

“It’s coming through!”: “Leakage” in portal-quest fantasies

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Portals can be mirrors, Pictures, Standing Stones, Stone Circles, windows and special gates set up for the purposes. You will travel through them both to distant parts of the continent and to and from our own world. The precise manner of their working is a management secret.¹

Our theme today has been concerned with the limits of fantasy. My discussion today is about *breaching* those limits, and the possibility of moving between one realm to another. Ironically, the discussion of breaching the limits of fantasy – the end of the known world – actually further perpetuates the fantasy. Instead of being in a world that exemplifies the mundane, rupturing the walls of the mundane allows the protagonist to reach a new realm where the marvellous is not only possible, but also expected.

In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, a system of classification for the fantasy genre, Farah Mendlesohn describes the portal quest as a device through which “a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place”.² Citing John Clute’s *Encyclopaedia of Fantasy*, Mendlesohn explains how portals ‘litter the world of the fantastic, marking the transition between this world and another; from our time to another time; from youth to adulthood’. Mendlesohn observes, “the fantastic is *on the other side* and does not leak. Although individuals may cross both ways, the magic does not”.³ The texts that Mendlesohn describes as portal fantasies which I shall address in the first part of this paper include *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and, controversially, *The Lord of the Rings*. She also makes a brief mention of *Harry Potter*, which I want to consider in more detail in the second part of this discussion.

At first glance, Mendlesohn’s observation that there should be no slippage between one world and the other seems appropriate. It is a device that was used by the writers of the early gothic novels who set their stories a long time ago in a land far, far away. More recently, it is exactly this definition that Stephen King used in his *Dark Tower* series and more specifically the second volume entitled *The Drawing of the Three*. This is possibly a model for the archetypal portal-quest series: characters are able to step between parallel versions of our world, and also find portals into different times.

¹ Diana Wynne Jones, *The Tough Guide to Fantasy Land* (London: Gollancz, 2004), pp. 159–60.

² Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. 1.

³ Mendlesohn, p. 1.

There is a marvellous description of the main character, Roland, the last of the gunslingers, discovering his first portal, a doorway that appears in a random location on the beach

This door. This door where no door should be. It simply stood there on the gray strand twenty feet above the high-tide line, seemingly as eternal as the sea itself, now casting the slanted shadow of its thickness toward the east as the sun westered ... [He] walked above the door and around to the other side.

There was no other side.

Only the dark gray strand, stretching back and back. Only the waves, the shells, the high-tide line, the marks of his own approach ...

The gunslinger walked slowly back to the other side of what wasn't there., already thinking it had been a hallucination to start with, a--

He stopped.

At one moment he had been looking west at an uninterrupted view of gray rolling wave, and then his view was interrupted by the thickness of the door.⁴

As his experiences with the door continue, Roland discovers that he can carry things from the *otherworld* into his world *and* later return them to the otherworld. However, items from his world cannot pass to the otherworld and remain at the frame of the portal.

He *was* able to take things from the prisoner's world to his own. The tooter-fish popkin proved that. He would take the bags of drugs as he had taken the popkin. The prisoner would Clear the Customs. And then Roland would take the bags back.

Can you?

Ah, here was a question disturbing enough to distract him from the view of the water below ... He could take things from this world, that he knew. But bring them back again? That was a thing of which he was as yet had no knowing, he would have to find out.

The gunslinger reached into the prisoner's pocket and closed the prisoner's fingers over a coin.

Roland went back through the door. ...

He looked at the coin he had brought back with him this time. ...

Time's short. Go back. Hurry.

But he tarried a moment longer, thinking ... To try the coin both ways was only half the experiment, wasn't it? He took one of the shells from his cartridge belt and folded it over the coin in his hand.

Roland stepped back through the door. ...

The prisoner's coin was still there, firmly curled within the pocketed hand. ... The cartridge he had been holding along with the coin lay at the base of the door.⁵

The problem is that King's description of the perfect portal rarely works. Neither *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* nor the **film** of the *Wizard of Oz* are portal fantasies, they are *dream-quests*: in both cases the main character wakes up and it was all a dream. Admittedly in the film of *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy wakes up and sees her three Oz companions without their costumes and insists that "it wasn't a

⁴ Stephen King, *The Drawing of the Three* (New York: Viking, 1987, 2003), pp. 24–5.

⁵ King, *The Drawing of the Three*, pp. 54–5.

dream. It was a place". By contrast in the novel, the cyclone that swept Dorothy away from Kansas to the Land of Oz also returns her back home. Dorothy lands and rolls in the grass of the Kansas prairie, having lost her silver shoes in the cyclone, while Aunt Em asks Dorothy where she has been.

For she was sitting on the broad Kansas prairie, and just before her was the new farmhouse Uncle Henry had built after the cyclone had carried away the old one. Uncle Henry was milking the cows in the barnyard, and Toto had jumped out of her arms and was running toward the barn, barking furiously.

Dorothy stood up and found she was in her stocking-feet. For the Silver Shoes had fallen off in her flight through the air, and were lost forever in the desert.

Aunty Em had just come out of the house to water the cabbages when she looked up and saw Dorothy running toward her.

"My darling child!" she cried, folding the little girl in her arms and covering her face with kisses. "Where in the world did you come from?"

"From the Land of Oz," said Dorothy gravely. "And here is Toto, too And oh, Aunt Em! I'm so glad to be home again!"⁶

Something has happened, it's not clear exactly what. This is what Todorov would refer to as 'hesitation' when the reader is unclear whether what they have experienced is fantastic or not. But this is not a *portal*; it is a natural event which creates a mode of *transition*. It's not like the rabbit hole in Alice, which clearly acts as a portal. That said, if this is a portal-quest fantasy, then surely the White Rabbit represents some leakage from Wonderland through to Alice's world. However, as we know, the story ends as a dream-quest fantasy as Alice beats away the attacking cards, then:

[Alice] found herself lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister, who was gently brushing away some dead leaves that had fluttered down from the trees upon her face.

'Wake up, Alice dear,' said her sister; 'Why, what a long sleep you've had!'

'Oh, I've had such a curious dream!' said Alice, and she told her sister, as well as she could remember them, all these strange Adventures of hers that you have just finished reading about; and when she had finished, her sister kissed her, and said, 'It was a curious dream, dear, certainly; but now run in to your tea; it's getting late.' So Alice got up and ran off, thinking while she ran, as well she might, what a wonderful dream it had been.⁷

Narnia, on the other hand, presents us with a series of portals, some of them specific, such as the Wardrobe, or access through the picture frame in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, and even the school gate in *The Silver Chair*. But there are others: the Pevensie children are inexplicably whisked off a train platform when there are

⁶ L. Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Oxford: Children's Classics, 2008).

⁷ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass* (London, Vintage, 2007), p. 148.

summoned by Prince Caspian, while in *The Last Battle*, which focuses on the Narnians, characters from our world arrive in Narnia following a fatal accident in a manner later used in Stephen Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant Chronicles*, and the TV series *Life on Mars*. However, while all of these are means of travelling *directly* to Narnia (and the portal is usually clearly defined), *The Magician's Nephew* presents a problem – the 'portal' is reached through the rings filled with Atlantean dust given to Andrew Ketterley by his godmother – a human with fairy blood – these rings transport Digory and Polly to the Wood between the Worlds, and here they encounter portals to countless other worlds. The characters from each world are able to pass to another: Digory and Polly travel to Charn; Jadis, the White Queen of Charn is able to travel to late-Victorian London (although physically weakened, and her magical powers are lost, she is still able to exert an almost supernatural influence over characters such as Andrew Ketterley) and then onto the new-born world of Narnia where she develops her magic again.⁸ So, this is an example of magic travelling two ways through the portal: as we saw with the *Dark Tower* series, the portal does not necessarily have to lead to Earth. Earth is just one of myriad worlds to which the characters can travel. Likewise, the apple that Digory brings from Narnia grows into a tree, the timber of which is used to make the portal wardrobe. Is this not an example of Narnian magic leaking through into our world?

Mendlesohn also places Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* in the category of portal-quest fantasy, observing the trope that "the protagonist goes from a mundane life in which the fantastic, if she is aware of it, is very distant and unknown ... into direct contact with the fantastic, through which she transitions, to the point of negotiation with the world via the personal manipulation of the fantastic realm".⁹ This, of course, is a common trope in High Fantasy literature. It is a device so that there is no necessity of presenting the reader with a massive amount of information before the story starts: the reader can learn about the world along with the protagonist. We can see the device used in epic series such as David Eddings' *Belgariad*, Terry Brooks' *Shannara* and Raymond E Feist's *Midkemia* series. Admittedly, Tolkien does give an extraordinary amount of information before the narrative of the Fellowship starts: his prologue includes a sections concerning hobbits, pipeweed, the Ordering of the Shire and crucially, "Of the Finding of the Ring". However, if we consider *the Lord of the*

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew* (London: HarperCollinsChildren'sBooks, 2001).

⁹ Mendlesohn, pp. xix–xx.

Rings as a portal-quest fantasy, the definition is problematic because the magic *does* leak through. The ring is the most obvious example: “Bilbo’s ‘funny’ magic ring. That makes you invisible’. Bilbo uses it on occasions in the shire, including as a means to hide from the Sackville-Bagginses as well as to hide his departure from the Shire at the end of “A long-expected party”. Merry describes how

‘It was the Sackville-Bagginses that were his downfall ... One day, a year before the Party, I happened to be walking along the road, when I saw Bilbo ahead. Suddenly in the distance the S.-B.s appeared, coming towards us. Bilbo slowed down, and then hey presto! he vanished. I was so startled that I hardly had the wits to hide myself in a more ordinary fashion; but I got through the hedge and walked along the field inside. I was peeping through into the road, after the S.-B.s had passed, and was looking straight at Bilbo when he suddenly reappeared. I caught a glint of gold as he put something back in his trouser-pocket.’¹⁰

There is also leakage from the other side of the portal as Gandalf travels between Middle Earth and the Shire, so do the Black Riders, also the elves led by Gildor. When Frodo encounters the elves, he observes that “one can sometimes meet them [the elves] in the Woody End. They don’t live in the shire, but wander into it in Spring and Autumn, out of their own lands away beyond the Tower Hills”.¹¹ There is also the example of Sharkey, that is Saruman, entering the Shire and forcing the hobbits into slavery, as well as Galadriel’s gift of soil from Lothlórien to Sam in order to restore the shire.

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I’d like to turn now to the Harry Potter series of books, which Mendlesohn describes as a narrative “when the authors move a fantasy from an intrusion fantasy into a portal world, ... the style changes to accommodate the shift”.¹²

The *Harry Potter* series, Mendlesohn argues, begins as an Intrusion fantasy: “the abrupt arrival of the owls in Privet Drive ... causing chaos and disturbance – but very rapidly transmutes into almost archetypal portal fantasies, reliant on elaborate description”.¹³ The problem with this definition is that the magical world of Harry Potter and Hogwarts is overlaid on our world, rather than reached through a portal. It is similar to the access to London Below in Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* – here, both Door and the Marquis de Carabas (who are from London Below) can move freely between the worlds; Richard (from our world) cannot: one needs permission to

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, (London: Harper Collins, 2012), pp. 114–5.

¹¹ Tolkien, *Fellowship*, p. 88.

¹² Mendlesohn, pp. 246–7.

¹³ Mendlesohn, p. 2.

travel between worlds¹⁴. But, from the beginning of *The Philosopher's Stone*, Vernon Dursley notices "something peculiar" including a cat reading a map, "a lot of strangely dressed people in cloaks", and "a downpour of shooting stars".¹⁵ From the outset, there are elements of intrusion – leakage of magic from the wizarding world. The two worlds co-exist. Each new Prime Minister receives a visit from the Minister for Magic to inform them of the existence of the magical world. Muggles – non-magical people – can enter the magical realm – Hermione's parents, for example, can enter the Leaky Cauldron and meet with wizards and witches, but this can only be done with permission. In other places, where Muggles are not welcome, there are a series of charms in place, for example *Repello Muggletum* which Hermione uses when the trio go into hiding whilst looking for the horcruxes. When approaching the Quidditch World Cup Stadium, Muggles suddenly remember that they have an urgent appointment elsewhere. Others simply do not see, or perhaps *consciously choose* to ignore it: Petunia Dursley is aware that her sister is a witch but chooses to reject such knowledge. Other locations might include the Leaky Cauldron, and St Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries:

They had arrived outside a large, old fashioned, red-brick department store called Purge & Dowse Ltd. The place had a shabby, miserable air; the window displays consisted of a few chipped dummies with their wigs askew, standing at random and modelling fashions at least ten years out of date. Large signs on all the dusty doors read: 'Closed for refurbishment'. Harry distinctly heard a large woman laden with plastic shopping bags say to her friend as they passed, 'It's never open, that place.' ...

Tonks leaned close to the glass, looking up at the very ugly dummy, her breath steaming up the glass. 'Wotcher,' she said, 'we're here to see Arthur Weasley.'

Harry thought how absurd it was for Tonks to hear her talking so quietly through a sheet of glass ... Then he reminded himself that dummies couldn't hear anyway. Next second, his mouth opened in shock as the dummy gave a tiny nod and beckoned with its jointed finger. ...

Harry glanced around at the jostling crowd; not one of them seemed to have a glance for the window displays ... nor did any of them seem to have noticed that six people had just melted into thin air in front of them.

'C'mon,' growled Moody, giving Harry yet another poke in the back, and together they stepped forward through what felt like a sheet of cool water, emerging quite warm and dry on the other side.¹⁶

And finally, Hogwarts: approaching Hogwarts Muggles see only a decrepit ruin with a

¹⁴ Neil Gaiman, *Neverwhere* (London: Headline Review, 2005).

¹⁵ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), pp. 8, 10.

¹⁶ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 427.

sign saying “keep out”. But Hogwarts is defended by further charms so that no one can Apparate or Disapparate in the school grounds (the exception being Dumbledore).

Some might consider that the Entrance to Platform 9³/₄ in Kings Cross Station is the portal to Hogwarts. This is not the case: it’s simply a means of reaching the Hogwarts Express, which is *one* method of reaching Hogwarts. In the *Chamber of Secrets*, Harry and Ron are prevented from reaching the platform, so they find an alternative means by taking Ron’s father’s flying car; in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, the Knight bus takes Harry as far as the Leaky Cauldron (itself another portal to Diagon Alley), it goes all the way to Hogwarts in *The Order of the Phoenix*.

Within the magical overlap to our world, there are multiple portals or means of getting from one place to another. These include the use of *portkeys*, an everyday object that can transport one or more people to a specific location, as seen in *The Goblet of Fire* where one is used as a means of travelling to the Quiddich World Cup, and away from the Triwizard Tournament with tragic consequences. There is the use of *floo powder*, whereby characters travel through the chimney network. Then there is the use of the *Vanishing Cabinet* that Draco Malfoy repairs which allows the Death Eaters to enter Hogwarts from Borgin and Burke’s shop in Knockturn Alley in *The Half Blood Prince*.

Other portals include the entrances to locations within the magical overlap, for example number 12 Grimmauld Place (the location of the Order of the Phoenix).

Harry looked around at the houses again. They were standing outside number eleven; he looked to the left and saw number ten; to the right, however, was number thirteen.

“But where’s –?”

“Think about what you’ve just memorized,” said Lupin quietly.

Harry thought, and no sooner had he reached the part about number twelve Grimmauld Place, than a battered door emerged out of nowhere between numbers eleven and thirteen, followed swiftly by dirty walls and grimy windows. It was as though an extra house had inflated, pushing those on either side out of its way. Harry gaped at it. The stereo in number eleven thudded on. Apparently the Muggles inside hadn’t felt anything.¹⁷

Each of these is accessed through a portal which allowed the traveller to reach a location that is hidden from Muggle eyes. The Ministry of Magic is, on one occasion, accessed via a telephone box, which, I wonder, is perhaps a nod to Dr Who (the ultimate portal fantasy, although here magic not only passes through the portal, but it is potentially leaked into any world or time, often with dire consequences).

¹⁷ Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, p. 58.

There are many examples of the magic leaking from the wizarding world into our own. Dobby the house elf causes mayhem while trying to prevent Harry from returning to Hogwarts and the car driven by Ron and Harry is spotted as it flies towards Hogwarts in *The Chamber of Secrets*; Aunt Marge is inflated by Harry in *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (although this is inside in the book, outside in the film). The Weasleys travel by floo network to the Dursley's house in Privet Drive in *The Goblet of Fire*. This is not merely a case of the magic 'leaking' through, but instead *blasting* through as the fireplace has been blocked up. In these cases, there are only a few witnesses, but the Ministry of Magic has the International Statute of Secrecy whereby wizards and witches must hide the existence of magic from Muggles. They spend a lot of time sealing these leaks so that the magic remains in the wizarding world, and those who witness any such events have their memories erased. However, there are other, more spectacular intrusions of the wizarding world on the non-magical world, most specifically the attack on the Brockdale Bridge and the hurricane in the West Country in *The Half-Blood Prince*, in retaliation for the Minister of Magic refusing to step down in favour of Voldemort. However, the Ministry's Department of Misinformation covers up these events.

So, in moving towards a conclusion, despite many examples of portals within the novels, the Harry Potter series cannot be considered as a portal fantasy in the terms as advanced by Mendlesohn. There are too many examples of 'leakage' from the magical world to our own. Rather, it is an overlapping world that co-exists and occasionally interacts with our own. That said, there are examples of leakage in other texts that Mendlesohn names as portal-quest fantasy, including the *Narnia* series, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Lord of the Rings*.

But then, in fantasy literature, the portal does not have to be a passage *between* worlds. It is, just as feasibly, a place where the protagonist becomes *aware* of a world beyond their previous understanding: so, it is Polly and Digory crawling through the attic and accidentally entering Uncle Andrew's study; it is Alice seeing the waistcoat-wearing, talking rabbit; it is Gandalf revealing the nature of the One Ring; or it is Hagrid telling Harry "Yer a wizard". All of these events open a psychological portal to a world in which they are about to play a part, and once the protagonist has accepted that portal, things can never go back to the way they were.

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