Transformation, Bewitchment and Flight:
The Case of Sophie Hatter in Hayao Miyazaki’s “Howl’s Moving Castle”

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Sophie Hatter is the main protagonist in the film “Howl’s Moving Castle” by Hayao Miyazaki. This film is an adaptation of the fantasy novel Howl’s Moving Castle by British fantasy writer Diana Wynne Jones. In her original book, published in 1986, we have a “light-hearted and tantalizing fantasy story that elegantly deconstructs a number of familiar fairy-tale conventions.” (Cavallaro, 58) This paper examines the main motifs of transformation, bewitchment and flight which are contained in the film story and how they are revealed through the character Sophie Hatter.

In presenting these important motifs and their examples from the film, I will take a virtue-based interpretation of the individuation process of its main character, Sophie Hatter. Moreover, it will be clear how Sophie Hatter’s key virtues emerge through these motifs throughout the film story. Sophie’s virtues are an essential ingredient in what can be seen as her individuation process. The virtue based individuation process of Sophie Hatter created a favorable outcome not only for herself, but also for the other characters in the film story.

The story Howl’s Moving Castle is an immersed type of fantasy in which the characters (like Sophie) accept the presence of the magical and otherworldliness as a fact of life. Hence, the presence of Howl the wizard is natural for Sophie and other residents, while remaining fantastic and magical for the audience. This particular story, with the various characters who would be at home in a fairy tale, lends itself well to a fantasy film adaptation. It has retained some motifs of the fairy tale, such as magic, transformations, magic helpers and objects. Also in the film story, as often found in fairy tale plots, there is a notion of quest, magical landscapes and the overcoming of obstacles. (Hasse, vol. 1; 48) Finally, this story also illustrates how fantasy (in film) has inherited the basic plot of fairy tales; the hero leaves home, meets helpers and
opponents, goes through trials, performs a task, and returns home having gained some form of wealth. (Hasse, vol. 1; 332)

The character Sophie, as the other female heroine figures in Miyazaki’s films, is an example of the young woman/girl who leaves home, experiences various adventures and challenges, and either returns with the treasure/victory or continues on into a new life for herself. Yet she is also somewhat different from Miyazaki’s other heroines, in that Sophie is for a great part of the story in the form of an old woman. Although Sophie is portrayed as an older woman, Miyazaki has cleverly visually retained her youthful vitality and personality. As Dani Cavallaro noted, “as subtle facial adjustments and bodily modulations evoke the impression that Sophie is neither 18 nor 90 but actually several ages at once, glimpses of the young Sophie fluidly infiltrate the images of her prematurely aged self.” (Cavallaro, 161) This fluidity in visual aspects enhances the value of movement and change in the motifs and adds a magical feeling to Sophie’s story.

Sophie lives in the imaginary country of Ingary in the busy town of Market Chipping. She is the eldest daughter in a family of three girls. She runs the family hat shop business in Market Chipping. One day she wants to pay a visit to her sister at the bakery. On the way there she is rescued from harassing soldiers by the wizard Howl. Because of this encounter, the jealous Witch of the Waste puts a horrible curse on Sophie, turning her into an old woman. The next day Sophie secretly leaves home to find a way to remove the witch’s curse. Her path leads her to Howl’s castle and the wizard Howl once again. Their inevitable friendship leads them through several adventures that finally gain them both freedom and happiness. The series of challenges they must face, such as an impending war, a revengeful witch, and a fearsome master sorceress and her minions all push Sophie to manifest her integrity and virtues which brings about a happy ending to the story.

This particular heroine from Miyazaki’s repertoire of the young woman/girl type appears in the first scenes at the hat shop as shy, timid and docile. However, at the same time Sophie is shown having a quality of maturity and responsibility that distinguished her from her more colorful sister Lettie and flamboyant step-mother. As the story opens, Sophie, as the elder sister, went to check up on her younger sister at the bakery. We get a hint of Sophie’s character in her short conversation with Lettie at the bakery. She tells Lettie: “I just wanted to make sure that you were all right.” When Lettie wonders why Sophie continues to stay at the shop, she replies, “The shop was just so important to Father. And I’m the eldest, I don’t mind.” (Ghibli, 214)

Here we first see her qualities of responsibility and maturity. These are closely linked to the sister virtue of wisdom. However, it is not until Sophie’s first transformation into an old woman that we more
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clearly see an emerging state of these virtues in her words or actions.

In the beginning of the film narrative, these virtues are mostly merged. But through the interplay of three important motifs we will learn how they emerge and they transform the hectic life of the immature and selfish wizard Howl through the agent of Sophie Hatter. As such, Sophie functions as a provider of wisdom and maturity for other characters. These others in return provide a vehicle through which Sophie can make progress in the process of individuation, and through which she began to learn about her own true self.

It is interesting to note that responsibility, maturity and wisdom are all virtues that are associated with the figure of Sophia, who is known as the Gnostic archetype of Feminine Wisdom. (Hoeller, 39) It is also the Greek word for wisdom and is regarded as a defining symbol of wisdom in various religious and spiritual traditions, including those from the ancient Hellenistic and Christian civilizations. Sophie’s name is derived from Sophia. It is remarkable that her character itself actually reflects the meaning behind the name.

I

The first motif regarding Sophie is bewitching (D2020) (from the Stith Thompson Motif Index). It is through bewitching that transformation is initiated and flight is necessitated. “Bewitching occurs when someone with magic power enchants or transforms a person, animal or thing … moreover the person who bewitches in folklore and literature from ancient times to present is usually a woman.” (Garry, El-Shamy, 166) The witch is the negative and injurious side of the Great Mother archetype that is found throughout folklore and fantasy stories.

In this case of bewitching, the once great sorceress but now jealous Witch of the Waste, who is herself in love with Howl, transforms Sophie into a 90-year-old hunchbacked woman. The Witch visits Sophie’s hat shop at night and bewitches her by flying through Sophie in a jealous rage as Sophie stands speechless and stunned. “The best part of that spell is you can’t tell anyone about it …” the Witch sarcastically told Sophie as she left the shop (Ghibli, 214). Sophie is shown alone and left with her initial shock and panic of transformation into an old woman.

The bewitching of Sophie takes place at the beginning of the story and sets the tone for her transformative process towards individuation. It also makes her find ways to emerge her virtues of maturity and wisdom. It was because of bewitching that Sophie had to search for a cure to the Witch’s spell. To do that, she had to leave home, which before she was reluctant to do, almost as if she had been afraid to
let herself change or embrace newness in life. At first she is alone in the hat shop after the attack by the Witch of the Waste. Sophie, trying to calm herself down, paces back and forth, telling herself over and over, “You’re going to be fine ... Stay calm, stay calm.” (Ghibli, 215) Then, the next day, as she prepared to secretly leave home and go to the Wasteland, she looks into the bedroom mirror and encourages herself, “This isn’t so bad, now is it? You’re still in pretty good shape ... and your clothes finally suit you.” (Ghibli, 216) Despite her initial panic, the dialog reveals Sophie’s pragmatic maturity in dealing with her monumental problem.

The irony of the Witch of the Waste bewitching Sophie is that she too experienced a very similar fate when the powerful sorceress of the King, Madame Suliman took away her powers and she was transformed into what she actually was, a very old and powerless woman. On the other hand, in Sophie’s bewitching, turning into an old woman actually empowered her towards emergence of her virtues—love, wisdom and maturity—and directed her towards the quest to discover her true self.

II

The second prominent motif is Flight (D670–D674). Carl Jung suggests that the flight motif is a kind of inversion of the heroic quest theme, although it leads to the same end. (Garry, El-Shamy, 133) “The magic flight motif usually appears in two main forms: the Transformation flight (D670) and the Obstacle flight (D672).” (Garry, El-Shamy, 133) In the case of Sophie, her only choice to escape her situation and the pursuit by the Witch of the Waste was flight. Sophie left home and fled towards the wastelands. Once she had reached Howl’s castle she became part of another flight—the flight of Howl from his own magical pursuers, the Witch of the Waste and Madame Suliman, and his war-time duties of fighting.

The main vehicle of escape for Sophie and Howl is the castle, portrayed in an anthropomorhic manner, walking on giant mechanical legs chicken-like powered by the fire demon Calcifer. Howl directs Calcifer to move the castle whenever they are in danger of discovery by the pursuers. Sophie’s flight with Howl is not unlike the folktale variety of a motif (313) in which the hero and daughter/girl co-operate to flee the ogre in magic flight, the ogre figure represented by the Witch of the Waste, among others.

In the flight of Sophie, Miyazaki has cleverly added another ironical, if not slightly humorous twist to the plot. The very pursuer from whom they were initially in flight from, the Witch of the Waste, finally becomes part of Sophie’s group as a weak and decrepit old woman, following her encounter with the sorceress Madame Suliman in the royal palace. Instead of casting the disempowered witch aside, Sophie compassionately (if not a bit reluctantly) accepts to help and take care of her, even making space for her
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at Howl’s castle. Madame Suliman and her servants, along with the various adversarial wizards fighting in the war, now became the new antagonistic pursuers from which Sophie and Howl were escaping.

The flight motif has an important function in the story of Sophie. It is the beginning of her own self-initiated process of self discovery. The first step she took after being bewitched was to leave home. The idea of going out in the world to experience life can be connected with the getting of wisdom and self-knowledge. This concept is also reflected in the story plots of many fairy tales, fantasy literature and film stories.

“Among its many uses, it (flight) can serve as a boon offered by the gods in a time of trouble or provide a means of establishing one’s own identity during a process of individuation.” (Garry, El-Shamy, 138) El-Shamy, in his discussion on individuation and motif, says that “from a general perspective individuation may be viewed as the gaining of wisdom by a person and that it is related to the category of “Acquisition and possession of wisdom … in which the individual leaves home and gains wisdom in the world at large.” (Garry, El-Shamy, 264) Sophie is shown embarking on her lonely departure from Market Chipping, a flight from the confined safety of the family-owned hat shop into the desolate and harsh wasteland as her first necessary step in her own quest for wisdom. As El-Shamy notes, “Leaving home and gaining wisdom in the world independently of one’s parents or other family members may be seen as part of the struggle between the individual and society.” (Garry, El-Shamy, 264)

Sophie’s flight brings her one step further along the path towards individuation. Individuation is the term with which C. G. Jung describes the psychological process of inner growth and centralization by which the individual finds its own self. (von Franz, 1998, 1) In her preface of Individuation in Fairy Tales, Marie Louise von Franz says that individuation is a “natural ubiquitous phenomenon which has found innumerable symbolic descriptions in the folk tales of all countries. One can even say that the majority of folk tales deal with one or another aspect of this most meaningful basic life process in man.” (von Franz, 1990, vii)

Though it is one of the main archetypes in Jungian psychology, individuation has also been identified and treated as a motif in folk tale. According to El-Shamy, “individuation belongs to the category of “Acquisition and possession of wisdom (knowledge)” of which “Self-dependence” (J1030) is an aspect.” “A new motif that addresses individuation in general terms is designated as J1030. 1§.” (Garry, El-Shamy, 264)

The previously discussed motifs, along with a third, are the important links that propel the individuation of the character Sophie. Her process of self discovery is carried out through the motifs of bewitching, flight and finally, transformation. Through the third motif we will also see how the rich
narrative framework provides circumstances through which Sophie’s virtues of wisdom, maturity and love could change from a merged into an emerged state of being.

III

The most important of the story’s three main motifs—transformation, bewitchment and flight—is transformation. It occurs throughout the film story on various levels of visual characterization, action and dialog. Its appearance ranges from the gross physical level to the psychological and the spiritual realms of human thought. The transformation motif (D0–D699), is a very broad category which may include a magical transformation, such as a bewitched person, escape of the characters, flight and transformative shape shifting.

The use of transformation in folklore and literature is well known. “The very broad category of transformation is one of the most fundamental motifs in storytelling. A basic impulse in telling and listening to stories is a desire for escape from the everyday world and stories involving magical transformations, while providing imaginative escape for the audience, often involve literal escape of the characters, as when someone changes from one form into another to avoid being caught by a pursuer. In the case of voluntary transformation, the process is called shape-shifting; when one is transformed by another, it is called enchantment or bewitchment.” (Garry, El-Shamy, 125) In an even broader sense, the wonder-tale and fairy tale types of stories (to which the tale of Sophie indirectly belongs to), are “in essence transformative narratives or transformations. Their narrative patterns and meta-textual variations convey dynamics of change … and themes hinge on processes of initiation and metamorphosis.” (Hasse, Vol. 3; 982)

Sophie and the majority of the characters in Howl’s Moving Castle go through some kind of transformation or are the cause of a transformation whether it be based on magic or through their individual actions and feelings. Magical transformations include Howl changing into a giant bird of prey, the Witch of the Waste changing into an old and powerless woman at the hands of Madame Suliman, and Markl, Howl’s boy apprentice, changing into a bearded and hooded wizard when customers come for a spell at the castle. Howl’s walking castle itself is a magical transformational device in terms of its place and appearances. Calcifer, the fire demon who powers the castle, and Howl’s magic are the sources of the castle’s transformation. The castle door has a special multi-colored dial that can transform the destination. One door leads to Port Haven, another to Kingsbury, and so on.

Sophie goes through physical, magical and spiritual transformations which make her character the
most interesting of all. Throughout these changes, it is Sophie’s merged virtues of wisdom, maturity and love that are gradually transformed into an emerged state. The link between the emergence of her virtues, and their empowering application through the motif of transformation, creates a matrix in which Sophie moves away from isolation and embraces individuation.

For example, in the first transformation, Sophie is bewitched by the Witch of the Waste and changed from her youthful form into a 90-year-old woman. Sophie’s reaction to this dramatic and magical change is two-fold. At first, she was obviously shocked and in a panic. Yet she managed to convince herself that she will survive. She tells herself, “There’s no use panicking … everything will be all right, you’re going to be fine.” (Ghibli, 215) Instead of being paralyzed by fear about her situation, she tries to deal with it head on, finally deciding to leave home in search of an answer to her problem.

One interesting feature that Miyazaki created is a curious visual expression of the transformation motif throughout the story in which Sophie at times seems to visually change back into a younger self, especially when she feels safe and at peace, or she is expressing her feelings about Howl to an adversary. One example of this is the scene in which Sophie meets with Madame Suliman at the royal palace. She was sent there to speak on behalf of Howl. When she realized how the sorceress planned to trick and disempower Howl, she defended him, saying to her, “Howl would never be so heartless. He may be selfish and cowardly and sometimes he’s hard to understand, but his intentions are good. He just wants to be free….” (Ghibli, 233) At this point Sophie’s voice and physical appearance transforms this she from an old and hunched over old lady to a younger and vibrant person. Yet as Madame Suliman sees retorts, “You’re in love with Howl, aren’t you?” and Sophie, allowing her embarrassment to revert her back to the old bent over woman, seems unable to bear the thought of recognizing her true heart being so indiscriminately revealed to her by the cruel stranger.

This feature of repeated visual transformations indicates the difficult yet necessary process of individuation she was undergoing as she learned to use and trust her virtues of wisdom, maturity and love. One visually interesting example of the transformational fluidity of Sophie’s physical being occurs in a dream state yet accurately portrays the change going on inside Sophie as well. The war has been raging. Howl, fresh from the fight, returned to the castle in the form of his huge monster-like bird of prey, as if he was too exhausted to return to human form. Sophie was asleep, but in the form of an 18-year-old young woman. In her dream she awakens to follow Howl up to his room after she discovers blood on the floor near her bed.

Sophie finds him upstairs inside a deep macabre room-cave full of odd objects. She tries to comfort the obviously desperate Howl. “I’m going to help you break the spell that you’re under … you don’t
understand ... I love you.” (Ghibli, 237) Howl darkly retreats and Sophie suddenly awakens. Her 90-year-old body is still quite the same. In this case we see how Miyazaki’s use of fantastic landscapes are not limited to the physical world but also the mental and spiritual level of reality as well.

In other scenes a similar sort of transformation takes place and the same reversion follows after Sophie finds it difficult to accept in some way the true nature of herself as a woman worthy of love and happiness. One example of this reverse metamorphosis is the scene of Howl and Sophie in the secret garden. Howl had just given the meadows to Sophie as a present in the form of a new dial location on his magic castle door. At first Sophie is delighted by the beauty of the flower-filled landscape. Her features, voice and manner smoothly revert back to her feminine and youthful self. Then Sophie suddenly realizes the fact that Howl might leave, and she hastily tries to acknowledge her love for Howl. Her words show how afraid she is of losing the chance to truly help him. She inappropriately pleads with him, “Please, Howl, I’m sure I could be of help to you ... even though I’m not pretty ... and all I’m good at is cleaning ....” When Howl insists that she is indeed beautiful, Sophie fearfully shrinks back inside her old woman form and remarks, “Well the nice thing about being old is that you’ve got nothing much to lose.” (Ghibli, 241) At this point, Sophie shows she is ready to do anything for her love of Howl. However, she has yet to accept herself as one worthy of love. The old Sophie form is still safer and so she reverts back into that shape. Their vital conversation is interrupted by war planes flying overhead.

The individuation process is not an easy one, but the basis of Sophie’s desire to positively transform her life and Howl’s was anchored in her virtues of love, maturity and wisdom which gradually emerges allowing the process to take place. There are numerous other functional examples throughout the story that display her emerging virtues—among them being Sophie’s pragmatic tolerance of the curse on her by the Witch of the Waste, her energetic cleaning and caring for Howl’s castle and his student Markl, her fearless dealing with Madame Suliman, tolerating Howl’s vain hair tantrum, and even her merciful caring of the disempowered Witch of the Waste.

The most important transformation Sophie goes through is the spiritual one, which in order to achieve she must enter and return from another realm (Howl’s memory), an “otherworld”. The motif of an Otherworld Journey (F0-F199) is used for Sophie’s visit into the magically contrived memories of Howl, and adds to the magical sense of wonder in the story. “There are generally three other-worlds to which heroes in myth ... and folk tale journey; the upper world (F10), the lower world (F80) and the earthly paradise.” (Garry, El-Shamy, 191) Sometimes the destination is vague and this adds to the sense of fantasy and mystery in the story. Access to the lower world can be through a door or a gate (F91). (Garry, El-Shamy, 192) This is perhaps the case with Sophie, in which she enters the immaterial darkness.
of a subconscious world through the magical door of the castle wreckage. The ‘otherworld’ she enters resembles the same open fields that Howl had shown Sophie earlier as a secret garden and cottage. It appears to be like the real world but consisted only of pure thought.

The most spiritual and liberating transformation that Sophie goes through is this discovery of Howl’s secret pact from his childhood with the fire demon Calcifer. In her determination to rescue Howl from his growing curse, Sophie had inadvertently caused the castle to collapse. In this scene, Sophie had unsuccessfully tried to save the integrity of the castle, but the Witch of the Waste, learning at that moment who Calcifer really was, grabbed him for herself. A fight ensued with Calcifer’s fire being doused out and the castle falling apart. Alone in the ruins, she discovered a way into the otherworldly memory through the magic door that had a dial for various destinations, one of them being Howl’s childhood memories. The ring that had been given to her earlier by Howl emitted a beacon guiding her as she entered a realm of pure thought. Sophie became part of the mental vision, witnessing Howl place Calcifer inside his heart.

Long ago, Howl had captured Calcifer in the form of a falling star and through his magic combined his heart with Calcifer to create great magical power for himself. In order to see this event, Sophie had to witness the vision from Howl’s memory. With her newly-found knowledge about Howl, Sophie then returned through a magical wormhole to the material world. As she fell back to the real world, she shouted to Howl, “It’s me Sophie! I know how to help you now. Find me in the future!” (Ghibli, 250) This final transformation of Sophie (now seen in the form of a younger woman, yet with gray hair), took place in her consciousness as a realization of how to save Howl and acceptance of herself as capable and confident. Her wisdom, love and maturity were fully emerged and guided her to act correctly and compassionately.

After Sophie was finally able to discover the truth of Howl’s childhood bargain with the fire demon Calcifer she was able to lift not only the curse on Howl but finally acknowledge her wisdom as well. In the final moments of the film, Sophie restores Howl’s heart to him by placing Calcifer into his chest. As Calcifer is freed, Howl awakens and feels the weight of his human heart returned to him. Sophie says to him, “A heart’s a heavy burden,” (Ghibli, 252) her words echoing her own wisdom of understanding the human heart that she had gained from overcoming her own tribulations of self doubt and fear of ever finding love and happiness. Yet it was through the many transformations the Sophie in fact became the person that Howl needed to survive. The result of a happy ending in the story confirms the important final transformation of the heart that created happiness for others as well as for the heroine.

The case of Sophie Hatter illustrates the process of individuation in which the heroine is bewitched and transformed, leaves home in search of wisdom, gains that wisdom in the outside world and through realization of her self identity, and creates a new life for herself in the world. With the progressive
emergence of her wisdom, maturity and love, the process is enabled and carried out through key narrative motifs we have examined in this paper.

Without the play of these virtues, perhaps the individuation process of Sophie would have been hampered if not delayed or lost. As an essential part of the self, the virtues could not be omitted without creating an inaccuracy in depicting a discovery of the true nature of the self. Virtues are an expression of the very inner core of the human being that lie merged until such time that they can emerge through willpower and enough determination resulting in benefit for the self and others. These virtues gave the heroine the power to finally act and speak with confidence and honesty towards herself and allowed her to achieve what she thought was impossible at the beginning of the story—love and happiness. As an example going before us, the tale of Sophie Hatter in fact points back to ourselves as participants in our own story which in a greater sense means our own quests in life that signal us towards awareness, self-discovery and the wisdom of the virtues.

Notes
1. The analysis in this paper is referenced to the English translation of the film screenplay, which is to be found in “The Art of Howl’s Moving Castle.” See works consulted for full text information.

Works Consulted
——, The Interpretation of Fairy Tales, London, Shambhala, 1996.
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Film references:

Internet Source References:

