show them things they have never—indeed, no one has ever—seen, and to create a magical place for them to prepare for reality.

As readers encounter literary fantasy and imagine the worlds, situations, and characters they are reading about, they co-create this fantasy and in so doing stimulate their imaginations. Jones says that the “imagination supplies further meaning to the apparently magic events. At its simplest, magic can be considered as a metaphor, or as functioning in the same way as metaphor” (“Profession” 12). Of course, metaphors can be interpreted on different levels, depending on a reader’s experience, but Jones feels that metaphors in her stories offer

a way of saying “Think this through.” This . . . is the best *intellectual* function of magic in fantasy. You start out by saying “What if this or that seemingly impossible thing was so . . .” and then following through the

logic of it. The fact that it has been put in terms of magic (or impossibility) has distanced the problem (which may actually be one painfully near to most children, like secret fears or racial difference) so that it can be walked around, followed through and, if possible, solved in some way. (“Profession” 12)

As a child, Jones discovered the effect metaphors have on the mind when she read how the sun kissed Mary Poppins in Mary Poppins Comes Back (1936) and understood the kiss as a symbol of the interconnectedness inherent in all things. She recognized this metaphor as many “truths presented in a shape they did not really have, personifications, and similes acquiring the status of fact” (“Profession” 13). By using fantasy as metaphor and connecting truth through symbols, Jones encourages her readers to interpret fantastical events in a way that is uniquely meaningful to each reader, thereby accomplishing her desire to share her wisdom without writing in an overtly didactic fashion.

Besides techniques derived from fantasy, Jones borrows as well from other genres such as myths and fairy tales. She says that “the beauty of such tales is that the weight they carry is only to be grasped intuitively. They cause readers to grasp far more than the surface meaning, but they combine with that surface meaning more easily and successfully than anything else, even for those who do not know the story in question” (“Profession” 11). Myths and fairy tales communicate “intuitively” because they are tied to a collective subconscious. According to Robert Ellwood, they “make their way into subjective consciousness because they are about deep-level psychic identities—above all, one’s own. Of that deep-set individual identity, the adventurous individual heroes of all

great stories are symbolic vehicles” (129). Well versed in fairy tales and myths, Jones uses them liberally in her work. She feels that myths contain truth which helps readers live better lives; thus, she uses myth not to escape to the past but to enjoy a richer present. In some of Jones’s stories, connections to specific myths and fairy tales are obvious, such as the Norse gods in The Eight Days of Luke (1975), “Puss in Boots” in Wilkin’s Tooth, and Tam Lin in Fire and Hemlock. Usually, however, Jones taps into the power and depth age-old stories contain, not by copying them or using them as a blueprint for plots or characters, but by conflating several different ideas from them as inspiration for her own creativity, allowing the meanings of the myths and tales to remain intact, and communicating subtly with the reader.

Humor, an element often found in myth and fairy tales, particularly appeals to Jones: “I do love ending up with very logical situations in which everything is totally absurd. . . . There’s no reason why one can’t make a serious point and be funny too” (qtd. in Butler 169). Indeed, humor has become integral to Jones’s work; she has even burst out laughing while she is writing: she was once, “laughing so hard I fell off the sofa where I was writing” (“Profession” 6). About The Ogre Downstairs, she says, “I laughed so much writing that one that the boys [her sons] kept putting their heads round the door to ask if I was all right” (“Diana” 168). Because so much of her childhood was odd, Jones learned to see humor in the absurd and to accept situations that would normally be considered beyond the realm of possibility: “Oddly, the most insanely funny things were nearly always part of something intensely tragic. . . . I came to the conclusion that the two states are, in fact, closely related and that fantasy—the times things go wild—is the connecting factor” (“Profession” 9). For Jones, humor diffuses pain, helps keep a

balanced perspective, entertains the reader, and makes serious elements even more poignant through contrast.

While one of Jones's main goals is to be entertaining, she also aims to create books that teach truths to readers, "that really [point] you in the way you wish to go" ("Profession" 14), by asking herself, when she is considering an idea for a book, "Will this idea translate my experiences into something of value for people today?" ("Birthing" 389). Conversely, Jones hopes to accomplish this goal without didacticism. She remembers that as a child she and her sisters created a particular shelf for their despised "Goddy books, . . . books about children getting together to do good" (qtd. in Jones, N.), which they never touched. As an adult, Jones carefully avoids writing "Goddy books," for she realizes that if readers notice she is preaching, "then I've done it wrong. . . . But I do think that if you write for children . . . you have more experience, and this is something you can give children the benefit of. This is where any moral element might come in, but if it comes in overtly and directly, this is a great mistake" (qtd. in Butler 168).

Jones has found that avoiding didacticism in writing for children helps guide her exploration as a writer. As a young mother, she noticed that when she read aloud to her sons the boys "immediately got restive as soon as they were being preached at. I thought, 'let me see what I can do that flouts the rules and interests children but can still get published'" (qtd. in Jones, N.). Jones's efforts to "flout" rules helped her transfer what she had learned from her own reading to writing provocative stories that question common assumptions. Confidently, she observes that "Practically every book I have written has been an experiment of some kind from which I have learnt. It does not seem

to me that I have a right to foist a story on people, most of whom are children who should be learning all the time, unless I am learning from it too” (“Profession” 7). She describes her writing as “an exercise in how to slip sideways through the gaps” (qtd. in Jones, N.)—the “gaps” she could find in the rules for writing for children.

Since the 1960s, Jones has flouted traditional rules governing the roles adults played, stipulations inherent in genres, and acceptable audiences for specific kinds of texts. Jones found that the “adults in children’s books used to be supposed to do everything right” (qtd. in Jones, N.), yet because she uses her own childhood as inspiration, the adults, including parents, in her fiction are often villains. She has also repeatedly broken genre boundary lines: “It seems to me that a lot of the rules about genre are completely daft” (qtd. in Butler 166). Jones would probably agree with William Coyle that fantasy is not a particular genre but is found in “film, flower arrangement, architecture, music, costume, painting, or any other human activity in which imaginative creativity takes precedence over scientific observation. Fantasy is not a genre but a mode, a way of perceiving human experience” (2). Readers will find a mix of genres in Jones’s fiction. For example, in A Sudden Wild Magic (1992) she blends science fiction and fantasy to tell the story of a group of witches who take a ride in a spaceship; one of her middle-school-aged books, Black Maria (1991), mixes fantasy with horror; and Howl’s Moving Castle (1986) includes fantasy, fairy tale, and romance. Finally, because Jones writes for all ages, her work also crosses the traditional boundaries of audience: “I never have a sense of whether my audience is adults or children: if I do I get self conscious and muscle-bound and can’t write a thing. I write because I have thought of a marvelous story and want to know what happens next” (qtd. in Jones, N.).

Elsewhere, she again speaks of her frustration at the boundaries drawn between children's literature and adult literature, the "ball and chains" a writer of speculative fiction encounters:

Every hidden assumption I discovered seems to be felt as a law, or a rule, or an absolute difference between two branches of writing. . . . They shackle the speculative fiction written for adults . . . I think it is high time people started examining them in order to free the wealth of good stories cramped under this load of old iron. For when all is said and done, it is telling a good story, and telling it well, that is the point of both kinds of writing. ("Article")

Again, Jones's attitude towards audience stems from her personal experience. When her husband read aloud to their children at night, "So inane were [the children's books] that my husband used to fall asleep . . . after a maximum of three sentences. The resulting outcry convinced me, not only that I could do better myself, but that it was imperative to put something in the books for the benefit of adults who had to read them aloud" ("Article"). Consequently, even in her books targeted for young people, Jones includes elements that her young audience may not completely understand, assuming that, rather than being disturbed by what they do not understand, children are instead accustomed to dealing with things that are beyond their comprehension. Furthermore, she says, "I never worry about putting in things that are not within children's capacities because I don't think this matters. I think it's very good for children to notice that there's something going on that they don't quite understand. This is a good feeling because it pulls you to find out" (qtd. in Butler 172). This idea of challenging children also supports her goal of

using fantasy to empower children by encouraging them to develop their capacities to solve problems in a way that will benefit them in their real lives.

Perhaps because Jones started writing with her own children in mind, she is especially aware of the needs of children, and her desire to empower children is but one of the needs she deems children possess. She also addresses the “quite incommunicable fears children have. . . . All children have these inexpressible fears and believe also that they are the only one who does. It is very hard for any other medium but a book to handle these fears, but a book can do it easily, since it is by its nature a private matter, like the fears are” (“Profession” 6). Jones, then, sees herself as an advocate for children. She uses her perceptive observation of children in real life to keep her work focused on them—their likes and needs, their interests and dreams. For instance, she recognizes that children display certain tendencies in their play and uses what she learns to guide her fiction:

- 1) . . . very wisely not pretending too many things at once. . . . I find it works best to suppose just one thing—pretend you are a ghost.
- 2) Pretending is a thing most usefully done in groups. . . . Oddly enough, this means that if I want a neutral character, not particularly girlish or boyish, I have to use a boy.
- 3) The peculiar happiness of the children wandering in the wood . . . killing, despising . . . terrifying one another and loving it . . . this mixture of nastiness and happiness is typical of most children and makes wonderful opportunities for a writer. Your story can be violent, serious, and funny, all at once—indeed I think it should be—and the

stronger in all three, the better. Fantasy can deal with death, malice and violence in the same way that the children in the wood are doing. You make clear that it is make-believe, and by showing it applies to nobody, you show that it applies to everyone. It is the way all fairy tales work. (Senick 178)

Because of her perception of children's needs, Jones bases most of her fantasy in real time rather than in the fictitious long ago typical of the "high fantasy" written by such writers as Tolkien, Lewis, Susan Cooper, and Lloyd Alexander. Jones noticed as a child, while studying medieval paintings in the National Gallery in London, that the artists had dressed people in clothing typical of their own time, even when portraying a Biblical image. She felt wistful because she could not imagine her "favourite knight, Sir Gawain, in a suit or tweeds however hard I strained to see it" ("Inventing"). She could not mesh the past with the present. Later, as a mother, she noticed that her boys also preferred fantasy that "firmly referred to real life" ("Diana" 168). Her twelve-year-old son, while reading Rudyard Kipling's Kim (1901), instead of understanding the book as a historical account of India, thought Kipling had made it all up: "So much, I thought, for inculcating a sense of history. It's possible that many children regard historical novels as this kind of fantasy. In which they are not exactly wrong" ("Inventing"). These observations led her to determine that "Children as a group have almost no sense of history at all. They are by their nature the most forward-looking section of the population. They are intent on growing up. Most of them can't wait to be adult. For this reason, they are not going to be very interested in books that are not about here and now and what is to come" ("Inventing"). She also concluded that she preferred writing about

what she knows than what she does not: “My thoughts have been trained to run in certain grooves, according to the Twentieth Century, and the thoughts of people living at different times in the past would have been trained to run in quite other grooves. I wouldn’t be able to get my mind round their minds” (“Inventing”). She therefore “made a conscious decision to write mostly about the present day (or a semblance of the present day set in an alternative world) and not to go out of my way to inculcate a sense of history that isn’t there” (“Inventing”). By placing her stories in the here and now, Jones offers insights into contemporary life, not a lesson in history or a form of escape.

Because she bases her fiction on her own experiences, her imagination, and her understanding of children’s needs, her fantasy is distinctive. By continually inquiring, “What if?” she avoids the accepted norm for fantasy fiction. Part of her aversion to the normal provokes her to scorn others’ blind following of society’s expectations. Questioning boundaries gives her a postmodern tendency to see things from various points of view. She spurns ignorant acceptance of stereotypes; she is also contemptuous of writers who are content to create imitations of Tolkien’s books. She wrote her encyclopedia-like The Tough Guide to Fantasyland (1996) to “[poke] fun at the large number of adult fantasies set in what the writers fondly believe to be a medieval landscape” (“Inventing”). Rather than make up a fictitious medieval world, Jones instead uses stories that come from established myth and medieval literature to create fantasy set in real time and connected through the ages.

Although Jones does not set her stories in a medieval landscape and time, she, nevertheless, acknowledges the influence of the medieval on her work: “I have a strong sense that everything I do write is quite deeply influenced by what I perceive as the

Middle Ages. . . . I think the Middle Ages invented *me*, rather than the other way around” (“Inventing”). Jones says she learned from medieval literature how to translate myths and fairy tales into other stories. Citing the poem, Sir Orpheo, a “story of fairyland and enchantment” based on the “hard myth” of Orpheus and Eurydice, as an example, she observes,

Until I read this poem, I hadn’t realized that this sort of translation from one type of story to another was possible. Once I did realize, I did some furious thinking, lasting for about ten years, and came up with the discovery that translating need not apply only to types of story. You can make up other kinds of translation as well, all equally useful and all equally telling. (“Inventing”)

Instances of story in her own work translated from myth or age-old tales include Charmed Life (1977), a Gothic romance reversed; Howl’s Moving Castle, a fairy story in which the heroine first rescues a prince and then the prince rescues her; and Hexwood, a “chunk . . . of Arthurian stories [translated] into a story about a super computer” (“Inventing”).

Jones also acknowledges a debt to Chaucer, a pre-eminent medieval writer. She compares her spoofing of “California writers of fantasy” in The Tough Guide to Fantasyland to Chaucer’s parody of Middle English romances in his “Sir Thopas” in The Canterbury Tales. Jones also admits that Chaucer’s ability “to play with narrative in a way that can be perfectly wicked at times” impresses her; “Each of his stories is a serious exercise in a certain *type* of narrative—he sets boundaries and shows what can be done within them” (“Inventing”). But Jones admires most Chaucer’s ability to maintain

suspense, even when relating a story well known to his reader such as Troilus or “The Reeve’s Tale” in The Canterbury Tales and “still get you to respond as if you had no idea what was coming next. That is something I have tried to do too” (“Inventing”).

In addition to Chaucer, Jones states that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight influenced her narratives too: the Gawain poet, she says, “knows when to pass quickly over time, and when to dwell on episodes—that is, he knows when to just tell you things were so and when to make you feel them so in your gut. . . . I think I use him as a sort of paradigm narrator all the time” (“Inventing”). She also credits him with influencing her Chrestomanci books about a modern enchanter who lives “in an up-to-date modern castle, with all the latest architectural features” because the Gawain poet sets his “‘story time’ in his own present time” (“Inventing”).

Finally, she singles out a third medieval writer, William Langland, as an influence on her work, noting that Piers Plowman “is not exactly straight narrative at all. Langland haunts me because he is such a strange mixture of deep thinking and jamming down what happens to be in his head. . . . His work reminds me of the tide coming in” (“Inventing”). Further, she comments that “What has always impressed me here is what you can achieve if you get behind your narrative . . . and really push. . . .The first thing that Langland taught me is that ideas are just as important as a story” (“Inventing”). Jones’s own work reflects her enthusiasm for Langland’s “tide” of ideas, since much of it shows multi-level narratives and ideas, so much so that some critics have complained that her narrative is too convoluted to follow easily.

How, then, should Jones’s work be defined? Jane Yolen comments that “Jones is one of those English wonders who can combine wit with wisdom. Her sense of humor

weaves in and out of the most absurd plots and twists around outrageous situations with a deftness any vaudevillian would envy” (qtd. in Olendorf and Telgen 116). Jones’s fantasy is atypical; she encourages readers to see life in a new way by challenging common conventions. She has written books targeted to adults, adolescents, middle-school children, and preschoolers, yet regardless of her audience she is consistently original, combining humor with both adventure and romance, which makes her work most accurately classified as speculative fiction: a combination of fantasy and speculative fiction that answers the question, “What if?” About her work Jones says, “what I am after is an exciting—and exacting—wisdom, in which contemporary life and potent myth are intricately involved and superimposed” (Commire 117). This quest results in stories that are simultaneously out of this world but also grounded in it.

Suzanne Rahn terms Jones’s work “complex in structure, intellectually challenging, [and] often bewildering” (147). Through her continual questioning, readers can expect to have their imaginations and ideas stimulated, to be encouraged to learn from the past and become empowered in their own lives, and to recognize truth in various forms. Jones’s fantasy provides social commentary through its use of imaginative elements and humorous entertainment because of its highly creative characteristics. As Rahn says, “Jones has deep roots in the realm of myth and myth’s unchanging realities; she assumes the ultimate moral responsibility of the individual, and the ability to discern moral truth even in a chaotic world. There is a cosmic harmony toward which her characters are called to strive, though the earth may be crumbling beneath their feet” (147). As Jones gains further recognition for the originality and quality of her work, her readers gain the benefit of her “exciting and exacting wisdom.”

Chapter Three: Multiple Worlds, Myth, and the Heroic Ideal—Empowering Readers

Characteristically incorporating mythological and fairy tale themes, motifs, and characters in her works, as well as elements taken from science fiction and the political and romance novels, Jones uses the reactions of her protagonists to magical events to reveal their giftedness and inner strength. Her main characters, often displaced, unhappy boys and girls whose parents or guardians are either absent or hostile, learn to cope with their problems through their encounters with the extraordinary and discover their identities in the process. (Senick 177)

In her effort to encourage her readers to discover inherent powers in themselves, Jones uses multiple worlds, myth, and the heroic ideal to create an underlying foundation of example and belief. Multiple worlds release endless possibilities, while myth grounds Jones's stories in timeless principles and values. The hero's journey serves as an archetype for dealing with challenges while at the same time demonstrating the power that comes from one's ability to think creatively for oneself. A close look at common aspects of Jones's novels helps identify how she uses multiple worlds and the mythical hero's quest as metaphors to encourage readers to recognize their own strengths and abilities.

Many of Jones's books include more than one world. In the preface to The Chronicles of Chrestomanci: Volume I she explains that "There are thousands of worlds, all different from ours. Chrestomanci's world is the one next door to us, and the

difference here is that magic is as common as music is with us” (Preface). Jones says she uses multiple worlds in her stories because of WW II and the Cold War, a period for her which “had a sort of icy saneness that was even more insane. I have never really lost the sense that the world is basically thoroughly unstable. I think this is why I tend to write about multiple parallel worlds—anything can happen and probably is somewhere” (“Birthing” 7). In Charmed Life, Jones’s character, the child Gwendolyn, writes about the premise of multiple worlds:

There are hundreds of other worlds only some are nicer than others, they are formed when there is a big event in History like a battle or an earthquake when the result can be two or more quite diferent [*sic*] things. Both those things hapen [*sic*] but they cannot exist together so the world splits into two worlds witch [*sic*] start to go diferent after that. (Chronicles 125)

Showing multiple worlds, all with different characteristics, some more stable and others more troubled than this planet, acknowledges the fact that this world has difficulties—that it is basically unstable.

In all of her stories, Jones not only recognizes the challenges inherent in this world but also demonstrates how one can deal with instability. Although the enchanter Chrestomanci urges Gwendolyn to stay in her own world and learn how to use her powers appropriately, she chooses to exchange places with one of her doubles who exists in another world. At the end of Charmed Life, Gwendolyn’s brother Cat discovers how unstable the world can be, especially after learning difficult lessons about who he is and how important it is to communicate clearly with and judge others accurately. Cat

manages to respond with humor to the difficult ordeal of learning that his sister has been using him for her own purposes: “though he was still a little lonely and tearful, [he] managed to laugh too” (Chronicles 163).

In Jones’s multiple worlds, characters deal with instability not only with humor but also with courage and self-sacrifice. In The Lives of Christopher Chant (1988), Christopher courageously changes his perception of others and himself when he learns he is wrong, takes responsibility when it is thrust upon him, and sacrifices for others’ well being. Adults who raise him are inaccessible and use him for their own purposes. The people he trusts turn out to be untrustworthy, while the people he dislikes are the people he comes to admire and emulate. Readers experience frustration when Christopher is unable to see others clearly and root for him as he changes and bravely stands up to evil. At one point Christopher’s tutor, Flavian, scolds him: “‘You seem to think,’ he shouted, ‘that those nine lives give you the right to behave like the Lord of Creation! That, or there’s a stone wall around you. If anyone so much as tries to be friendly, all they get is haughty stares, vague looks, or pure damn rudeness!’” (Chronicles 513). Christopher is surprised that people perceive him as cold or lordly. When he travels to the parallel world Eleven to save Gabriel de Witt, “it gave him an unpleasant shock to find that he had been quite as horrible as these Eleven people” (Chronicles 577). But Christopher uses his experiences as a vehicle for change and demonstrates his courage and selflessness when he sacrifices one of his lives for de Witt.

In Jones’s work multiple worlds also present opportunities for readers to understand that their experiences are not necessarily the same as everyone else’s. Maria Nikolajeva observes that

Describing our own world from Otherworld's perspective enables Diana Wynne Jones to discuss existential questions, such as: What is reality? Is there more than one ultimate truth?—questions pertinent to postmodern thinking. The multitude of worlds is thus not merely a backdrop for adventures, but a reflection of the young protagonists' split and distorted picture of the reality in which they are living. (143)

Jones's own experience of realizing that her early home life was atypical provides an example of how children may think life is one way but then, as they read or experience others' realities, discover countless ways of viewing situations and people. Knowing that different realities exist can give hope to readers who are unhappy in their present situations. A sense of multiple worlds also suggests that anything is possible and that no one knows everything. This sort of open-minded optimism intimates that situations and people can be viewed in more than one way. Cat and Christopher's experiences serve as good examples; they learn how wrongly they have judged others, and that knowledge empowers them to change.

The technique of using multiple worlds is also an empowering motif because it addresses many young people's experiences with alienation. The idea of multiple worlds, the possibility that people have doubles on other worlds, can pacify children who feel estranged from parents or peers, almost as if they suddenly discovered a twin whom they have never met. They may then conclude that someone somewhere may understand them and relate to them better if they only knew the person. Jones's creative use of multiple worlds thus opens up multiple possibilities by which readers can deal with their own world.

While Jones encourages her readers to think creatively for themselves as they try to decipher right and wrong in a confusing, unstable world, at the same time she offers them guidance by including timeless aspects of myth, fairy tale, and the heroic ideal in her stories. According to Joseph Campbell, “It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidents are fantastic and ‘unreal’: they represent psychological, not physical, triumphs” (27). Because they are timeless and innate, myth, fairy tales, and the heroic ideal give Jones’s stories a sense of solidarity and permanence that is comforting in an unstable world. Stephen Johnson notes that “Myths simplify and order the world by creating a collective identity through common narratives,” and Campbell links myth, the cosmos, and the arts: “it would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestations” (3). Because of their collective nature, myth and fairy tales can communicate with readers through their timeless connections to life. When one reads a story that contains a pattern of myth, even when one is not aware of the myth, the story strikes a familiar chord in the subconscious and suggests meaning beyond itself. Myth intimates proverbial truths. Campbell quotes the Vedas: “Truth is one, the sages speak of it by many names” (xxii). In the past this truth built a foundation upon which society’s conscience defined itself. Campbell continues: “The past [myth and fairy tale] evoked was no subject of mere nostalgia . . . but a time when values and spirituality, now almost forgotten, reigned” (xiii).

According to Campbell, this view of myth is “far indeed from the contemporary view” (358). Like Campbell, Jones recognizes that literature today has drifted from

earlier truths and long-accepted ideals. Jones recalls that as a student at Oxford she realized that seemingly everyone accepted the idea “that the heroic ideal was awfully banal and naïve and straightforward. . . . No respectable writer dared for centuries [after Chaucer] to write a straightforward heroic narrative” (“Heroic” 132). The literary community considered the heroic ideal clichéd, and Jones notes that “you had to show that your narrative had a purpose that was not heroic—either to strip the illusions from a naïve hero like Candide or Tom Jones; or to make a moral and social point aside from the story as, say, Dickens does” (132). So far has this tendency gone that today some critics, like Dudley Jones and Tony Watkins, feel that children can’t relate to archetypal heroes at all:

We live, after all, in a post-heroic age: Heroes are for debunking and deconstructing. The gendered associations of the terms “hero” and “heroism”—macho posturing, manliness, celebrations of physical bravery (often in a context of imperial conquest), and a consequent devaluing of what are often seen as feminine qualities—have been analyzed and condemned. (1)

Jones disagrees. In her stories she relies on the heroic ideal, including a variety of allusions to myth and fairy tale because “the big heroic things which we respond to are exactly the same nowadays as they always were” (“Heroes”), and defends her reliance on myth and fantasy by saying, “it is a fact that all children’s books that *endure* are fantasies of some kind. These do seem to strike the deepest note” (“Heroic” 134).

Jones’s own experience as a visiting author at a school further confirms her feeling that “children do, by nature, status, and instinct, live more in the heroic mode than

the rest of humanity” (“Heroic” 133). During the school’s recess, the school tomboy stood up to the school bully and defeated him. Both children were forced to sit on display as punishment, and Jones comments that, as she passed by where the tomboy was sitting, the girl “was blazing with her deed, as if she had actually been touched by a god. And I thought that this confirmed all my theories; a child in her position is open to any heroic myth I care to use; she is inward with folktales; she would feel the force of any magical or divine intervention” (“Heroic” 134).

Of course, Jones defines heroes differently from the “gendered” characteristics of “macho posturing, manliness, and celebrations of physical bravery.” Besides being “brave, physically strong, never mean or vicious,” Jones says, “[heroes possess] a code of honor that requires them to come to the aid of the weak or incompetent and the oppressed when nobody else will. In addition, most heroes are either related to, or advised by, the gods or other supernatural characters” (“Heroic” 130). Jones also believes that heroes are in touch with humanity through their needed abilities and connected to gods who watch over them, making sure that they fulfill their heroic deeds. “But above all,” she says, “heroes go into action when the odds are against them. They do this knowingly, often knowing they are going to get killed, and for this reason they impinge on a hostile world in a way others don’t” (“Heroic” 130).

Heroes are not born heroic but instead develop their abilities through experience, choice, and effort. Like Campbell, Jones defines the typical hero’s journey:

Your average hero starts out with some accident of birth, parentage, or person which sets him apart from the rest and often, indeed, causes him to be in contempt. Even if he seems normal, he has at some point to contend

with his own physical nature (as when Beowulf fights the dragon as an old man, or when Odysseus listens to the Sirens). Nevertheless he sets out to do a deed which no one else dares to do and/or at which others have horribly failed. The story often does not state the heroic code that demands this. That code only manifests itself when, along the way, the hero's honor, courage, or plain niceness cause him to befriend some being who will later come powerfully to his aid. (This is one of the places where being a hero overlaps with "being the person in the story with whom we identify," because your hero is after all also your Goodie.) After this, he may well make some appalling mistake—as Christian strays from the strait and narrow path, or Siegfried forgets Brunhilda—and this lands him deep in trouble. He can then end tragically. Or he can call in the debt from the powerful being he befriended earlier and, with difficulty, prevail. ("Heroic" 131)

Clearly, for Jones, the mythical hero's journey is one of progress and growth. Campbell also pictures the hero "losing [his or her] way innumerable times, refusing the first call, thinking it is only one thing when it really is, in fact quite another" (xxiv)—an image at best of a flawed hero, yet because he or she is flawed, she or he is precisely the sort of hero to whom an audience can relate: a work in progress, a protagonist developing abilities in order to fulfill an important task. Reading about such heroes makes readers realize that they do not have to be perfect to be good but that learning through trials develops heroic qualities.

Not surprisingly, then, Jones uses a plethora of flawed heroes as protagonists in her stories. In Fire and Hemlock “Polly’s mistake is to behave like her mother, with possessive curiosity, and spy on Tom. On the mythical level, it throws the story back to the tragedy of Hero and Leander, with which the story started. This unjustified curiosity, which leads the hero to spy on his or her partner, is a motif in dozens of folktales” (“Heroic” 139). Howard, a flawed hero in Archer’s Goon, finds out after battling wicked wizards that he is actually one of them and decides to help people he loves instead of being manipulated by evil: “Now he saw he would have to bring himself up not to be Venturus, too. . . . He thought that since this was his third time around, he might just manage to get it right for a change” (324). Part of Howard’s decision to be true to heroic ideals comes from his efforts to battle evil. Clarissa Pinkola Estés points out in her 2004 introduction to Campbell’s Hero with a Thousand Faces (1949) that “coming through such struggles causes the person to be infused with more vision, and to be strengthened by the spiritual life principle—which, more than anything else, encourages one to take courage to live with effrontery and mettle” (xxiv). The struggles of the heroic quest result in the hero’s gaining greater understanding of personal power and identity.

Jones’s concerns with the empowerment that comes with understanding one’s identity stems from experiences in her childhood when her parents disparaged her goal to be a writer and determined that her sister Isobel was to become a ballerina. Isobel was completely devastated when, after building her identity as a dancer, her dance teacher told her she could never become a professional ballerina (“Diana” 165-68). In Jones’s work, the protagonists, like Isobel, because of their struggles often come to a new understanding of who they are and what their potential and powers may be. For example,

after being deserted by Gwendolyn, Cat in Charmed Life realizes that he is a powerful enchanter; after encountering life-threatening experiences as a dog, Sirius in Dogsbody (1975) discovers he is a celestial entity; and after being turned into an old hag, Sophie in Howl's Moving Castle learns of the power behind her words. Rahn comments that in Jones's fiction, characters and readers experience "a reversal of how the protagonist sees himself, other people, and the cosmos. The effect is disorienting not only for the protagonist but for the reader, who has shared the protagonist's assumptions about 'what I am,' 'what they are,' and 'how things are.'" (156). She further observes that Jones's heroic characters must be able to "keep . . . mental and moral balance even as they [begin] to see how wrong [they] have been. [Their] success is the measure of [their] willingness to accept a new version of reality, and [their] ability to discern and follow [their] own course through the midst of it" (154). Because Jones builds her stories upon a traditional, heroic foundation, readers can understand the importance of the quest for accurate identification in a changing, confusing world where others use inaccurate assumptions and labels as truth.

These insights in self-identity often involve a discovery of supernatural powers. Rahn proposes that "this innate, even godlike magic, is appropriate for stories that partake of the heroic or mythic realm, in which gods and other supernatural beings are at home. On another level it suggests that for everyone the change from ignorance to knowledge increases both power and responsibility" (156). Discovering one's identity, including inherent powers and responsibility, in turn connects one to mythic gods. According to Campbell,

The godly powers sought and dangerously won are revealed to have been within the heart of the hero all the time. He is ‘the king’s son’ who had come to know who he is and therewith has entered into the exercise of his proper power—‘God’s son,’ who has learned to know how much that title means. From this point of view the hero is symbolic of that divine creative and redemptive image which is hidden within us all, only waiting to be known and rendered into life. (36)

Jones, too, acknowledges the connection between “the magical or god-guided aspect of all heroic careers” and uses magic as a metaphor for the ability of people to tap into that higher power and use it as a force for good in their lives (“Heroic” 137). Because of his extraordinary power, for example, Chrestomanci, functions not only as a god-like person but, more importantly, as a servant of god accepting the responsibility to ensure that magic is not misused in various worlds. As Jones’s characters discover their true identities and the powers they possess, they serve as models and metaphors for the creative abilities and god-like power Jones believes are inherent in her readers. She explains that while writing Fire and Hemlock in order to relate the “god-guided aspects” to her readers, she “sometimes . . . made the action overtly supernatural and sometimes so close to mundane factualness as to be indistinguishable from everyone’s ordinary acts” (“Heroic” 137). In basing her fiction on mythical ideals of the hero discovering ties to gods, Jones puts into practice Campbell’s conclusion that “The two—the hero and his ultimate god, the seeker and the found—are thus understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world.

The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known” (37).

After discovering who they are, heroes finally have the responsibility to sacrifice themselves to help others with their own heroic quests of self-discovery and empowerment. The heroic attribute of self-sacrifice is the basis of Jones’s underlying message of the importance and necessity of selflessness in a hero. Jones’s stories repeatedly center on heroes who discover the power of self-sacrifice and antiheroes who demonstrate soul-killing selfishness. As she observes,

I do find, myself, that the Hero, the protagonist, *is* the story . . . Yes, the opposition *is* there, but at least half the struggle is with the hero’s own inner self. . . . The hero is expected to struggle on two fronts, externally with an actual evil, and internally with his/her own doubts and shortcomings. The hero, out there as scapegoat, has to do the suffering for everyone. (“Heroes”)

Christopher in *The Lives of Christopher Chant* sacrifices one of his lives in order to save his mentor, Gabriel de Witt. Derk in *Darklord of Derkholm* becomes an unlikely hero when he is unwillingly forced from his comfortable life as a wizard/inventor to become the next Dark Lord, a position requiring him to sacrifice his own desires to arrange the dreaded tours through Derkholm by tourists from another world.

Self-sacrifice also requires a conscious choice—a quest of the mind, as Campbell says: “The hero is the man of self-achieved submission” (15). Jones’s heroes achieve their potential by sacrificing their egos for the good of others. Well acquainted with what results when people are selfish, Jones is concerned with “people coming to terms with the

nastiness in themselves” (qtd. in Senick 181). In Conrad’s Fate (2005), for instance, Conrad knows he has been given powers and a mission to accomplish, but because he continually questions the rightness of his own motivations, he saves himself from being used by others more powerful than he is to accomplish their greedy designs. Likewise in many of her other novels, when people make substantial changes, they usually do so to turn from ego-driven, self-centered ways of thinking to selfless actions motivated by love. Campbell calls this heroic self-sacrifice “some sort of dying to the world” and says that it is tied to the “really creative acts” (33). Certainly, Jones’s heroes accomplish paramount creative acts when, motivated by concern for others, they create new selves. As Campbell reminds readers, heroes complete their quests as they conquer their egos and return “reborn, made great and filled with creative power” (Campbell 33).

For example, in Fire and Hemlock, Jones contrasts Polly’s motivations of love and self-sacrifice with Laurel’s cruel selfishness—“the way she had of bending the truth to her own ends” (“Heroic” 135). Jones speaks of Laurel as Homer’s Calypso, requiring Tom to go to hell in order to be free of her and Circe, “a woman who confuses fact and fiction impartially for her own ends” (“Heroic” 136). As Polly does her best to overcome her own personal limitations and her destructive possessiveness of Tom, she becomes heroic. In the novel Jones clarifies that heroic sacrifice for another is not a one-time occurrence; the story indicates “however briefly, that though a relationship *was* possible between Polly and Tom, such a relationship is only likely to be maintained through continuing repeated small acts of heroism from both” (“Heroic” 140). As is required in life, both Tom and Polly perform many acts of heroism throughout the book. For Jones a one-hero plot is rare. She wants her readers to understand that heroes are multitudinous

rather than an exclusive group, and in Fire and Hemlock, she uses the name Polly, a nickname for the popular name, Mary, as a symbol of the universality of the hero—“she is many people” (“Heroic” 136).

Campbell calls the hero’s journey “the destiny of Everyman” (33), and Jones agrees: “Christianity [has] modified the tradition that a hero is guided by a god or gods. For God watches over everyone. . . . every ordinary man or woman *could* be a hero” (“Heroic”133). For example, as a god-figure, Chrestomanci watches over Cat, nurturing him and allowing him to experience self-discovery, to progress and grow in his own time, rather than telling him of his powers and responsibilities and forcing him to fill a heroic role. After struggling with self-identity and betrayal, Cat ultimately fulfills Chrestomanci’s expectations for him, responding heroically to others’ needs. Cat’s journey, like that of many protagonists in Jones’s fiction, is a decision any reader can make. As Campbell says,

The modern hero, the modern individual who dares to heed the call and seek the mansion of that presence with whom it is our whole destiny to be atoned, cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding, ‘Live,’ Nietzsche says, ‘as though the day were here.’ It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal—carries the cross of the redeemer—not in the bright moments of his tribe’s great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair. (362)

By depicting the journeys of heroes in her work, Jones convincingly demonstrates that, unlike what may be currently accepted, the heroic ideal still exists and is attainable: it can be a guide for a life of giving rather than taking.

By creating multiple worlds and stories based on the mythical hero's quest, Jones thus taps into what Campbell calls the "realm that we enter in sleep. We carry it within ourselves forever. All the ogres and secret helpers of our nursery are there, all the magic of childhood" (16). Reading about flawed heroes who battle enemies inwardly and outwardly in works set in multiple worlds with various traits requires, as Laurence Yep comments, "a slight shift in perspective—a shift that enlivens and reanimates the world because we drop our normal mental filters and see things instead as outsiders" (54). Yet such "shift[s] in perception" encourage readers to discover and develop their own inherent powers. By writing fantasy, Jones creates empowering metaphors that draw upon her readers' subconscious, a place where, as Campbell states, lie

all the life-potentialities that we never managed to bring to adult realization, those other portions of ourselves, are there; for such golden seeds do not die. If only a portion of that lost totality could be dredged up into the light of day, we should experience a marvelous expansion of our powers, a vivid renewal of life. We should tower in stature. Moreover, if we could dredge up something forgotten not only by ourselves but also by our whole generation or our entire civilization, we should become indeed the boon-bringer, the cultural hero of the day—a personage of not only local but world historical moment. (16)

Jones bases her work on patterns of using one's "life-potentialities." In her contemporary novels she employs ageless myth to introduce a multitude of possibilities to her readers, empowering them with a vision of heroes making heroic choices in an unstable, unheroic world. Her fiction, growing from her beloved "third garden," the power of magic and dreams, contains potent ideas that she wants to share with others, particularly children whom she feels can be misunderstood, neglected, and misused by their adult caretakers.

Chapter Four:

The Merlin Conspiracy and the Power of Knowledge in an Unstable World

Though the writing in Archer's Goon is fine and the scenes and characters fresh and well-drawn, the convolutions of the plot and sheer numbers of characters make the whole difficult to juggle. It is fast-paced and comic, which keeps you turning the pages, but is finally only a self-indulgent romp from an author who has been seduced by, and has lost control to, her own extravagant inventions. Still, it's a cheery tale and children will probably like it a lot. (Babbitt 18)

Some critics, like Natalie Babbitt, have criticized Jones for having convoluted plots. In her review of The Lives of Christopher Chant, Ethel Twichell comments, "Although the plot is almost labyrinthine and occasionally confusing, the individual episodes are wonderfully entertaining" (209). Speaking about The Merlin Conspiracy (2003), Sally Estes says that "Jones's convoluted, alternate-world fantasy is put together like a four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, including time, a dimension in which the puzzle pieces don't quite fit together. . . . Nevertheless, the story, infused with humor as well as exciting adventure, makes compelling reading" (1464). Alice Turner says, "The Merlin Conspiracy is [Jones's] Big Baggy Book. Or if you like, her satisfying, long and complex, somewhat mystifyingly plotted, massively constructed epic fantasy with a cast of thousands" (BW10). Complicated stories are not necessarily a failing. Besides providing interesting reading, Jones's convoluted plots interject the idea of the

complexity of life. Since one of Jones's goals is to encourage her readers to think for themselves, her complicated plots create a milieu that reflects the difficulty of real-life situations. The Merlin Conspiracy is a good example. In this novel, which includes a plot that twists and turns with every page, Jones uses the complexity of multiple worlds and multiple perspectives to examine the value of knowledge in dealing with an unstable existence.

She writes the book in first person from the viewpoints of two different characters. Nick and Roddy take turns telling their stories as if they are writing them down after the fact for a report. Jones uses a similar technique in several of her books: Black Maria, Conrad's Fate, Deep Secret (1997), The Homeward Bounders (1981), and The Spellcoats (1979). This method gives the reader the advantage of knowing exactly what protagonists are thinking during various episodes of the story and how they see things after those episodes. In addition, Roddy and Nick's alternate voices in The Merlin Conspiracy introduce the reader to various perspectives of the same experiences.

Roddy is a young girl who travels around Blest, a parallel England, as part of the King's Progress. Her parents are assistants to the king, and they protectively keep her ignorant of troubles within the Progress. Besides feeling excluded, Roddy does not like the instability of drifting from place to place. Her parents, worried about the effect the King's Progress has on her, want her to live with her paternal grandfather in London. Roddy, however, is determined to stay with the king's entourage because of her attachment to Grundo, a boy several years younger than she is whom she has protected from bullying children and his abusive mother, Sybil, since he was four years old. After the Merlin, the king's wizard, is murdered, Roddy and Grundo discover that Grundo's

powerful mother, and a king's knight, Sir James Spencer, have apparently colluded with the new Merlin to overthrow the king. They bewitch the rest of the King's Progress so that the group cannot see what is plainly in front of their faces. Having avoided the spell, Roddy and Grundo struggle to know what to do about the plot to dethrone the king.

Meanwhile, Nick is having his own adventures. Not from the world of Blest, Nick lives in a parallel London with his adopted father who insists he travel with him to a mystery writers' conference. During the conference, a stranger inexplicably sends Nick off to a different world. Nick thinks he is dreaming as he acts the part of a novice to a group of mages assigned to protect a prince during a cricket match. The mages instruct him to put himself in a trance, leave his body, find his totem animal, and wander around looking for anything suspicious. Still thinking it is all a dream, Nick follows a path into a dark wood, meets his totem animal, a black panther, and is tracked down by the powerful wizard Romanov and his large cat Slatch. Romanov tells Nick that because he was offered a commission to kill Nick, he decided to find Nick in order to discover why someone would want him dead. But Romanov realizes that Nick is "too ignorant to be a danger to anyone" (51). Because he finds Nick harmless, he tells Nick he will report back that he is not worth killing. Romanov then leaves Nick on the dark path but not before telling Nick to come and find him if he needs to learn how protect to himself in case others come to kill him.

After Nick runs away from the mages, he travels along the dark and damp path through the woods, looking for Romanov, when an old drunk man instructs him that he must "meet three folk in need in this place and give them what help you can before you can get where you're going" (109). At the same time in Blest, Roddy and Grundo have

left the King's Progress and are in Wales, visiting Roddy's mysterious maternal grandfather, Gwyn, who has been forced by Sybil and her cohorts into assisting them in their evil designs. The Little People instruct Roddy in how to restore the balance of magic in Blest; she either needs to ask for help from a "person [who] walk[s] dark paths . . . outside all worlds" or to "raise the land" (146). Since raising the land might create a catastrophic chain reaction, Roddy chooses instead to contact a stranger on the dark outside path. She sees Nick when she casts a spell and calls, "Feet on the stony way, eyes that can't see, wizard man outside the worlds, come and help me!" (150). Nick, who has just recently realized that he is not dreaming, promises to help Roddy although he is too ignorant to know what to do.

After talking with Roddy, Nick continues down the path in search of Romanov and on his way inadvertently assists two others, an embroiderer in the city of Loggia and Mimi the elephant, before finally coming to Romanov's self-made island. Romanov is ill and becomes weaker the longer Nick is with him. Soon after Nick's arrival, the drunk man from the wood reaches Romanov's island and, now sober, introduces himself properly to Nick as Maxwell Hyde, Roddy's grandfather from London and himself a powerful wizard. Hyde brings Nick to London to meet Roddy. In London Gwyn carries off Hyde, and Nick and Roddy begin to use their abilities to correct the imbalance of power and avoid an apocalyptic outcome.

Clearly, the plot of The Merlin Conspiracy is complex and nothing is expected. Characters travel through a multiverse; children live unstable lives without proper adult nurturing; all characters are flawed to one degree or another; and readers meet no single omniscient and omnipotent hero. Jones uses this confusion to demonstrate the value of

knowledge in dealing with an unstable existence. A convoluted story places readers in the same context as characters; neither readers nor characters completely understand what is occurring. As the tale continues and questions are answered, characters and readers ultimately gain knowledge and learn wisdom together. Jones creates a dystopia, and her characters learn to deal with an imperfect world by acquiring knowledge through their sometimes painful experiences; simultaneously, her readers learn that while their own existence is far from utopian, yet they must, like Roddy and Nick, cope with what they encounter in it.

Besides accepting the fact that wisdom and knowledge come with a cost, characters also gain insight into identity—their own and others'. Jones uses characters' names to emphasize identity. Loius Althusser addresses the important part names play in society: names “transform the individuals into subjects by that very precise operation which I have called . . . hailing. . . . Ideology hails individuals as subject” (163-64). Names have significance and power. When individuals choose to answer a “hail” or a name, they have chosen to submit themselves to certain obligations, identifications, and ideologies. In The Merlin Conspiracy names reveal how characters understand their own identities, responsibilities, and motives and how others see them; names change as characters and roles change. Roddy's real name is Arianrhod, but she shows her independence from society by choosing to answer to “Roddy,” defying her grandmother who scolds her for her name choice: “You ought to be taking up your true heritage, my girl, not trying to be someone else” (264). Grundo's real name is Ambrose, but Roddy nicknames him Grundo, and that is the name to which he answers—a symbol of his tie to Roddy. Gwyn keeps his real name, Gwyn ap Nudd, or Lord of the Dead, secret, but

because Sybil calls him by that name, she is able to exercise power over him. Isadora and Ilsabil, Roddy's two spoiled cousins, continually exchange personalities in order to confuse others. Roddy and Grundo call them "the Izzys"; therefore, they have no distinguishing name or identity, but instead share the same non-name, reflecting their manipulatively confused identities.

Names also signify the power that comes with in the understanding of one's identity. At the beginning of Nick's adventure, the mages who are guarding the cricket match think Nick, whose real name is Nichothodes Koryfoides, is the apprentice Maurice. When they call him by the wrong name, he finally is able to recognize the truth of his situation: "From the moment Arnold said he thought my name was Maurice, it was like a whole train of pennies dropping in my head. This was not a dream. It was *real*" (97). At that point Nick knows he is in danger from the mages. Fortunately for him, they think his name is Nicholas Maurice, and he is able to escape from them by saying his real name over and over to himself while they search for him by calling, "Nicholas Maurice."

Names, or being named, distinguish between significance and obscurity. For example, Nick never names his totem animal, the black panther, who never surfaces again in the story, while Romanov's big cat Slatch plays a vital role in the ultimate success of the fight against evil. Jerome Kirk, whose last name is associated with the National Church of Scotland, tries to convince Nick to join his group. "We're an association, but we don't name ourselves. We just exist and gather strength and numbers. . . . You need to join our new order. You don't want to be throttled by their stupid *rules!*" (337). Avoiding a name means avoiding rules, responsibilities, and eventually, existence.

Nick gains further insight regarding the significance of names when he talks about Maxwell Hyde: “It was funny the way I always had to call him by both his names—Maxwell and Hyde—in my mind. If I thought of him as Mr. Hyde, I found I was calling him Dr. Jekyll. If I tried thinking Maxwell, it made me think of silver hammers” (230). For her part, Roddy experiences the power of being hailed as she speaks to a mystical lady at the ruined Inner Garden of Castle Belmont during a dream; she observes, “While I was waiting for her to say more, somebody called my name from inside the guest bedroom, and I had to leave in a hurry. This is the way when somebody calls you by name” (279). She returns quickly to consciousness in her bed, called by creatures who need to speak with her. Understanding the power that comes with one’s hail is critical knowledge. Thus, names are essential for self-understanding because they reflect identity and include expectations, rules, and responsibilities.

Besides reinforcing the power in a name, The Merlin Conspiracy reveals the importance of knowing who one is. Roddy and Nick’s action demonstrate the truth of Socrates’s statement, “An unexamined life is not worth living,” for they develop heroic qualities as they question their personalities and motivations. They are afraid of being ignorant, selfish, and cold. After escaping from the mages, Nick says, “I felt vile. And guilty. Let’s face it, I had deceived a whole security team. I hadn’t exactly *meant* to, but I had been so set on the idea that this was all a dream that I was having that I hadn’t even *tried* to say, ‘Excuse me, I’m not your novice’” (104). Nick recognizes his guilt for being deceptive and expresses his feelings of inadequacy when meeting the powerful Romanov (the family name of the Russian Czars), “I was so terrified I felt as if I was melting. His eyes were so yellow and cutting” (51-2). When Nick insists to Romanov that he is

dreaming, Romanov responds, “People’s capacity to deceive themselves always amazes me. If you want to live past the age of twenty, you’d be well advised to learn to see the truth at all times” (52). Nick continues to question himself after feeling despised because of his ignorance:

I was full of hurt and paranoia, too, at the way Romanov had despised me. A lot of people had called me selfish. I’d been working on it, I thought. I’d looked after Dad and been really considerate, I thought. But I could tell Romanov saw through all that, to the way I really *felt*. And of course I still felt selfish, in spite of the way I behaved. All the same, I was trying, and it wasn’t fair, and it wasn’t fair either that Romanov had despised me for being ignorant. (91)

Nick has always wanted “to be a Magid and walk into other worlds” (48). He is struggling to learn how; he mentions that he has read “everything [he] could get his hands on about magic” (91). His desire not only leads him to question himself continually but also to seek out Romanov even though he feels Romanov despises his ignorance. Nick is willing to change himself for the better.

Roddy also questions her flaws: “I knew I was a courtier born and bred, and that I was smart and good-mannered and used to summing people up so that I could take advantage of their faults, and I could see that my grandfather had nothing but contempt for people like me” (79). After seeing herself through her grandfather’s eyes, she says, “I was feeling mean and depressed about my personality” (81). Others see Roddy as aloof, cold, and proud. When she finally breaks through her reserve, Gwyn says, “The ice of Arianrhod had melted at last, it seems” (86).

Setting in the novel is also significant for discovering one's true self. Jones creates a contrast between light and dark, using Roddy and Nick's locations. The darkness of Nick's experience, whether he is on the dark, damp path, or in Loggia City, symbolizes his blindness and ignorance. Nick has no identity or purpose for being in Blest. He is leading a dream-like existence and actually finds comfort in telling himself he is dreaming (92). Readers can empathize with Nick: the plot's bizarre convolutions are dreamlike. But Nick makes progress as he becomes aware of reality and starts to use all of his senses while moving along the dark path. While Nick slowly realizes he is not dreaming, Roddy accepts the quest to right what is wrong with the King's Progress when she first realizes problems exist. Her searching leads her to gain needed knowledge from an ancient mythical woman. Because Nick and Roddy question their motives and consciously try to overcome faults of selfishness, pride, and ignorance, they achieve personal victories as they conquer a larger evil.

The Merlin Conspiracy develops the theme that besides being knowledgeable about oneself, one must also gain knowledge and understanding of others. In the novel many people are blind to others' manipulations. Sybil, Sir James, and the Merlin bewitch the Progress into doing what they want; as Sir James says, "[They've] got everyone drinking out of [their] hand[s]" (64). The Izzys cast a spell on their mother and grandmother to blind them to their misbehavior. In what may be the most surprising twist, readers learn that Grundo has bewitched Roddy since he was three years old to be obsessed with taking care of him, showing how blindness to truth and the scheming of others cripple characters who would act differently if they could see accurately.

Jones also shows how blame and fanaticism keep people from seeing the truth. When the Merlin is murdered at the beginning of the novel, the antagonists go to great lengths to cast suspicion on others to divert people from recognizing the truth. The people first blame the Scottish king and then Roddy's father. After the new Merlin enigmatically prophesies, "Blame is—where blame lies—blame rests—where dragon flies," Roddy's grandfather says, "And what's *that* suppose to mean? Is he accusing *Wales* now or *what*?" (22). Suspicion focuses on everyone but the culprits. At the end of the novel, when evil has reached its apex and is about to take over the magic of Blest, Roddy's Aunt Dora shows how fanaticism can cripple people. Dora has joined a group who follows their leaders blindly, acting without considering consequences. Roddy says that after Dora hands Roddy, Nick, and Grundo over to their enemies, she saw "a perfectly horrible woman leading Dora away, patting her and praising her as if she were a dog. 'Good girl! Well done! Doesn't it feel better now you've done what you owed your friends to do?' Poor silly Dora. She was beaming and nodding and looking shamed, all at once" (439). Roddy goes on to record that she saw crowds of people gathering at the takeover, "a lot of them like the horrid woman praising Dora, and crowds of men with beards and dishonest faces—many of these had too much hair and golden disks on their chests in the manner of priests—and large numbers of men and women who struck me as like Dora: not quite sure what they were doing here" (439). These people, caught up in blind devotion, are tools to be used by manipulative people for their own selfish purposes.

Jones also includes several examples of outsiders being used and misused. Probably the group that most influences the outcome of the fight against evil is the Little

People to whom Roddy turns for advice. Roddy conscientiously treats one Little Person with her best manners and tries hard not to stare at his strangeness. But she has a hard time focusing on what he tries to tell her because she is struck by his uniqueness. When she asks Grundo, “Don’t you even feel how marvelous it is to have talked to one of the Little People?” he lectures her: “No, not as the main thing. . . . If you think like that, then you’re treating him like something in a museum, not as a person” (147). Roddy admits, “Grundo was right! I *was* thinking of the small person that way. . . . I still had to try hard as I followed Grundo across the hillsides *not* to think of the Little Person as something very rare and strange that I had been to stare and marvel at” (147). The Little Person provides necessary solutions to the imbalance of power: to ask for help from an outsider and to raise the land. Roddy ends up having to do both to restore the balance of magic, and Jones comes close to breaking her rule of avoiding overt didacticism in this section of the book. But the main lessons learned come from Nick and Roddy’s growth as they travel their heroic journey. Thus, while the novel contains no superhero, Roddy and Nick’s heroic qualities, their desire to serve bravely and to question motives, create possibilities for them to become heroes themselves.

Throughout The Merlin Conspiracy Jones presents life as unstable and dangerous; people are flawed. At the same time she suggests how to deal with a convoluted life—seek truth and realize that difficulty comes with good. Jones sets up a dystopia, showing readers how important knowledge is in dealing with life’s instability; yet her heroes, while restoring balance, do not fix all the wrongs in their world. They do progress towards an ideal in character and knowledge. The Merlin Conspiracy reflects several themes consistent with much of Jones’s fiction: children who are inadequately nurtured,

flawed heroes, and motivation—selfishness vs. self-sacrifice, for example—defining good and evil. Magic, or power, being neutral, is something that must be controlled and used for selfless purposes. A hero does not have to be perfect to serve others. Desire is the key, and if one desires to help others, resultant experiences will teach knowledge and wisdom. In Jones's worlds characters must find out how they can serve, determine what is good and what is not, question their motives, make corrections, and, especially, think for themselves.

Appendix 1

Alphabetical List of Diana Wynne Jones's Work

- Archer's Goon (Methuen, 1984; Greenwillow, 2003)
- Aunt Maria (US Title) / Black Maria (UK Title) (Methuen, 1991; Greenwillow, 2003)
- Cart and Cwiddler (Series: Dalemark Quartet) (Macmillan, 1975; Greenwillow, 1995)
- Castle in the Air (Series: Castle) (Methuen, 1991; Greenwillow, 2001)
- Changeover (Marketed to adults) (Macmillan, 1970; Moondust, 2004)
- Charmed Life (Series: Chrestomanci) (Macmillan, 1977; Included in The Chronicles of Chrestomanci Vol I, Greenwillow, 2001)
- Conrad's Fate (Greenwillow, 2005)
- Crown of Dalemark (Series: Dalemark Quartet; Mandarin, 1993; Greenwillow, 1995)
- The Dark Lord of Derkholm (Series: Derkholm) (Greenwillow, 1998, 2001)
- Deep Secret (Marketed to adults) (Tor, 1997)
- Dogsbody (Macmillan, 1975, Greenwillow, 1977, 2001)
- Drowned Ammet (Series: Dalemark Quartet) (Macmillan, 1977; Greenwillow, 1995)
- Eight Days of Luke (Macmillan, 1974; Greenwillow, 1988, 2003)
- Fire and Hemlock (Greenwillow, 1985, 2002)
- Hexwood (Methuen, 1993; Greenwillow, 1994, 2002)
- The Homeward Bounders (Macmillan, 1981; Greenwillow, 1981, 2002)

- Howl's Moving Castle (Series: Castle) (Greenwillow 1986, 2001)
- The Lives of Christopher Chant (Series: Chrestomanci) (Methuen, 1988; Included in The Chronicles of Chrestomanci Vol I, Greenwillow, 2001)
- The Magicians of Caprona (Series: Chrestomanci) (Macmillan, 1980; Included in The Chronicles of Chrestomanci Vol II, Greenwillow, 2001)
- The Merlin Conspiracy (Greenwillow, 2003)
- The Ogre Downstairs (Macmillan, 1974; Greenwillow, 2003)
- The Power of Three (Macmillan, 1976; Greenwillow, 1977, 2003)
- Puss in Boots (picture book) (Scholastic, 1999)
- The Spellcoats (Series: Dalemark Quartet) (Macmillan, 1979; Greenwillow, 1995)
- A Sudden Wild Magic (Marketed to adults) (AvoNova, 1992)
- A Tale of Time City (Greenwillow, 1987, 2002)
- The Time of the Ghost (Macmillan, 1981; Greenwillow, 2002)
- The Tough Guide to Fantasyland (Vista, 1996)
- Who Got Rid of Angus Flint? (Methuen, 1978) (Also included in Stopping for a Spell)
- Wild Robert (Methuen, 1989; Greenwillow, 2003)
- Wilkin's Tooth (UK)/Witch's Business (US) (Macmillan, 1973; E. P. Dutton, 1974; Greenwillow, 2002)
- Witch Week (Series: Chrestomanci) (Macmillan, 1982; Included in The Chronicles of Chrestomanci Vol II, Greenwillow, 2001)
- Year of the Griffin (Series: Derkholm) (Greenwillow, 2000)
- Yes, Dear (picture book) (Greenwillow 2002)

Short Story Collections

- Believing Is Seeing: Seven Stories (very similar to Minor Arcana) (Greenwillow, 1999)
- Hidden Turnings (Egmont Children's Books, 1989)
- Mixed Magics (A Chrestomanci anthology) (Greenwillow, 2000)
- Minor Arcana (Gollancz, 1996)
- Stopping for a Spell (HarperCollins, 1993, 2002)
- Unexpected Magics (Greenwillow, 2002, 2004)
- Warlock at the Wheel and Other Stories (Collection; partially series: Chrestomanci) (Macmillan, 1984)

Appendix 2

Awards

Dogsbody

1975: Carnegie Medal Commended

Power of Three

1977: Guardian Children's Fiction Award Commended

1977: Silberner Griffel (Netherlands)

Charmed Life

1977: Carnegie Medal Commended

1978: Guardian Children's Fiction Award

1978: Preis der Leseratten (ZDF Schülerexpress, Germany)

Archer's Goon

1984: Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book Award

1984: World Fantasy Award for Best Novel, nominated

Howl's Moving Castle

1986: Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book Award

1987: Horn Book Fanfare List

Fire and Hemlock

1984: Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book Award

1986: Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, nominated

Lives of Christopher Chant

1988: Carnegie Medal Commended

1988: Methuen Children's Award

2005: Children's Literature Association, Phoenix Honor Book Award

Castle in the Air

1992: Mythopoeic Fantasy Award, nominated

Crown of Dalemark

1996: Mythopoeic Fantasy Award

A Sudden Wild Magic

1996: British Fantasy Award, nominated

Minor Arcana

1996: British Fantasy Award, nominated

Tough Guide to Fantasyland

1997: Hugo Award for Nonfiction, nominated

Dark Lord of Derkholm

1998: Best Books, School Library Journal

1999: Mythopoeic Fantasy Award

Diana Wynne Jones, in general

1999: British Fantasy Society, Karl Edward Wagner Award

2005: NSK Neustadt Prize for Children's Literature Nomination

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