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## Isn't it Romantic? Sacrificing Agency for Romance in *The Chronicles of Prydain*

### Abstract

Addresses the vexed question of Princess Eilonwy's gesture of giving up magic and immortality to be the wife of Taran and queen of Prydain. Was it a forced choice and a sacrifice of the capable and strong-willed girl's agency and power, or does it proceed logically from her depiction throughout the series?

### Additional Keywords

The Chronicles of Prydain

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ISN'T IT ROMANTIC?  
SACRIFICING AGENCY FOR ROMANCE IN  
*THE CHRONICLES OF PRYDAIN*

RODNEY M.D. PIERCE

IN AN ARTICLE ENTITLED "What's Wrong With CINDERELLA," author Peggy Orenstein laments the obsession American girls have with the concept of being a princess. When asked by her daughter why she was so against the idea of idolizing princesses, Orenstein replied, "It's just, honey, Cinderella doesn't really do anything" (Orenstein 62). The scene of Cinderella's magical transformation from a servant to a princess, though lamented by Orenstein as disempowering to women, has nonetheless become a cultural icon in film, television, and literature as a way to depict female power acquisition.

Actress Julia Roberts rose to fame and superstardom in *Pretty Woman*, a romantic comedy film that is a modern interpretation of the Cinderella myth. In one of the movie's most memorable scenes, Roberts's character, a Los Angeles prostitute named Vivian Ward, stands in the dressing room of a Rodeo Drive boutique trying on dress after dress. As the camera zooms in on Vivian's lithe body, she twirls girlishly in each glamorous outfit, clearly having the time of her life. In the next frame, she walks down the street with arms laden with shopping bags, turning heads of every wealthy man she sees. Vivian is at the height of her power here, and in case we doubt it, Roy Orbison's "Oh, Pretty Woman" plays as she struts down Rodeo Drive, reminding the audience that this glamorous creature we are watching is a dream girl who is "not the truth, no one could look as good as you" (Orbison).

To demonstrate her newfound power, Vivian walks into a boutique in which the salesladies refused to help her only days before. Dressed as she is in her new finery, the saleswomen fail to recognize her and are instantly solicitous until Vivian reminds them of their rudeness. Vivian may become socially acceptable, but she also surrenders the identity she has crafted for herself in order to become what Edward wants. Being a prostitute may not be the safest or most prestigious life choice, but it is one Vivian makes for herself. The makeover moment marks a distinct transference of power in which Vivian transitions from being Edward's employee to his accessory. Transformed into a lady, Vivian becomes a prostitute of a different sort, being deprived of the freedom to go as she pleases. Instead, she sits in the hotel, waiting for Edward

as a housewife would. At the film's outset, Vivian is the "property" of men of her choosing and *only* for as long as she chooses. Now she is distinctly Edward's.

Amanda Allen, author of "The Cinderella-Makers: Postwar Adolescent Girl Fiction as Commodity Tales" observes that much fiction acts almost as instruction guides for women about how to attain popularity or attract a man's attention. The right hairdo, the right dress and accessories are all that is needed to secure a desired social position. Even in YA Science Fiction and Fantasy (SFF), this trope is very much present, though hidden under the guise of romance.

In YA Fantasy series, the female character is usually wise, resourceful, and spirited, creating the idea that she is stronger and more capable than her counterparts in other genres. Oftentimes, she teaches the male character what he needs to know in order to become a hero. At a certain point, however, she undergoes a physical transformation and emerges traditionally beautiful, sacrificing her agency and individuality under the guise of romantic love to become an object for the hero to win.

It seems that nearly all of the YA Fantasy princesses in the 20th century, from Edgar Rice Burroughs's Martian Dejah Thoris, to J.R.R. Tolkien's elf-daughter Arwen, struggled in vain against the objectification foisted upon them. Dejah, despite being an accomplished and savvy political figure, is solely praised by all male characters in the novel for her extraordinary beauty. Her introduction in *A Princess of Mars* (1917) immediately marks her as an object for the male gaze for the novel's protagonist, John Carter, as "save for her highly wrought ornaments, she was entirely naked, nor could any apparel have enhanced the beauty of her perfect and symmetrical figure" (Burroughs 45). Dejah's beauty is the catalyst for Carter proving his worth as a masculine warrior, as her frequent capture by his various enemies and subsequent rescue are the central plots of *A Princess of Mars* and two of its sequels in Burroughs's *Barsoom* series. By winning Dejah as his wife, and repeatedly rescuing her from danger, Carter demonstrates to Dejah's father and grandfather that he is worthy of the throne he inherits through her.

Though Dejah's body is essential to obtaining the Martian throne, she has almost no agency in deciding to whom she is given. The contract for her person and her inheritance is negotiated entirely by men, reducing her to be little more than a prize broodmare. Tolkien's Arwen, from his 1954/1955 *Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*) trilogy, must endure a similar fate. Universally considered to be the definitive prototype of the SFF trilogy, *LotR's* view of female characters and their importance is reductive at best. When making the films, director Peter Jackson had to excise some of the male characters, just to give Liv Tyler's Arwen sufficient screen time to elevate her above bit-part status.

This predicament in which Tolkien places Arwen is akin to that of many other SSF heroines. Despite Peter Jackson's best efforts, Arwen's chief importance remains her beauty, the power of which induces her lover, Aragorn, to become High King in order to win her hand in marriage. Not only is Arwen absent from the battles for Middle-earth, but in order to remain with Aragorn, she must relinquish her magic, her family, and immortality.

Since Elrond will not give permission for the marriage unless Aragorn becomes king, Arwen's beauty is an immensely potent force for change, just not one she is given any agency to control. In the end, much like Dejah Thoris, the contract for her body and identity is brokered between two men, rendering her helpless.

The Princess Eilonwy, heroine of Lloyd Alexander's *Chronicles of Prydain* series, finds herself in a very similar predicament, though Alexander's intentions were for Eilonwy to represent a shift away from the literary trope of the passive fantasy maiden. When Alexander started writing *The Chronicles of Prydain* series in the mid-sixties, he noted that "girls in children's literature tended for the most part to be passive. [...] The boys flew the airplanes; the girls sat on the ground waving handkerchiefs at them. Even Nancy Drew was sort of a girly type" (Alexander, "Interview" 49).

Alexander wanted to liberate the fantasy heroine from a legacy of submissiveness by creating a self-actualizing character whose actions and reactions felt empowered and genuine, and was frequently told "that [his] character Eilonwy was part of the change in that climate" ("Interview" 49). She is also an homage to the strong female influences in the author's life. In a 2001 interview, Alexander stated that "Eilonwy is the way women really are. The women I've known in my life—young, middle-aged, old, my mother, my wife, my sister, my daughter—these were all bright, competent, active people. I do not have the raw material to create a dumb woman" ("Interview" 49). In some ways Alexander achieved his goal, for Eilonwy is certainly not dumb, though the contradiction between her strong presentation in the series early novels and her eventual fate is something that bears further scrutiny. With the advent of such contemporary empowered characters as J.K. Rowling's Hermione Granger, Suzanne Collins's Katniss Everdeen, and Kristin Cashore's Lady Katsa, we can now re-evaluate Eilonwy and her place in the shifting continuum of powerful fantasy heroines.

When she is introduced in book one of the series, *The Book of Three* [BT], Eilonwy is a far more self-possessed character than Taran, the series' hero. Described as having a "delicate" face, "though smudged," a "white robe" girded "with silver links," though "mud-stained," and being "one or two years younger than [Taran], but fully as tall," she is equal parts feminine and tomboy (BT 54). In Eilonwy, Alexander established a character who is independent,

practical, resourceful, and wise; in short, she epitomizes all of the qualities which Taran believes that a hero should possess, and which he must spend the series acquiring.

When Taran first appears in the series, he is a boy with very traditional and classical ideas of the hero that he seeks to fill. As much as Gwydion, the noble and fearless prince of Prydain, epitomizes that mythical hero, so does Eilonwy, but rather than accepting Eilonwy's example and counsel, Taran quarrels with her and spurns her help, as though punishing her for not fitting the princess ideal he has fashioned in his mind. Writer Rona Glass asserts that "as a person [Eilonwy] is logical, practical, and independent, often seeing through muddled situations to the heart of the matter when others do not. However, it is not these traits which impress Taran the most as he falls in love with her. It is her nobility; she is a princess" (16).

Rather than loving the girl herself, Taran loves the idea of Eilonwy as Princess of the Royal House of Llyr, daughter of Angharad, daughter of Regat, though she does not reveal this fact to him until the very end of *The Book of Three*. Realizing that true nobility is denoted through deeds, not birthright or bloodline, Eilonwy is modest about her lineage, preferring to be accepted into Taran's group of (male) cohorts based on her merits rather than her rank. Though Eilonwy often acts as informal teacher to Taran in the ways of heroism, he consistently rejects her aid and tries to convince her to stay on the sidelines, desperately trying to force Eilonwy to fit his stereotyped image of what a princess should be. For most of the series, however, Eilonwy valiantly resists his attempts to cow her, proving herself to be, in the words of Robin McKinley, one of the "girls who does things" (McKinley).

When Taran is imprisoned by Queen Achren, Eilonwy's (supposed) aunt, he relies entirely on the princess to extricate him from his situation. "Free my companion first," Taran tells her, "[a]nd there is a white horse, Melyngar [...] you must get her too. And weapons for us" (BT 57). At no point is Eilonwy afraid she will fail in her rescue attempt. In fact, to her, it is a rollicking adventure. "I would love to see [Achren's] face when she comes down to find you," Eilonwy says as she rescues Taran and leads him away, "that would be more fun than anything I could think of" (BT 56). Though he is frequently derisive of Eilonwy being just a girl, Taran falls and stumbles several times following Eilonwy, who "[moves] so quickly Taran [has] difficulty keeping up with her" (BT 61) as she weaves adeptly through the tunnels of the castle toward safety. Despite Taran's condescendingly sexist dismissals of her, Eilonwy is not cowed. "I don't like being called 'a girl' and 'this girl' as if I didn't have a name at all" Eilonwy yells at Taran for refusing to address her by name (BT 92). As they are fleeing the castle, Eilonwy has no problem

upbraiding Taran for his inability to comprehend the escape route she has previously explained:

"Haven't I just been and finished telling you? Are you slow-witted? I'm so sorry for you. It's terrible to be dull and stupid. What's your name?" she went on. "It makes me feel funny not knowing someone's name. Wrong-footed you know, or as if I had three thumbs on one hand, if you see what I mean." (BT 51)

Though Taran objects to having her on his quest, Eilonwy is frequently the voice of reason on the journey in *The Book of Three*. His annoyance with her stems from his sense of inadequacy in the face of her complete self-reliance. Taran already fancies himself a hero, but Eilonwy in no way lives up to his romantic notion of a helpless princess. Instead she is the one who insists upon obtaining weapons before fleeing Spiral Castle (Achren's home) and is the only member of the party who recognizes one of the swords as having mystical powers that can only be invoked by one of royal blood. Given that she is still a child herself, Eilonwy is wise beyond her years and possesses a keen understanding of human emotion. In *The Black Cauldron* [BC], in order to obtain the evil cauldron from the witches of Morva, Taran must part with either the memory of a summer's day or the magical broach of Adaon, which he is extremely loath to do. Not only was it a gift from a dead friend, it empowers him by giving him prophetic dreams and visions. Without it, Taran feels that he is unworthy of the title hero. Eilonwy's words to him indicate both her sympathy for his loss and her understanding that true heroism comes from inner strength rather than reliance on rank or talismans.

"I realize it's no consolation to you," she said, "but if you look at it in one way, you didn't give up a thing to the enchantresses, not really. You did exchange the clasp and everything that went along with it. But don't you see, all those things came from the clasp itself: they weren't inside of you."

"I think," she added, "it would have been much worse giving up a summer day. That's part of you, I mean. I know I shouldn't want to give up a single one of mine. Or even a winter day, for the matter of that. So, when you come right down to it, Orddu didn't take anything from *you*; why, you're still yourself and you can't deny that!" (BC 168)

As *The Book of Three* draws to a close, Eilonwy proves to be as fearless in battle as the men she fights alongside. When they encounter the enemy warriors, Eilonwy does not flee, instead she "jumped lightly from [her] saddle and snatched a bow and a handful of arrows" (BT 104). She outruns Taran,

whom she kicks for trying to force her to safety; by the time he reaches her, she has climbed a hillock, strung her bow, and let loose an arrow upon which she has cast a spell. When Taran suggests that Fflewddur Flam, his bard companion, take Eilonwy away from harm to her kin people, she angrily replies, "try to conduct me to my mean stupid kinsmen [...] that harp will be in pieces around your ears!" (BT 92). Finally, when trapped in the realm of the Fair Folk, Eilonwy alone is astute enough to compliment their king (Eiddleg) on the beauty of his kingdom and the ingenuity of his magic, mollifying him long enough that he agrees to aid the travelers in their quest. "I see you're the sort of person one can talk to intelligently," King Eiddleg says to Eilonwy. "It's unheard of for one of you big shambling louts to have any kind of insight into these matters. But you at least seem to understand the problems we face" (BT 140).

Though she proves herself in battle time and again, Eilonwy is consistently coddled and treated like a feckless female, especially in the series' final novel, *The High King* [HK]. As Taran and his comrades prepare to depart for battle, Eilonwy remarks that "since no one has mentioned it [...] it seems I'm not being asked to come along. Very well, I shan't insist" (HK 44). Dallben, a powerful sorcerer, cites Eilonwy's decision to remain out of harm's way as proof that "[y]ou, too, have gained wisdom" (44), remarking that her days being trained as a proper lady on the Isle of Mona were not ill spent. Only after insinuating that she might follow them anyway, is she accepted as a travel companion, though not before a male character notes that "it is hardly the conduct of a young lady to force her own way thus" (HK 45). Throughout the novel, the potential disaster of Eilonwy's assertive and unladylike behavior hangs over her head like the proverbial sword of Damocles. From Gwydion, who smiles patronizingly saying, "Princess. What I cannot prevent I accept," (45) to Taran, who repeatedly screams at Eilonwy to stay out of harm's way, her male companions consistently disregard her, even when her counsel proves life-saving.

Upon arriving at King Smoit's castle, which has been secretly besieged, Eilonwy immediately recognizes that something is amiss, since "it is courtesy for a cantrev noble to fly the Golden Sunburst of Don when one of the Royal House visits" and the banner is conspicuously absent (HK 69). Fflewddur waves the girl's remark aside, saying condescendingly that he understands "how such things are done" and that surely Gwydion has "told Smoit to put aside the formalities" to hide his presence (HK 69-70). When Eilonwy renews her protests, noting that the castle gates should not be closed to guests and that Smoit himself should be waiting with an honor guard, Fflewddur again dismisses her concerns, stating that he has "been on a thousand secret missions" and that "such wisdom will come to [Eilonwy] in



time" (HK 69-70). Once her suspicions of foul play are proven accurate, there is no acknowledgment of her veracity, though she also captured the dwarf whose magic allows them to storm the castle and free Taran and Gwydion.

Later during this episode, Eilonwy must remind King Rhun, her intended husband, that his royal duties preclude his recklessly entering the fighting. "You're not a Prince anymore," she tells him. "You're King of Mona. Your life isn't altogether your own" (HK 87). When Rhun grumbles that he wishes to repay Taran for having helped him previously, Eilonwy again must remind him that "[Rhun] owes another kind of debt to the [people] of Mona [...], and theirs is the greater claim" (HK 88).

Once the travel party reaches *Caer Dathryl*, where a major battle will take place, again, attention is negatively drawn to Eilonwy's refusal to don a dress and sit with the court women. "For the sake of being a Princess, I've been half drowned in soapy water," Eilonwy asserts, "and that's quite enough. [...] As for skirts, I'm comfortable just as I am" (HK 132-33). Only the commencement of the war council staves off further male protest at her behavior. When she charges into the battle, breaking through the enemy flank, Taran accuses Eilonwy of having "lost [her] wits" (HK 156). As the battle conclude, however, and *Caer Dathryl* is stormed, Eilonwy's decision to fight rather than remain watching from the castle walls proves prophetic. Had she lingered with the other women, she would have been raped and murdered by the soldiers who breached the castle's defenses.

At the end of the series, Taran, having matured into a hero and become High King of *Prydain*, also marries Eilonwy with whom he has fallen in love. Marion Carr, in examining the moment of the marriage, remarks that "surely one of the most remarkably satisfying declarations of love in all literature for children (and perhaps in an even broader range) is Eilonwy's decision: 'If enchantments are what separate us, then I should be well rid of them!'" (Carr 508-10). Upon first reading, I was mostly in agreement. After all, Eilonwy and Taran spend large portions of the series squabbling back in forth in exchanges fraught with sexual chemistry and unexpressed desire, most often resulting in Eilonwy's famous argument-ending phrase, "Taran of *Caer Dallben*, I'm not speaking to you!" It is clear early on in the series that she is attracted to him, and is waiting patiently for him to realize that his feelings for her run as deep. She tells him in *The Book of Three* that true nobility comes from within, indicating that she cares little for titles and does not judge him for his lack of one. Despite this, Taran does not comprehend the true meaning of her words, and so Eilonwy must wait patiently as he castigates himself for not having a title equal to hers.

In *Taran Wanderer* [TW], Eilonwy vanishes as a character entirely (except for the occasional mention) as Taran journeys throughout *Prydain*

seeking knowledge of his deceased parents, in hope that they were of noble birth. At the end of the novel, Taran tells a friend the wisdom he has learned, namely that "As for my parentage [...] it makes little difference. True kinship has naught to do with blood ties, however strong they may be. [...] The folk of the Free Commots taught me well, that manhood is not given but earned" (*TW* 271). The journey chronicled in this book, undertaken so that Taran might ask for Eilonwy's hand in marriage as her equal, might have been necessary for Taran's maturation as a hero and as a man, but it was never necessary where the relationship with the princess was concerned. She loves Taran for himself and when he finally finds the courage to ask for her, she tells him as much, saying "Well indeed, [...] I wondered if you'd ever get round to asking. Of course I will, and if you'd given half a thought to the question you'd have already known my answer" (*HK* 282). So for both of them, particularly for Eilonwy, who has waited for several years (and five books) for Taran to grow up and admit his feelings, this should indeed be a triumph of the most romantic order.

As I re-read the final scene in *The High King*, however, I realized that the fulfillment of this romantic plot comes entirely at the expense of Eilonwy, who destroys all of her magical power, and agency, and discards her familial identity in order to be with her true love. Though her moments of sacrifice are written as necessary and termed romantic, if she has to destroy her dreams and entire identity in order to stay with Taran, how romantic is it? In her essay on *A Wrinkle in Time* and *The High King*, Rona Glass compares the romantic relationship of lead characters Meg Murray and Calvin O'Keefe with that of Taran and Princess Eilonwy in order to determine why the former seems more loving, while the latter is frustrating as opposed to amorous.

One key difference, Glass, notes, is that in Madeleine L'Engle's series, the main character is female and the secondary character male, while the reverse is true in *The Chronicles of Prydain*. We are, after all, reading Taran's story and following his adventures, so on one hand, the events of the story should shape up in a way that brings his character to full maturation and fruition as a man and hero. Glass notes that "While it may be somewhat understandable and acceptable for Meg to rely on Calvin, it is less appropriate for Taran to depend on Eilonwy. This is particularly true given *The High King's* framework of mythology and traditional literature" (15). While I understand that a general trope for high fantasy is "the questing hero and the clearly secondary love/ideal for whose sake, less than with whose help, the hero acts," I wonder why this trope is so intractable (15). The point of the high fantasy story is to trace the hero's journey (within a magical framework) from childhood to adulthood. As he grows, and learns to question childhood beliefs and to accept the world around him, why can Taran not also come to accept

and love the many facets to Eilonwy's character as part of his maturation, rather than needing her to conform to his ideal of a helpless feminine princess?

Taran does grow up in many ways through the series, as his acceptance of his kingship in the series finale would indicate. When told that his reign will necessitate hardship and perhaps thankless toil, Taran replies that:

Long ago I yearned to be a hero without knowing, in truth, what a hero was. Now, perhaps, I understand it a little better. A grower of turnips or a shaper of clay, a Commot farmer or a king—every man is a hero if he strives more for others than for himself alone. Once [...] I hoped for a glorious destiny [...]. That dream has vanished with my childhood; and though a pleasant dream it was fit only for a child. (HK 291-92)

Interestingly enough, Taran has matured sufficiently enough to be able to examine his childhood dreams and see the flaws inherent in them. He regards them fondly, but has embraced a more elastic and noble idea of what constitutes a hero. Where Eilonwy, and the concept of a princess and love interest is concerned, however, his ideal remains as childish and superficial as it was in *The Book of Three*, when he first encountered the feisty Eilonwy. Rather than allowing Taran's princess ideal to mature as he does, the narrative compels Eilonwy to fit his image by divesting her of her powers, heritage, and dreams while convincing the reader of its romantic qualities and appeal because such behavior results in a royal marriage.

Marion Carr, in examining the ten essential characteristics of the mythical hero, notes that Taran fulfills eight of these, one of which is that "The hero wins a maiden, usually after overcoming great dangers" (Carr 509). Since, heretofore, Eilonwy has never been in any danger from which she could not extricate herself, the events of *The Castle of Llyr* [CL] cast Eilonwy into such a position, enabling Taran to become the hero who rescues her from the clutches of the Queen Achren. In this book, number three in the series of five, Taran is older and has matured a bit from the child he was at the series' outset. Glass notes, however, that "as he gains in stature and becomes a man his view of Eilonwy increasingly becomes that of hero to princess rather than person to person. [...] Based on her past actions, Taran has no reason to view her as anything but a true helpmeet" (Glass 17). To that end, Alexander invents justification for Taran's attitude by shipping Eilonwy off to the Isle of Mona, where she is to be trained as a lady and proper princess. Since Eilonwy will not willingly remove herself from the otherwise male adventuring clan, the insistence on her taking her proper place in society is the perfect way to force this separation, and to allow Taran's view of the princess to shift from vaguely resentful to protective and romantic.

What does being a princess and young lady mean in *The Castle of Llyr*? At the beginning of the text Dallben says that he is sending Eilonwy to the castle Dinas Rhydnant on the Isle of Mona to learn the ways of a princess, because “raising a young lady is a mystery beyond even an enchanter’s skill” (CL 10). As she always does, Eilonwy ponders this statement and practically responds, “I don’t care about being a princess! And since I’m already a young lady, how else could I behave? That’s like asking a fish to learn how to swim” (CL 10). In a sense, Eilonwy is correct. She is brave, wise, witty, resourceful, confident, and capable. She is already a remarkable young lady without formal tutelage. Dallben ostensibly is sending her off to learn to be a royal young lady but his reasoning to Eilonwy, “Child, child, do you not see? For each of us comes a time when we must be more than what we are” comes across as enigmatic and strange at the time (CL 10). Of course, Dallben’s advice to her is revisited at the end of the book, and given Eilonwy’s travails, it is clear that in telling her to be more than she is, Dallben is not merely referring to her putting away her sword in exchange for a crown, scepter, and a weaving loom.

In Dinys Rhydnant, at the court of King Rhuddlum and Queen Teleria, Eilonwy’s make-over/physical transformation occurs, and the romantic plotline is jumpstarted. Interestingly enough, Taran, who quarrels with Eilonwy for not being his ideal, does not understand his amorous feelings towards her until he sees her attired as the princess he has envisioned. After a trip to Queen Teleria’s store rooms, Eilonwy emerges and: “Taran saw that Eilonwy wore a new cloak; her hair had been combed and dressed in a different fashion; among the ladies, she shone like a bird of golden plumage; and, with a curious twinge of heart, Taran realized that had it not been for her chattering he might not have known her” (CL 37). Contrast that with the description of her appearance prior to leaving Care Dallben as having “skinned knees, torn robe, and unshod feet” (10), and the superficiality of Taran’s “love” for Eilonwy becomes more apparent.

The more feminine appearance, which fits Taran’s concept of her as ‘lady to be won,’ is what finally allows him to make sense of his feelings and for his heart to become enamored with her, whereas the earlier description of Eilonwy as his fighting companion invokes no clarity of his feelings. While Eilonwy’s affection for Taran is unconditional and unwavering, his for her is not only superficial but based on her conforming to his conceptions of a feminine princess (Glass 17). Again, why is this romantic? It is another reincarnation of the Cinderella restoration myth. Eilonwy, who was kidnapped as a child, was denied the palace upbringing she undoubtedly would have had, and all of the elegant trappings that go with such a life. When Taran beholds her in King Rhuddlum’s great hall, he is seeing the image of a Princess Eilonwy restored to her rightful place, appearing as she undoubtedly would

have had she been raised in *Caer Colur*, her ancestral home off the coast of *Dinas Rhydnant*. The image of Eilonwy, bejeweled and impeccably coiffed in a throne room, is not emblematic of the girl herself. She is a warrior princess, not an idle court lady, which she proclaims later in the scene. Running up to Taran she exclaims:

I've never met such silly women! Why, I don't think there's one of them that's ever drawn a sword! All they want to talk about is sewing and embroidery and weaving, and how to run a castle. The ones who have husbands are always complaining about them, and the ones who haven't are always complaining about the lack of them. They've never been out of *Dinas Rhydnant* in their lives! (CL 38-39)

Her horror at the prospect of spending time with the court ladies, or worse, being expected to imitate them, proves that the image with which Taran is enamored is not something Eilonwy intends to embody. Alexander's narrative, however, contrives to place Eilonwy in a situation in which she will become Taran's ideal, whether she wishes it or not. Soon after arriving at the castle, Taran encounters Prince Gwydion in disguise, who informs him that a terrible fate is going to befall Eilonwy unless they keep watch. Furthermore, Gwydion instructs Taran not to tell anyone of the threat or Gwydion's presence in *Dinas Rhydnant*, especially Eilonwy. By not alerting her to the danger, Taran and Gwydion force Eilonwy into the position of helpless victim, which she would never have otherwise occupied. In fact, at the end of the novel, Eilonwy reveals that she knew that Magg (Achren's henchman) was up to something suspicious, so Gwydion and Taran's secrecy was for naught and in fact did more harm than good. Eilonwy only left with Magg (and was subsequently kidnapped) because there was no other way of finding out what was transpiring. As she tells Taran, "How else was I going to find out? You were so busy sitting in front of my chamber and threatening to have a guard put round me. I knew there was no use trying to get any sense out of you" (CL 200). By keeping his silence, however, Taran is propelled into the heroic role of protector, and this allows his relationship with Eilonwy to shift from equals to hero and maiden in distress. He often quarrels with her, but his conversations in *The Castle of Llyr* take on the authoritative tone of commands.

"Eilonwy," Taran said firmly, "you are not to leave *Dinas Rhydnant*."

Eilonwy, so surprised she stopped talking for a moment, stared at him open-mouthed. "What?" she cried. "What did you say? Not leave the castle? Taran of *Caer Dallben*, I think the salt air must have pickled your wits." [...]

“You are not to set foot outside this place,” he ordered angrily. “And if I think you have any idea of doing so, I shall ask King Rhuddlum to set a guard over you.” (CL 40-41)

This exchange is insulting to Eilonwy in the text, and should be interpreted as such by the reader, but the way that Alexander has crafted the chapter is designed to make the reader side with Taran. Bound as he is by an oath of secrecy, Taran cannot reveal to Eilonwy why is he being so authoritative, and thus his domineering handling of her is construed as romantic, heroic, and protective rather than offensive and abusive, which, given how often she has proven herself in dangerous situations, it certainly is in any other circumstance. Of course, despite Taran’s best efforts, Eilonwy is kidnapped by Magg and taken to Queen Achren, who bewitches the girl in hopes of manipulating her magic. Given Taran and Gwydion’s mishandling of the situation (again, knowing Eilonwy, they should have realized that simply ordering her to stay put without sufficient explanation would only result in her doing the opposite) almost makes it seem as though they wanted her to be captured. Certainly, unless she is, Taran cannot fulfill the “win maiden” portion of the traditional hero code, he would soon sail home, leaving Eilonwy in Dinas Rhydnant, and the adventure would end there.

Once Eilonwy is taken, Taran leads his friends in pursuit of her, and the adventure ultimately takes them to *Caer Colur*, Eilonwy’s home and the seat of the original rulers of Prydain. Eilonwy is the descendant of an ancient line of formidable enchantresses, who once ruled over Prydain from *Caer Colur*. Regat, her grandmother, was the last enchantress to reign, as the line was broken when Eilonwy’s mother, Angharad, forsook her position to wed with a commoner. Since Eilonwy was stolen from her mother by Achren, her magical powers have gone largely undeveloped, and it has been her dearest wish to become an enchantress like her ancestresses. Achren brings Eilonwy to *Caer Colur* in hopes of unleashing her powers and using them to augment her own. What is interesting about the battle in *Caer Colur* is that it points out a trend in Alexander’s Prydain chronicles, in which female power-holders sacrifice their magic for the sake of romantic love.

Achren was once High Queen of Prydain until she taught her lover, Arawn, her magical secrets. After learning what he could, Arawn became all powerful and supplanted Achren, casting her from her castle *Annuvin* and ruling in her place. Throughout the series, Arawn is the supreme villain, with Achren operating first as his henchwoman and later as a vengeful and desperate spurned lover trying to regain what she lost. Ultimately Achren dies helping Taran and Gwydion to defeat Arawn. A similar fate befalls Eilonwy’s mother. Angharad leaves her home and forsakes her family and her magical

birthright to marry Geraint, a commoner. After the child is born, Eilonwy is stolen from Angharad, who travels the country in search of her, ultimately meeting her death at the hands of Morda, a male creature who steals her magical implements. This same choice, between fulfilling her destiny as a sorceress or giving up her powers and identity, is also presented to Eilonwy in the climaxes of *The Castle of Llyr* and *The High King*.

Inside Caer Colur, Achren gives Eilonwy her mother's book of spells and Eilonwy's golden "bauble," an orb which is the key to reading the enchantments. As Taran and Gwydion watch in horror, Eilonwy fights an internal battle of wills, part of her wanting to become an enchantress, part of her wanting to destroy the spells and save the kingdom. Alexander, in describing the castle and its powers, lets the reader know which way Eilonwy must choose while simultaneously categorizing the female power of Caer Colur as dangerous: "Throughout the Great Hall rose a faint, confused whispering, as though the wind had gained tongue, urging, cajoling, commanding. The very stones of Caer Colur seemed to have taken voice" (CL 188).

Given the negative connotations of the words "cajoling" and "commanding," Alexander's description of Caer Colur evokes siren-like imagery, and the font of female power becomes akin to those mythical creatures that lured sailors to their doom with their bewitching voices. A similar action is taking place in this scene, in which Eilonwy's ancestral home whispers to her, tempting her to choose personal gain and glory over the good of Prydain. By characterizing Caer Colur so negatively, Alexander marks the castle as tainted by evil and thus it must be destroyed. What the reader is seeing is essentially the destruction of Eilonwy's only real home, her link to her ancestresses, her magical agency and her dream. Prompted by Caer Colur's negative description and its link with Achren, however, the reader is meant to view this not as a sorrowful act, but as a decent and necessary one.

Near the end of the novel, as Eilonwy gazes upon the ruins of her ancestral home, she tries to articulate how sad this incident has been for her. "Now I shall never be an enchantress. There's nothing left for me now except being a girl" (CL 202). Gwydion's response, "That is more than enough cause for pride" is akin to an argument Timothy Shary makes regarding the transformation of smart girls into sexy girls in film. In reference to the movie *She's Out of Control*, Shary notes that after the main character, Katie, ditches her glasses and braces and becomes sexually desirable, "the narrative has clearly moved away from demonstrating her intellectual integrity to revealing her moral integrity, to showing that the 'smart girl' has gained her greatest pride in being a 'good girl'" (Shary 240). Gwydion is making a similar argument with regards to Eilonwy's rather considerable loss, that it is far better that she

become a good yet ordinary girl than for her to have become a powerful one with the potential for being employed for evil. Funny that Gwydion never considers that Eilonwy could have successfully wielded her power and not lapsed into despotism as Achren did. After all, Eilonwy successfully overthrew Achren's magical hold over her and destroyed the spells. With that force of will, Eilonwy could very well have ruled Prydain well, as her grandmother did, but then Taran could not play the hero to her damsel in distress.

Only after reflecting on her lost power does Eilonwy remember Dallben's words exhorting her to be more than what she is and think:

Can it be true that being a young lady is more important than being an enchantress? Perhaps that's what he meant. I shall have to find out for myself. [...] So if I must learn to be a young lady, whatever that may be that's any different from what I am, [...] then I shall try to learn twice as fast as those silly geese at Dinas Rhydant and be home twice as soon. For Caer Dallben is my only real home now. (CL 204-205)

It is interesting considering Dallben's advice at the end of *The Castle of Llyr*, and how it lays the seed for the involuntary transformation of Eilonwy from warrior-queen into feminine dream-maiden for Taran. Where Taran is concerned, Dallben's advice means that the Assistant Pig-Keeper must rise up and become a hero. In Eilonwy's case, however, becoming more than she is requires her to sacrifice all that she is. By heeding Dallben's advice, Eilonwy becomes a princess without a kingdom (having destroyed hers) and is now a princess in name only.

By destroying Caer Colur and making it a fundamentally necessary act of sacrifice, Alexander has effectively forced Eilonwy to become the young lady that Taran envisions, for no other path is left open to her. Not only is she resigned to it, she is willing to do it twice as fast to return to Taran at Caer Dallben, for as she says, she has no other home now but where he also lives. In this way, Alexander manipulates the reader into seeing this incident from Taran and Gwydion's perspective rather than Eilonwy's. She will work hard in Dinas Rhydant, and return to Taran, whom she basically pledges to wait for at the novel's conclusion. Not only has he successfully played the hero, he has also been assured of Eilonwy's devotion, that she will not allow the King and Queen to betroth her to their son while she stays with them. In his author's note, Alexander writes that "In this chronicle of Prydain, [...] what befalls the heroine is as important, and perilous, as the hero's own quest" (CL 7). I would argue that in this chronicle, rather than both journeys being equally important, the heroine's journey ends so that her fate can be aligned with the hero's once he fulfils his destiny. This narrative lays the groundwork for Taran winning the hand of Eilonwy, by ensuring that she cannot take a different path.



This conclusion, begun in *The Castle of Llyr*, comes to fruition in *The High King*, when Eilonwy is purged of her warrior-spirit by her near rape at the hands of the marauder Dorath. He binds her arms and smacks Eilonwy so hard that her head sings. Realizing she is the beloved of his enemy Taran, Dorath tells Eilonwy that, "You shall go free, [...] after a time, my pretty Princess, after a time. When you shall be fitting company for pig-keepers, perhaps you may join the swineherd again. Perhaps he will even recognize your charms, whatever may be left of them" (HK 202-203). In the previous novels, Eilonwy consistently maintains her composure in the face of adversity, but here "she could sense the outlaw's thoughts behind his cold eyes and for the first time she was deeply afraid" (HK 203). This is one of the few times in which Eilonwy does not manage to free herself from danger. Instead, she threatens Dorath with Taran's wrath should she come to harm, something Eilonwy has never done before. After this incident, Eilonwy is considerably chastened, choosing to remain in the protection of male companions during the last battle as opposed to engaging in combat.

Her near-rape drives the fight from Eilonwy, and at the end of the novel, she gives up her what is left of her magic and her heritage to wed with Taran. Though she lacks the knowledge to use her magical powers, Eilonwy is still in possession of magic, which means that she must retire to the Summer Country, as all magical beings are leaving Prydain to make way for the reign of men. However, when Taran decides to remain in Prydain as High King, Eilonwy, in defense of her romance with Taran, renounces her magical heritage, exclaiming, "It's not my fault I was born into a family of enchantresses. I didn't ask for magical powers" (HK 301). In order to bring about a romantic conclusion to the series, Alexander has Eilonwy completely reverse her position in regards to her magical powers. But since she has been forced to destroy her use of her magical powers for the good of Prydain, ridding herself of her magical blood for the ruler of Prydain's marriage-bed is made to seem like a small sacrifice.

Taran, meanwhile, is willing to stay in Prydain even though it will prevent him marrying Eilonwy. In fact, he makes the choice to do so after proposing to her but without discussing it with her, but even this he is forgiven because of the beautiful way in which he breaks it to Eilonwy. "I have long loved you, and loved you even before I knew that I did. If my heart breaks to part from our companions, it breaks twice over to part from you," Taran says to Eilonwy. "Yet so it must be. I cannot do otherwise" (HK 289-90). For the hero of the novels, duty supersedes love. If a romantic ending is to be achieved, Eilonwy, not Taran, must renounce her birthright, her eternal life in the Summer Country, so that Taran can fulfill his destiny. The only thing she retains is her beguiling physical beauty or "the magic and mystery all women

share" (HK 302). Eilonwy, who begins the Prydain series ennobled in her own right and born to great power, ends having been reduced to Taran's childhood ideal of a princess.

In contrast to Achren, who was corrupted by power, Eilonwy is extolled for being a "good girl" and choosing to relinquish that power in favor of romantic love and the good of the kingdom. Achren and her lust for power only bring about destruction. "Your enchantments have ever been the enchantments of death," says Gwydion. "Seek life, Achren" (CL 197). Eilonwy, in choosing her friends over Caer Colur and Taran over immortality in the Summer Country, is praised for having chosen life, even though that life contains no identity for her except as his queen.

When I first read *The Chronicles of Prydain*, I felt convinced that Alexander had failed to create in Eilonwy the empowered heroine that he promised. Her relationship to female-agency is problematic at times, for Achren's magic and her own are characterized as too dangerous to exist. The optics of the final scene in *The High King* also appear to belie Alexander's claims, for Taran is left with all of the authority and Eilonwy with all of the sacrifice. The reader is never given an explanation for what exactly the "magic and mystery that all women share" is, or how that adequately compensates for the loss of either incredible magical heritage or a throne that is Eilonwy's by birthright (HK 302). Moreover, all the way through the series, she endures consistent condescension from all of the male characters, who just want her to put on a dress, act like a girl, and stay out of harm's way.

Too much focus on the obvious ways in which Eilonwy is disenfranchised, however, can result in an oversimplification of the crucial way that Alexander empowers her at the series' conclusion. I got lost in the idea that Eilonwy is yet another female character forced to relinquish her power, until I realized that there is no force applied to coerce this decision. Alexander makes Eilonwy a powerful heroine, not simply by bestowing power on her, but in giving her a choice as to what to do with that power. Tolkien's Arwen, in contrast, never has the agency over her own body and life that Eilonwy is granted. Arwen may desire a relationship with Aragorn, but the terms under which her body and hand in marriage are bestowed upon him are entirely dictated by Elrond; by stipulating that the pair may not marry until Aragorn becomes High King, her father disenfranchises Arwen from the social contract governing her person and identity. The subordination of her desires and commoditization of her body are based on a simple thesis often seen in fantasy novels: Arwen is Elrond's to control because he made her, and will become Aragorn's to control because he meets the terms set about by her previous owner. Arwen's identity (as daughter/wife/queen/mother), therefore, is never her own to shape, but is entirely dictated by which man possesses her.

Alexander breaks with this tradition by equating Eilonwy's surrender of magic blood to her defloration in the marriage-bed and granting her absolute power over the situation. The transformation occurs when Eilonwy turns a magic ring on her finger that elicits "a sharp cry of pain. And in Taran's hand the light of [her] bauble winked out" (HK 302). As with the destruction of Caer Colur, this intimate experience is entirely controlled by Eilonwy, relegating Taran to the position of spectator. Since the ring will serve only her and "grant [her] *only* the deepest wish of her own heart," Eilonwy's transitions from girl to woman and immortal to human are entirely self-enacted (HK 302, emphasis added). Unlike Arwen, Eilonwy is allowed to select an identity for herself as Taran's wife and queen, rather than remain shackled to the identity that was chosen for her by her ancestry, magical heritage, or any male character.

This last scene in *The High King* is crucial to determining whether Alexander kept his promise to elevate Eilonwy above passive fantasy heroines, and the entire argument centers around the word "choice." All through the *Chronicles of Prydain*, characters try to mold Eilonwy into the gender-stereotyped idea of what a princess should be; an identity she vehemently resists at every turn and insists does not suit her.

At the end of the series, she is called upon to sacrifice her magical blood in order to be with Taran, and in some ways, that is a devastating choice. Being Taran's wife rather than an autonomous queen is not the option I, as a reader, wanted Eilonwy to select, but what makes the moment a triumph is that the decision is entirely hers. After bidding Taran farewell, Eilonwy reiterates the injustice of her being forced into another role that is not of her choosing, likening her enchantress ancestry to being, "worse than being made to wear a pair of shoes that doesn't fit! I don't see why I have to keep them!" (HK 301). The tension between Eilonwy's magical birthright and the human existence to which she aspires proves that the mantle of heritage, whether patrilineal or matrilineal in origin, is equally burdensome and constricting to the process of identity-formation. While there are patriarchal pressures on Eilonwy to conform to a traditionally feminine identity, she must ultimately abjure her maternal legacy in order to create a life that suits her.

If *Prydain* teaches us anything about power, it is that relinquishing it can be as brave and selfless a choice as its acquisition. Throughout the series, Eilonwy often acts as Taran's informal teacher in the ways and duties of royalty; surrendering her personal power for Taran and the good of their people is the ultimate lesson in altruism, for the pair enters the marriage on more equal terms. Rather than choosing between power and romance, Eilonwy forges an identity that enables her to have both. The power of choice that she exercises marks her as one of YA Fantasy's first autonomous fantasy heroines

and also as the feminist contemporary of more modern characters who face similar choices regarding power and family. In *Mockingjay*, the final installment of *The Hunger Games* trilogy, Collins eschews the traditionally romantic ending by making sacrifice an integral part of Katniss Everdeen's life choices. Physically broken and disillusioned with mankind's endless penchant for self-destruction, Katniss walks away from power. Motherhood affords her peace and an opportunity to redefine herself, for instead of retreating into a passive role, "she plans to become her children's teacher, using her personal history to prepare them for what may lie ahead. In this way, she maintains her autonomy and identity long after the action of the trilogy has concluded" (DeaVault 197). The choices that female characters like Eilonwy are forced to make are emblematic of the imperfect world in which we, the readers, live. What makes Eilonwy a groundbreaking character has less to do with her being the series' most powerful figure than her license to decide what to do with that power. Female characters, much like their real life counterparts, still struggle with the daunting idea of "having it all." Lloyd Alexander giving Eilonwy the authority to choose her destiny in 1968 was a critical step in the right direction.

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