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### Female Agency in Fantasy Films of the 1980s.

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FEMALE AGENCY IN FANTASY FILMS OF THE 1980s

by

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## Introduction

Before any films were projected on large screens to popcorn-fed audiences, fairy tales were entertaining adults and children with fantasy worlds. Originally “the fairy tale was first a simple, imaginative oral tale containing magical and miraculous elements and was related to the belief systems, values and rites, and experiences of pagan peoples” (Zipes 21). These tales were meant for adults but “resonate with [children]...offering hope that we can change ourselves while changing the world” (Zipes 20). Many of the classic fairy tales we know today, and some of the more obscure ones, were a large part of my childhood. I had more than one book of fairy tales on my small bedroom bookshelf, and I recall being fascinated by both the magic and the horror encapsulated within these short stories. Jack Zipes also states, “the world of the fairy tale has always been created as a counter-world to the reality of the storyteller” (14). My reality was that of many 1980s children living in planned communities. I lived in a comfortable suburban neighborhood and went to a safe local public school, but at night I could seek out Bluebeard’s hidden chamber or stray from the path on my way to grandmother’s. In the pages of fairy tales there were talking animals, witches with agendas, and princesses who danced all night long ruining their shoes. It only makes sense then that this early love of fairy tales, arguably the origin of all fantasy, led me right into the waiting arms of the fantasy film.

In the 1980s films depicting both fantasy worlds and fantastic scenarios became quite popular with studios and audiences. One could even go a little farther back in time and look at a few films from the 1970s as preparing movie audiences for the fantasy boom to come. Tara Ghai even argues that it is “hard to underestimate the importance of *Star Wars* (1977) in ushering in the new age of fantasy cinema” (6). There is one small problem with many of the fantasy films of this time period; they often focused on male characters. These fantasy films are still

interesting, and as a child I loved *The Neverending Story* and the animated version of *The Hobbit*, but where “many classic fairy tales and literary fantasies focus on female characters, cinematic fantasies usually focus on boys” (Block 69). It is not that a person can’t relate to a character of a different gender, it’s that while a person can relate, she may not be seeing herself on the screen. *Time Bandits* is an entertaining movie, but it doesn’t universalize to girls. It turns out representation can strike a spectator - in this case a 6 year old girl in 1987 - with a much deeper connection to the story.

In this vein, fantasy is not just escapism; it has the power of approaching the truth of the human condition. *The Dark Crystal*, *The Last Unicorn*, *Ladyhawke*, *Legend*, *Labyrinth*, and *Willow* each made a lasting impression on me as a child, and they still remain among my favorites. *The Dark Crystal* is the tale of two young Gelflings named Jen and Kira, who must save his world from slipping into darkness. In this film the symbolism is rich but the counterpart of Kira to Jen is significant to the outcome of the story. Her role is not minimized though she comes into the tale later. In *The Last Unicorn* the female unicorn must go on a journey to find if and why all the other unicorns have disappeared. *Ladyhawke* is titled for its female character who, despite not being on screen as much as the male characters, still plays a vital role in the action. Lili in the film *Legend* makes a decision that sets the world in darkness and upon realizing her mistake takes action to reverse it. Sarah is the protagonist in *Labyrinth*, and though an otherwise male dominated cast surrounds her, each choice she makes is hers alone as she fights to save her baby brother. *Labyrinth* in particular is “the tale of a young girl finding her way through the center of fantasy. That, in itself, made the film something of a rarity” and one that I watched enough to know every line by heart (Block 69). Then there is *Willow*, a film that seems to have a male protagonist, but each turn of events is actually controlled by female

characters. This last film is an excellent case study for the female archetypes used in fantasy film.

Just as in fairytales, where representations tend to be symbolic, so is the way in which gender is represented in fantasy film. Often the women in these films are not perfect princesses waiting to be saved, but instead they are characters that make mistakes and take on challenges. Take *Labyrinth* for example where “many of the film’s young fans, particularly the female fans, love *Labyrinth* for exactly that reason. They identify with Sarah, warts and all. ‘Sarah is, in fact, very flawed...I think that is part of why they like her’ ” (Block 67). In these films I was able to witness female characters with flaws they had to work with or overcome; though this idea seems small, it is important that people can see themselves within the narrative forms to which they are exposed.

Within the films themselves there are even moments where the female is devalued. The Lord of Darkness, in the film *Legend*, has just found out that only the male unicorn has been neutralized when his goblin makes an excuse that the mare is “just a female...she has no power” to which Darkness replies, “only the power of creation” (Scott). Where his goblin seems to embody the voice of many societies, the antagonist Darkness seems to understand there is power within the feminine. He speaks of creation, which is often the trope of where female power lies, but it is an acknowledgement that there is power there. The real power, he will find, is within the agency of a female character. Vanessa Veselka writes that a “true quest is about agency, and the capacity to be driven past one’s limits in pursuit of something greater. It’s about desire that extends beyond what we may know about who we are. It’s a test of mettle, a destiny.” So beyond the trope of creation as the seat of female power, I would argue that there is also power in the choices that women make within a narrative. The more choices that a woman can make, the more

control and power she is given within her story. Fantasy films are a powerful narrative form because they provide insight into the human condition just as cleanly as the novel might. In these six 1980s films the representation of gender shows a truth about female agency.



## Chapter 1

### Guiding Female Characters

In fantasy movies the protagonists take spectators on a journey. This particular character is the one the spectator stays with, roots for, cries with, fights with, and ultimately gets excited with when she achieves her goal. In these stories there also are other characters helping the lead to find her way and without these companions the protagonist could not achieve her quest fully. Take Sarah, from *Labyrinth*, who willingly throws herself into finding her baby brother and getting him back. Sarah is surrounded by helpful characters like Hoggle, Ludo, and the endearing Sir Didymus. In the end, Sarah has to face her challenge on her own, but she could never have reached that point without help. All of Sarah's companions, however, are male. There are also fantasy films that embrace the idea of a guiding female character, or one who helps steer the protagonist toward his or her goal. In fact, one could argue that is more often the case in the traditional sense of the fantasy genre. These women will often fit into a classic literary archetype within the film, and they will offer information or wisdom that helps move the protagonist forward.

Sometimes the help that is offered or given is small. Take Oona from *Legend* as the first example of this type of assistance. It isn't until 25 minutes into the film that the spectator is introduced to Oona as the camera follows her along the sparkling snow covered ground. She is a tiny fairy, at this point just a light, who is a part of Honeythorn Gump's group of enchanted characters. When Gump takes Jack to find the armor so he can fight; he claims he "can't go with [him] now...Oona will guide the way," (Scott). She coaxes and guides him through a series of underground tunnels to where there is golden, likely enchanted, armor he can use. During this moment, she flickers and changes into a full size form, introducing herself to Jack with a

whispery, “I’m Oona. Nobody knows but you. It’s our secret Jack. Don’t tell Gump. Promise? Promise! I could be anything you want me to be, even your heart’s desire. You’ve got to help us Jack.” (Scott). This entire section is filmed tight on their faces and as a shot reverse shot between she and Jack, with waterfalls of glitter falling in front of her each time she speaks. The sparkle and shine of the scene implies there is magic and work. One must assume the secret she is referring to is her ability to shape change at will, which is a talent that comes into play later in the film. Oona uses her magic, and a little bit of implied fairy seduction, to get Jack to don armor he is unsure of and fight.

The second action taken by Oona is to free the group once they have been trapped in a cell after falling in. Jack gives away her secret to make this happen, and she is angry saying, “Our secret” to which Jack replies, “Our secret will keep forever in this grave if you don’t help us” (Scott). After a moment, she says she will help if Jack kisses her. The kiss is only a peck on the cheek, and offended by the scant offer, she then uses her ability to look like Lili to seduce a real kiss out of him. This tactic fails so she flies away in anger, and for a moment the characters, and the spectator, think that she won’t be coming back. She does return with the keys, and tells the group that they look like, “mourners at [their] own funeral” before Gump commands and she uses the key to free them. Though Gump seems in charge of this moment, without her ability to shape shift and get the key they would have ended their journey in that dark cell.

There is one more small moment where her services are needed. After the group has set up a rather elaborate system of mirrors, made of shields, to draw in the sunlight they need Screwball, who stayed at the top, to start the reflection chain. It is Oona who must “fly up like the wind” and tell him to start; however, she arrives to find him asleep (Scott). She must then try to wake him, and in between dramatic shots of a fight between Jack and Darkness, the spectator

sees her struggle to try and lift it on her own without help. Finally, she and her companion get the shield up shooting a large, bright ray of sunlight into the realm of Darkness. Without her to fly up and give the signal, this crucial move in the final confrontation would not be possible. In fact, each of her small moments of aid is necessary for the journey of these characters as a whole. Despite her apparent crush and desire to seduce Jack, she is still a worthy ally who comes through.

In line with those that use magic, in *Willow* several female guides are vastly important though they have small roles. After giving up the baby to Madmartagin and thinking he should head home, Willow sees that Brownies, tiny woodland people who are riding a bird, have stolen the baby. Thus he is led to woodland fairy Cherlindra who arrives floating and overlaid with a glowing layer of white light effect. It is she who gives Willow the wand he must take to Fin Raziel and she who tells Willow that the baby's name is Elora Danan. There doesn't appear to be any arguing with her magical wisdom, and so Willow takes the babe, and the wand, and continues on. She plays the simple magical guide with the role of pointing the hero in the correct direction.

With her directions in mind Willow finds Fin Reziel and it is then that one of the most important characters joins the party to protect Elora. It is Raziel who helps Willow with magic and who will also fight Queen Bavmorda later. She is necessary, as Willow has very little power he has explored on his own. She is both a guide and a mentor on this journey even though she spends a good portion of the first part in varying animal forms. Without her magic and knowledge Willow would not have been able to help Elora and stand up against Bavmorda.

There are also guides without magic but with wisdom. *The Dark Crystal's* Aughra seems to be a mentor with nothing but questions. The male lead, Jen, finds Aughra's domain after

ambiguous directions from his dying master. In a scene where Jen is climbs along a wall full of dusty pink colored vines, he is suddenly grabbed and held in place by the sentient flora. Thrust up to his face level is a gnarled looking hand holding a moving eyeball. The spectator soon learns this hand and eyeball belong to Aughra. She can remove her eye and see with it not attached to her head. She begins to become much more than a creature with questions. Aughra is “the mysterious keeper of secrets who holds information about Thra’s [the world of *The Dark Crystal*] rich history and the prophecy that Jen is destined to fulfill” (Gaines 110). She is the wise old crone and earth mother of this tale. Aughra is the one who has kept the piece of the shard safe all the years that it has been broken off of the larger crystal. She also “serves as a prophet, whose long life enables her not only to know the past but also see what is coming in the future” (Gains 110). Visually Aughra is arresting; she has twisted ram horns, a non-functioning third eye in the middle of her forehead, and only one actual working eye in the correct place. All of this is set on a squat, heavyset female figure; she comes across as both ugly and lovely in a fantastic sense. Once Jen is inside with her she is able to explain what the Great Conjunction is, which the spectator will recognize as an eclipse, and she teaches Jen a bit of the world’s history. In her home she has a giant moving model of the stars and planets. Just before she is able to tell Jen what to do with the crystal, Garthim, soldier creatures from the Skeksis castle, attack them and she is unable to impart that wisdom. One has to wonder if she has known all this time that Jen would eventually show to fulfill the prophecy. She is able to guide Jen, though her time with him is cut short by the attack, just enough to point him in the correct direction.

Later in the film, after the female lead Kira has been captured and her essence is being stolen, Aughra calls out from her nearby cage to remind her to “call the animals...[she] has the gift” (Henson). Due to this interruption and prompt, Kira is able to tap into her abilities and free

herself with the help of the animals she riles up. Once Kira is free, Aughra warns her it is “too late too late Gelfling [the species that Jen and Kira are], you come too late...very soon three suns touch...” (Henson). Kira runs off to find Jen and make sure they succeed. Soon after Jen climbs into the room where Kira was and Aughra still is and he expresses his surprise she is still alive. Her reply to him is a quick, “No time, no time, when single shines the triple sun. The Great Conjunction comes” (Henson). She keeps encouraging the pair to go forth and complete their prophesized task of taking the land back from evil.

In a less dramatic, and inconsequential moment, Aughra does one more helpful task. Kira has a small dog-like pet called Fizzgig. At some point the poor furry creature had been knocked down into a glowing red chasm. Aughra uses a stick to pull the little guy out and save him from doom. While this does nothing for the story itself, the spectator sees there is kindness in this gruff prophet who has been alive for untold years waiting for this day.

Molly Grue in *The Last Unicorn* also has her share of gruffness. This character is first introduced when Schmendrick, the magician who is traveling with the titular last unicorn, runs into a camp of outlaws and is captured. Molly is apparently the love of Captain Cully, the leader of the group, and the camp cook. She is drawn with brown hair that sticks out all over and in a peasant style dress. Upon meeting Schmendrick she tells Cully to, “gut him before he does you the way the last one did” (Rankin). Cully excuses her actions by saying, “That’s only Molly Grue’s way...she has a good heart” (Rankin). So the spectator learns early that she is tough, and unlikely to fold quickly in an argument. After Schmendrick fools the camp so he can get away, Molly follows him and meets the unicorn. This meeting between the two female characters is a powerful moment in the narrative. Molly, in anger asks the unicorn, “Where have you been...where were you 20 years ago...where were you when I was new...how dare you come to

me now when I am this..." and then she breaks down and cries (Rankin). Molly's words are another insight to the rough life she has had, and her age, as the unicorn is in front of her long after the stories say she should have seen it.

So, Molly joins the search party against Schmendrick's wishes. When the magician balks Molly replies with a simple "ask her", referring to the unicorn, and there is no argument to be had (Rankin). Here she becomes an ally, knowing things that they do not, like which direction to go to get to Haggard's castle as they had been going the wrong way. After the magic, through Schmendrick, changes the unicorn into human form, it's Molly who runs to her to comfort. Once they enter Haggard's castle, it's Molly who gets them leave to stay. When King Haggard explains he can see no reason to hire a magician when he has one already she says to him, "I can. He doesn't, this marvelous Mabruk, doesn't make you happy," (Rankin). It is this bold sass that gets Mabruk fired and allows the party to stay in Haggard's castle, thus giving them space and time to search for the Red Bull and the unicorns that are missing.

Her contributions do not stop there. In a series of cuts showing Molly in the kitchen and Schmendrick performing for the king, the spectator understands the group has been at the castle for some time now. Finally, it is Molly to whom the cat speaks, and he tells her the riddle directing them to take the king's way to the bull. Before now no one else had been able to figure that information out. The cat points out that the human form of the unicorn, Amalthea, becomes more human and less unicorn each day. Amalthea "must do what she came to do. She must take the king's way down to the red bull" (Rankin). She picks him up and gets him to reveal the riddle for how to get down to the lair. Molly is the first to find the skull and the clock that the cat mentions in the riddle, not Schmendrick.

The spectator also sees Molly's kindness to Prince Lir and he confesses his unrequited love for the Lady Amalthea; he is unaware she is a unicorn in disguise. She is helpful but tough and not afraid to be tough on the unicorn either. At one point she admonishes her for being so cruel to Prince Lir. She is a kind of glue for all the parties involved at this point in the story. In the end, Schmendrick invites her to continue on traveling with him, showing that her kindness and wisdom, despite her gruff exterior, has won him over.

In each of these films these female characters are technically supporting characters. Their role appears to be small, but their actions end up being essential. The unicorn could not succeed without allowing Molly into her group, and perhaps she knows that on some level. Willow cannot get anywhere without Raziel or Cherlindra. Aughra's wisdom leads Jen and Kira. Even Oona, whose part seems so small, is the only means to completing certain tasks. These characters help the protagonist continue forward and they do so with wisdom, guidance, and useful information no one else seems to have. What is depicted is a simple kindness, the idea that people need each other to get through their journey successfully. No one can succeed completely alone.

## Chapter 2

### Physical Transformations

In any genre of film the transformation of a character into someone different can be crucial to the story line; however, in fantasy films it can take on a whole new meaning. Katherine Fowkes writes that, “a core of fantasy themes and ideas exists at some metaphorical center, and movies may share many or a few of these commonalities such as ...physical transformations” (5). Often these transformations are necessary to symbolize or demonstrate character growth. They can also be a visible symbol of her emotional changes and signify a move from innocence to wisdom. Keeping this idea in mind, one can watch *Legend*, *Labyrinth*, *The Last Unicorn*, *Willow*, and *Ladyhawke* and witness the physical changes of the main female characters.

*Labyrinth* and *Legend* both introduce a ‘seduction scene’ where each girl must resist the temptation of an evil monarch. The physical set up of these moments are pivotal to the overall message each director was trying to deliver. When Sarah is betrayed with that poisoned peach from Hoggle, she falls into a drugged state where she drifts into the world of a bubble. There is a close up shot of Sarah’s face as she realizes she was betrayed; she stares off into the distance. The next scene plays out in a lush ballroom with curved walls, as if captured in a bubble, and is full of ornately dressed characters waltzing about. It is both beautiful and disorienting as the masks worn are grotesque and the characters taunting as they swirl in dance. Sarah, now dressed in a sumptuous white ball gown with silver vines in her hair seems to wander the room in a confused haze. In this moment she goes from child to woman, shedding the modern jeans and top she had been wearing before for a dress that embodies both her innocence, with it’s color, and the fantasy of being in a dreams state, with it’s design. Eventually, she is in the arms of The Goblin King himself, dancing to a heavy-handed love song. There is even a moment where the



spectator, and perhaps even Sarah, seems to fall into the idea of this romance. “ ‘There’s a point in the movie,’ says Froud, ‘where the relationship changes. We sort of get that when we arrive at the ballroom scene. Because once Jareth becomes sexual, he’s dangerous. And everybody, even the other dancers, backs away...That’s what gives power to his character’ ” (Block 58). When a clock arrests Sarah’s attention she realizes she is being seduced away from her cause and she flees to the edge of the room, breaking the curved wall with a chair and thus rendering the dream broken. The danger is not just in the Goblin King himself, but in the idea that Sarah could be tempted away from what was important to her. Released from the ballroom she returns to her original clothes as she falls back down to the ground; a clear connection to finding stability and getting back on track.

*Legend’s* Lili, in a parallel moment in her story, awakens alone in a large fire lighted room and begins to fearfully look around. In an extreme close up of Lili’s face the spectator can see she is terrified but curious. She notices a box of shimmering priceless jewelry left out and open; the only sounds at this moment are her breathing and the tinkling of gems as she lifts a necklace into the air and begins to bring it to her neck. Just as she realizes what she is about to do she turns to find a faceless creature, like a moving mannequin, in a black gown dancing around the room. It dances for her, and though she shrinks away in fear at first, it soon tempts her into dancing with it as the music rises in a carnival-like waltz. In a swirl of shadows and raised hands of submission Lili is soon dancing alone, dressed in the navel plunging gown the shadow creature had been wearing. Her clothing has instantaneously shifted from a ragged white highborn style dress, to this black, fitted, revealing gown. Physically she has left behind the innocent naïve princess and donned the look a much darker look that speaks of her potential sexuality. In this moment the Lord of Darkness decides to appear for her. When she first sees her

captor as he emerges from a mirror, hoof by black hoof, she faints. When she finally awakens Darkness has a large table set with dozens of dishes and wine glasses that fill themselves. He asks her to eat, “just to please him” and the Lili that had appeared to have been tempted by jewels and her “bridal gown” retorts with a sharp, “I do nothing for your pleasure” (Scott). She bravely rebels against all of his commands perhaps because of the fear that made her faint when she first saw him. His stature and presence makes giving into her temptation too large a risk.

These scenes are both deeply important and represent a crucial change in the characters. By denying Jareth’s and Darkness’s offerings for physical luxuries, and their offers of a strange kind of love, each girl shows a deep maturity they did not have earlier in their stories. Sarah and Lili have both moved past childish whims that all of their desires should be filled, and realize that they must fight for the few things that are important. Neither one gives in to the opulent seduction set up to represent the fulfillment of their selfish and childish desires. These moments are meant to derail them but do not succeed in doing so. They girls are making stronger, wiser choices than they made at the beginning.

Where Lili and Sarah change clothes, which is a symbolic outward showing of each girls’ shedding of her innocence, other fantasy females might completely change in form in a fairytale like manner. In fact, “fairy-tale influences on fantasy movies are obvious through their reliance on stock characters, magical themes, and iconography common to such tales (wizard, wands, etc.), but we also find explicitly physical transformations in a variety of films, such as *Ladyhawke...*” (Fowkes 9). Fin Raziel in *Willow*, the unicorn in *The Last Unicorn*, and Isabeau, in *Ladyhawke*, each shift from creature to woman. The female characters in these three movies have both a human body and an animal-like appearance. Fin Raziel is supposed to be a great sorceress but she has been living on an island trapped by a spell Bavmorda cast some time ago.

When she first comes on screen, through Willow's eyes, she is a possum, and shortly after the Brownie characters echo the spectator's thoughts with their observation that, "That's Rasziel...I expected something more grand less uh...fuzzy" (Howard). She eventually teaches Willow the words to a spell to change her back into a woman. The spectator learns that this transformation, from her cursed state as an animal into a woman, is necessary for her to perform any magic that will help defeat the evil Queen Bavmorda. In the course of the film's events, Willow manages to change Fin Raziel from a possum into a rook on the first try, from the rook to a goat a little later in the plot, and then finally from a goat into her human female form. In this final change she morphs through several animals in 1980s style CGI before finally landing upon that of a slender woman. Upon gaining her true form back, she realizes with a sad "has it been so long" that much more time than she thought has passed since she was originally enchanted (Howard). Her human form is that of an old woman; not the young and beautiful woman she remembers being. Despite her age, she goes on to fight with the rest of the group. One is left to ponder that it could be because of her age that she is able to face Bavmorda this time when a spell from this same opponent had changed her so many years ago. She now has the wisdom that comes with those long enchanted years on the island, and she cannot fight at all until she regains her true form no matter how long it has been.

A similar process occurs for Isabeau in *Ladyhawke*. In her first appearance on screen she stops the character Philippe "Mouse" Gaston from hurting a large black wolf that is near. There is a stunningly composed shot where she slowly turns to face the camera wearing a black hooded cloak that frames and highlights her face set with deeply blue eyes. In this introduction the spectator is easily as speechless as Philippe by her mysterious appearance. He even talks out loud to himself saying, "...or more likely maybe I'm asleep dreaming that I'm awake wondering if I

am dreaming” (Donner). From off in the distance there comes a soft reply of, “you are dreaming” said by Isabeau (Donner). She is introduced as a lovely mystery who seems to have a connection to the large black wolf that Philippe keeps seeing; however, he only sees her during the night and he sees the revenge-seeking Etienne, with a hawk, during the day. Unlike Philippe, the spectator begins to put together Isabeau and her animal self, the hawk who is constantly with Etienne. It isn’t until she is hurt as a hawk, defending Etienne in a fight, that Philippe catches on when he must take the injured animal to a monk. When he walks in to a room and sees a woman where the monk had taken a bird, Philippe asks, “Are you flesh or spirit?” and Isabeau responds with, “I am sorrow” which confirms the reveal that she is the hawk he brought in (Donner). As she heals from her wound it is the monk who tells Philippe the story of the curse on Isabeau and Etienne and how she is a hawk during the day while Etienne is a wolf at night. Throughout most of the film the spectator watches Isabeau go from hawk to lady and back; it is Philippe who gives her the name Lady Hawk when she sits on Etienne’s arm in animal form.

There is no indication as to why the Bishop, who cursed the two lovers, chose a hawk and a wolf other than their complete incompatibility. But the fierceness of Isabeau’s spirit is embodied in that of the hawk, and the cleverness that is associated with such a bird is easily found in the human character. In a dramatic scene where she and Philippe must escape from the Bishop’s hunting military, she loses her footing though Philippe grabs her hand, she slips just as the sun rises. In a fade scene she changes from woman to hawk and back with a close up on her eyes changing into the eyes of the bird. Isabeau’s screams are layered with that of the cries of the hawk she changes into which creates a haunting sound and the spectator is meant to understand the pain of a split life even though it is the hawk side of her that saves her from death this time. Her constant physical transformation represents the half-life that she must live, both half animal

and half a woman. A little deeper into the story and one realizes that she is also living with half her heart as she must watch her true love Etienne always be one sunrise away. They cannot speak but only attend and protect each other. In the most striking, and heart breaking, physical change in the film she has just saved Etienne and has spent the night laying with his wolf form to keep it warm. As the sun rises the next morning he shifts to man as she shifts to hawk light moves through her; she becomes the light before she is fully back into her hawk form. At that moment she has made a choice and we see that she is the purity, the brightness, in their relationship despite actions she has had to take.

Isabeau also has an ever-changing wardrobe; not once does she wear the same outfit when she is on screen. These clothing changes also help define and signal growth in her character. One particular change occurs just after she has readily killed a man, a hired hunter, in order to save the wolf form of Etienne. Until this point she has worn dark, practical clothes save a blue dress Philippe steals for her when they are hiding out. She is in that garment only briefly; in that moment the two characters relax their guard and even practice dancing. After the death of the hunter at her hands, though, her cloak changes to red. This visual color change signals her ferocity and her willingness to go to great lengths in order to keep the wolf version, and thus all versions, of Etienne safe. “When Navarre’s wolf form turns up, growling at Cesar, Isabeau exploits the huntsman’s moment of distraction to kick him into his own wolf trap. She stands over him and watches him convulse until she is sure he’s dead – no pity, no fear, no squeamishness,” wrote Leah Schnelbach about this exact moment in the film. Isabeau is not some innocent girl who must be protected and cared for, but a woman who is willing to share a hard and tragic life just to stay with the man she loves.

In the last of the animal changes, or in this case a mystical creature, there is the unicorn in *The Last Unicorn*. As the unicorn she has no name, she simply knows herself as a unicorn with her own forest to watch over. It is not until 45 minutes into the film, when the unicorn has reached her destination with the help of Schmendrick and Molly Grue, that she must be changed. The Red Bull, a tool of King Haggard used to round up all the unicorns in the world, senses the unicorn as she is, and Schmendrick must ask the magic to save her. Magic chooses the form of a pale woman with long locks of white hair. Molly immediately recognizes the folly in this transformation and she yells, “What have you done? You’ve trapped her in a human body, she’ll go mad” (Rankin). The unicorn is also distraught in this form; she says that she, “can feel this body dying all around [her]” (Rankin). Immortal creatures are not meant to take mortal forms, especially against their will. It is, however, the only way the small band of adventurers can get into the castle and find out where all the unicorns have gone. At this point in the story she is finally named, for she cannot be introduced as a human girl if she doesn’t have a name, so Schmendrick calls her Amalthea. Both her body and her identity are forced into something else so that she can survive long enough to complete her quest. Early on, Haggard notices that he cannot see himself in her eyes, despite being human, they are not reflective as they should be. In this state she is still more unicorn than woman, but as time passes she becomes more human than mythical creature. Standing on a castle balcony talking to Molly she asks, “What is it that I am seeking in this strange place, day after day. I knew a moment ago, but I’ve forgotten” (Rankin). The unicorn’s transformation was necessary but comes at the risk of losing herself and her goal. In that body, transformed as she is, she begins to respond to the kindness of Prince Lir, who is trying to court her, a thing she never would have done as a creature, and this giving into Lir’s love is another sign of her loss. When Haggard finally confronts her, and confesses he has all the

unicorns, she is so lost that her eyes are reflective and she cannot see her own kind out on the ocean waves where he has trapped them all. As the climax of the tale is reached, Schmendrick once more asks the magic to “do as [it] will” and changes her back into her mythical form so she can face the Red Bull (Rankin). After, Schmendrick says to Molly of the unicorn’s change that she, “is the only [unicorn] that knows what regret is, and love” (Rankin). She was wise and innocent before her physical change, but she will always be different from the other unicorns as she has been mortal and knows what it is like to feel deeply.

The transformations that occur are in films where “magic is considered very much a natural entity rather than treated with unease...perhaps the choice of animals rather than any other forms is a means of connecting magic with the natural world; nature in this case being symbolized by animals” (Ghai). Each woman who experiences changes into an animal, or into a human, became something different because of those changes. Fin Raziel is wiser and must see to her new body and life. Isabeau embodies the fierceness of the animal side that holds her days captive. The unicorn will always be a bit different from anyone else in her kind because of her experiences as a woman. These are not just plot devices but embodiments of a character’s soul.

Not all physical transformations signify a loss of innocence or a dramatic shift in character; however, their symbolic representation can be just as telling. Oona in *Legend* is a small fairy depicted by a bee-sized light. But when trying to seduce the protagonist, Jack, she shows him that she can become as large as a human. This little trick is a secret she has been hiding from Gump, the leader of the forest folk. At one point the group gets stuck in a cell and Jack gives away Oona’s secret to save them. She can fly through the bars, grow larger and get the key, then free them all. While this doesn’t seem as significant as any of the aforementioned changes; it seems to represent the secrets that women can hold within them. By all rights Gump

should be aware of her power, but he has no idea, going so far as to call her a “willful sprite” when he sees her and says “how dare [she] keep such secrets” (Scott). Oona replies in a petulant voice that, “they are [hers] to keep” (Scott). He had no idea she was capable of such things and it seems he never thought to ask either.

Every woman who experiences a transformation in these stories loses a little of herself in the process. Where Lili and Sarah grow up somewhat they lose innocence just as the unicorn does during her time as a mortal. Fin Raziel must face the changes time has wrought while accepting this is the only form she can wield magic in. Isabeau must live only half her life as a woman, and only at night, but she proves her worth and mettle doing so. And even a secret isn’t fully safe as Oona finds out; her transformation gives away part of herself. These are not small but rather significant moments in the emotional growth and journey of each female character.



## Chapter 3

### The Final Battle

The landscape of the fantasy film, clearly inspired by the fairytale, is full of archetypes like the hero, good triumphing over evil, the quest, and so on. I would argue one of the most common of these tropes is the final battle; the place where the characters must take a stand against the antagonist. The fantasy films within are no exception to this archetype; however, each of the following battles concern female characters in the films and their ability to stand up for what is right. All of the decisions to continue to fight and to follow the quest come to fruition in the final battles. Each character must overcome her own individual challenge and fight alone in whatever capacity given.

*Labyrinth's* Sarah fights with her acquired friends against the goblin army to make it to the castle. Once there, she turns to her companions and says, "I have to face him alone," and when she is questioned on this decision, she shakes her head and replies, "because that's the way it is done" (Henson). As Sarah navigated the ever-changing labyrinth she learned that she has no actual control over the world itself. The only real control she has had is over the choices she makes during this challenge by "learning to think for herself, accepting that she won't always get her way, [and by] facing up to the fact that reality isn't going to bend itself to her whims" (McGovern). She goes on alone, equipped with what she has learned, and must make it through one final Escher staircase-filled room where she tries to get her brother who is always just out of reach. Finally, she faces Jareth who emerges from a shadowed doorway, now dressed in dreamy cream colors and feathers. The Goblin King makes one last attempt to control Sarah, first by warning her that he has "been generous up until now but [he] can be cruel," and then switching gears by telling her that all she has to do is "fear [him] love [him] do as [he] say[s] and [he] will

be [her] slave” (Henson). No longer a child herself, she is not taken by either his threats or his promises and she begins to recite the part from the play she was trying to remember at the beginning of the film. The spectator is reminded of the foreshadowing at the opening of the film where Sarah playacts this same scene alone in a park. True understanding of the lines set in as she repeats them out loud, “For my will is as strong as yours. And my kingdom as great...” (Henson). Her final triumph comes in six simple words that now hold more meaning to her than they did in the beginning. With genuine surprise on her face, she looks Jareth directly in the eyes and says, “You have no power over me” (Henson). Her battle doesn’t have an epic fight with swords and spells. She simply uses her newly earned courage and takes back all control of the situation defeating The Goblin King by recognizing her own agency and thus her true power.

Where Sarah uses words, Lili must take action. She has figured out Darkness and, “she cunningly tempers her responses to him, going so far as to deliberately provoke him and then to laugh coyly when he rages” (Valentine). In a dark twist Lili asks Darkness if, as her bridal gift from him, she can kill the remaining unicorn and offers to stay with him if he lets her. He is so surprised and pleased by the idea that he clearly agrees with a deep, terrifying laugh. When the actual moment where Lili has the sword of the unicorn finally comes, the fairies are not sure if they can trust the situation. Gump, a wood sprite with Jack, readies his bow and aims at Lili just in case. Jack closes his eyes, Lili raises the axe, and then brings it down on the chain that holds the unicorn, freeing the beast and causing total chaos that allows the band of heroes to fight. Genevieve Valentine points out that though they wait to see what will happen, “Gump’s drawn bow is Scott’s tantalizing hint to the spectator that Lili really is no longer the innocent girl Jack knew” (Valentine). Nor can she ever be that girl again. In order for her to make the choice to use Darkness’s desires against him, she must grow past the childish innocent she was in the

beginning. She has to dig deep and find courage that she spins into cleverness. Without her choice in that moment Jack and his band of fairies would not have succeeded at all. One could argue that her story arc is more interesting than the protagonist, Jack's, and that "the Lili who outsmarted the son of the Devil will be a much better queen than the Lili who thought that no harm could come to her if her intentions were pure" (Valentine). She has developed a well thought-out agency through her journey, which in turn allows her to complete this pivotal moment in her final battle. Her weapon is the choice she makes in freeing the unicorn thus righting the wrong she caused and giving others a chance to physically fight.

*Ladyhawke's* Isabeau has a similar final battle in her story. As she is the other half of a pair, she does not fight in some epic battle but with her spirit. Schnellbach says it well when she points out that, "Isabeau has lived essentially alone for three years...every night Isabeau wakes up naked and alone in a forest, dresses herself, defends herself, and hunts rabbits for her meals, while tending an enormous horse and keeping an eye on the giant wolf". The spectator then, is already well acquainted with the fact that Isabeau is not a shrinking flower of a character but strong and independent. Even if she is not the one seeking revenge, she makes sure that Etienne can survive to pursue his plan.

When they reach the final battle and Etienne is confronting the Bishop it is Isabeau who walks slowly into the church, no longer a hawk, proving that the monk was right about how to break the curse. She is backlit in this scene so that her hair is a halo of light around her face. After an emotional greeting with Etienne, who has fallen to his knees upon seeing her, she looks up to see the Bishop. There is a shot reverse shot where the camera shows her face, from a low angle making her powerful, and the Bishop's face as he sees the object of his desire for the first time since he cursed her. She walks to him, eyes defiant and then narrowing, and she holds out

her hand to show ties and hood she wore as a hawk. Using both hands she displays them clearly, then tips her hands over to release the items as the Bishop's feet. This action is smug and satisfied and executed perfectly in the scene. She then turns her back on the Bishop in a second act of boldness that stokes his anger. Losing control he goes after her with his staff. This act opens the door for Etienne to take his revenge by throwing his sword into the Bishop, pinning him to the wood behind him. The problem of the Bishop is solved and all is well for the reunited lovers. Isabeau battles with her strength and her defiance; this spirit is the facilitator for the end of their quest.

In order to face her final battle, Amalthea in *The Last Unicorn* must once more become the unicorn. The Red Bull, in the tunnels below the castle, catches her and her companions unaware. He is a contrast to her light form, drawn as a large muscular beast with flames dancing all over his body. Her mortal body does not fool the bull this time and he recognizes her for what she is. To save her, as she can do nothing as a human girl, Schmendrick uses the magic to turn her back into her true form. Once she is transformed the bull roars and chases her out onto the bleak beach below the castle. The Red Bull runs after her, pushing her back toward the ocean where he has corralled all of the other unicorns over time. Lir steps in to defend her, as heroes are supposed to do, but ends up run over and killed by the bull. No one can fight this final battle but the unicorn, not even the classic storybook hero. When the unicorn sees his death she begins to fight back; rearing up, her horn glows and she advances on the bull. Step by step she now herds him, as he did all the others. There is another size contrast as the spectator sees her small white form advancing toward the larger bull and forcing him to back into the ocean. It is this act of standing up, of fighting back, that not only defeats the bull who turns and walks into the water, but also frees the unicorns from their ocean enchantment. They are drawn galloping on the

tops of the waves, like white foam, and then released back to land as the waves crash. By proxy, she also defeats King Haggard, as he was standing on a balcony of his castle when the enchantment is broken and the entire building crashes down into the dark ocean water. Even if the catalyst of her fight is the death of the man she loved when mortal; it is enough of a push to get her to do what no other unicorn had done. She dared to challenge the red bull back, and wins. The unicorns are freed back into the world, and thus her quest is completed.

*Willow* has a more epic final battle. Sorsha tries to stand up against her mother as magic is thrown about between two powerful sorceresses. What makes this battle interesting is that the most important parts of it are fought by powerful women, not men, not even the titular character Willow. When they have finally made it to the inner parts of the castle, as Madmartigan and the army fight below and outside the castle, it is Sorsha who leads them inside. She has with her Fin Raziel and Willow and their object is to stop Queen Bavmorda from completing the sacrificial ceremony that will kill the baby Elora and seal Bavmorda's ruling position for years. Raziel and Sorsha go into Bavmorda's spell chamber first and Sorsha opens with, "Mother...I..." but is cut off by her own mother's retort of, "traitor child, I must despise you now" (Howard). Sorsha then fights all three of the guards her mother sends over to kill her. In her own act of defiance, she walks toward her mother explain that she "won't let [her] kill that child" (Howard). Now Bavmorda uses magic against Sorsha, picking her up and sending her to a wall of spikes, but Raziel steps in stopping Sorsha from being impaled. Though the evil queen is willing to kill her own daughter she fails. Bavmorda drops the princess to the floor and this action knocks her out for the duration of the scene. Sorsha cannot fight this battle as she does not possess the magic skill of Raziel or Bavmorda; however, without her guidance and swordsmanship Raziel would not have made it to the tower to face Bavmorda.

The battle is not over, however, as Bavmorda and Raziel face off in a fight of magic. There is a cut scene where the spectator sees the hero's army still fighting Bavmorda's army outside the castle walls, and then a cut back to the fight between the women. They use ice and fire against each other and Bavmorda knocks Raziel down and sends a pillar of stone down on top of her. At this point, all should be lost, except Raziel uses magic to pull her wand to her and send Bavmorda on a flying trip around the stone room. The two sorceresses end up fighting over the wand Raziel was given, sending magic lighting bolts all around the room. In one of the best moments of the film, the older Raziel leans back and applies three solid punches to Bavmorda's evil face. This action sends both women tumbling over fallen stones and ends up being a bit comical. When Bavmorda believes she has choked the life out of Raziel, she gets up and is distracted by Willow. He does not fight her, he simply hides the baby with a trick, which angers Bavmorda enough that she raises the wand, which becomes a lighting rod, and is struck down by lighting from the storm outside. In an ironic twist of fate, Bavmorda kills herself. In *Willow* the important battle is the one happening in the inner sanctum, the one that happens between a warrior princess, her evil sorceress mother, and a old powerful sorceress on the side of good. These female characters are still facing obstacles they must overcome in order to survive.

One could argue that none of the important battles happen between armies or epic heroes in these fantasy films. Instead they happen between the hearts and minds of these characters. Where Lili and Sarah must outwit and overcome their foes, the unicorn and Isabeau learn to stand up for their cause. In *Willow*, the true fight happens between women only with a little help from Willow's parlor trick. To fight one must care enough to give of herself and have enough courage to stand up to her foes. Sometimes the fight comes with sacrifices both large and small; such sacrifices need not occur during a large battle.

## Chapter 4

### The Sacrifice

The sacrifice of a character for the greater good is not new or inventive in the fantasy tale or myth. Often characters that commit sacrifice are thought of as tragic. Willing or unwilling, any sacrifice holds value. While sacrifice is a common theme in these fantasy films, I assert that these female characters are not tragic in their sacrifices.

In the film *Willow* Sorsha is the warrior princess, and daughter of the evil Queen Bavmorda. Cassandra Bausman calls her “a combination of capable warrior and beautiful princess, at once a dispassionate military commander and skilled warrior and a vulnerable, emotionally susceptible, physically attractive young woman” (46). She is her mother’s right hand, and when she first comes on screen she has just checked the baby born of an imprisoned woman for the birthmark that fulfills an omen. Immediately she “must tell her mother” of the birth of the child (Howard). Her next appearance on screen shows her in full armor facing her mother after having found the nursemaid who stole the baby away, but having failed to actually bring in the baby. She is “ruthlessly competent and apparently willing to sacrifice the discovered babe” (Bausman 46). Bavmorda calls her “useless” but that doesn’t stop the princess from explain how she will find the baby. Her mother, however, decides to make her take another warrior with her, General Kael, despite her protestation that she “[doesn’t] need his help” (Howard). Bavmorda will not take the protestations into consideration and sends them off together. This early setup shows just how loyal Sorsha is to the queen, her mother, and the lengths she is willing to go to please her.

Sorsha will turn against her own mother, a fear Bavmorda’s advisor expresses when he tells her he, “read the signs” and “[he] fear[s] her daughter will betray [her]” which, of course,

she does (Howard). This betrayal is Sorsha's sacrifice. It can be hard to equate turning against a character as vile as Queen Bavmorda with sacrifice; it is the morally correct thing to do. What is unseen is that Sorsha was raised as a fighter who served her mother completely. She is giving up her only family connection and her position. The fighter shows no sign of having been mistreated by her mother, she just happens to be the daughter to someone who must be destroyed for the kingdom to be okay. No one gets to pick his or her parents, and Sorsha's betrayal is a total loss of trust and of whatever love did exist between mother and daughter is immediately destroyed. Later in the film, when Sorsha tries to speak out against her mother, the spectator sees Bavmorda hesitate for only a second before she resigns her daughter to the same fate as the army. On top of losing her status, she is also vulnerable to her mother's vengeful nature.

For Sarah in *Labyrinth* the sacrifice is that of a teenage girl, though, no less important. Her threat comes from Jareth the goblin king who has taken her baby brother away to his kingdom. Though she selfishly, and accidentally, requested that he come and take the baby brother she was tired of taking care of, she realizes right away that she "did not mean it" and that she must try to rescue the child (Henson). Sarah has to travel through the labyrinth that surrounds the Goblin City and take back her young brother within the thirteen-hour time limit Jareth has set for her. Sarah could have given in to Jareth at the beginning and lived a life of luxury, her every desire served. He offers her a magic crystal sphere that "...if [she] turn[s] it this way - - and look[s] into it, it will show [her] dreams. But this is no gift for a girl who takes care of a screaming baby" (Henson). Sarah must forget about the baby to get this offered gift, but she tells him that she "cannot" and while she does "appreciate what [he is] trying to do - - [she] want[s] [her] brother back" (Henson). In this moment she faces a tall, imposing Goblin King in her own home, from whom she doesn't shrink. She does not give into the temptation of giving up her



brother and chooses instead to brave the challenge that is set. Sarah walks away from the offer of her dreams and of anything she could possibly want. While this might not seem like a traditional sacrifice, it is something that would be hard to walk away from. Earlier the spectator witnessed how unhappy Sarah appears to be in her current life, so then to watch her walk away from an offer to make all her dreams come true is to watch her sacrifice. Not only does she walk away from the offer, but she also takes on the task that the Goblin King sets for her.

Lili, in a similar vein, must resist falling into the temptation that The Lord of Darkness offers after her selfish desire sends the magical world into turmoil. Lili's love interest, a child of the forest called Jack, takes her to see two sacred unicorns, a mated pair, assuming she knows the rules of the forest. The world is green, lush, and full of bright greens and golden light through trees. It is clear the princess does not know the rules as she moves to the edge of a sparkling creek trying to draw the unicorn near and she reaches out a hand to touch it. When Jack tells her, "what you did is forbidden" she thoughtlessly responds that she, "only wanted to touch one. Where's the harm in that?" (Scott). It is Lili's innocence that draws the unicorn to her, and her carelessness that helps waiting goblins poison the mythical stallion. This action sends the world into partial darkness and instant winter. "Lili, symbolizes us [humanity], capable of claiming innocence in the face of our own undeniable selfishness," writes Mathew Aitken.

Lili learns of her mistake when she overhears two goblins speaking. Here she realizes that it was her forbidden touch that made the male unicorn vulnerable and she now must warn others of The Lord of Darkness's plan. The camera pulls close in a scene that is nearly black and white, and the audience sees Lili whisper, "What have I done? I'll make it right" (Scott). Lili then chooses to follow goblins, through blizzard of snow and ice, and overhears them speaking to The Lord of Darkness about the plan to kill off the mare as well and sink the world into total

darkness. She must sacrifice her own safety as a highborn lady to do the right thing. She recognizes her moral responsibility and though she tries to warn the others, she gets caught before she has the chance. Like Sarah, Lili now resists the temptations that Darkness offers her. All she has to do is marry him and she can have anything she wants. She puts aside her selfish desires thus sacrificing a chance at having anything her heart wants.

Sarah and Lili both, in the face of danger, know that they must take responsibility and control in order to overcome the evil they helped set in motion. Though this is not the type of sacrifice a spectator is used to, one can see how each girl struggles with the overwhelming offers. They give up their comfortable lives in order to take on the challenge put forth and right the wrong they committed.

The unicorn in *The Last Unicorn* is both willing and unwilling in her sacrifices. The film opens with two men out hunting and one man turns to the other saying, "I dislike the feel of these woods. Creatures that live in a unicorn's forest learn a little magic of their own in time...the leaves never fall here, or the snow...why is it always spring here," then he turns back and says into the forest, "Stay where you are poor beast...stay in your forest and keep your trees green...for you are the last" (Rankin). Until that moment, the unicorn did not realize she was the last of her kind and she has trouble believing it. In order to find out the truth, she must leave behind the forest she protects, her home. In a voiceover expressing her thoughts she notes that unicorns, "can even be killed if [they] leave [their] forests" (Rankin). She then runs into a poetry spouting butterfly who has a moment of clarity and tells her that she "can find the others if [she] is brave, they passed down all the roads long ago and the Red Bull ran close behind them..." (Rankin). After this interaction she considers her options thinking, "I could never leave this forest, but I must know if I'm the only unicorn left in the world...what if they're waiting for me,

in need of my help...I must go quickly, and come back as soon as I can” (Rankin). The spectator is shown the image of the edge of her home with all of the animals gathered there as she leaves to solve the mystery of the missing unicorns. She is potentially sacrificing her life, and the well being of the creatures she looks after, to solve the mystery. The unicorn leaves the safety of her protected place to go on a journey with no solid direction; she takes this risk knowingly.

It is not until later, when she is forced into the body of a human girl by the magic, that she makes her unwilling sacrifice. Schmendrick reminds her that it will keep her safe until she can find the unicorns she came all this way to seek out. This sacrifice is forced upon her. She suffers inside the mortal body, unsure of who she is and what she has become. Still, she looks for answers with the help of her companions. As she loses touch with her immortality, the spectator begins to fully grasp this second loss she is experiencing. Once back in her natural form, she gently accepts the apology from Schmendrick and acknowledges that she is “a little afraid to go home...[she] has been mortal and some part of [her] is mortal yet, [she] is no longer like the others...[but] unicorns are in the world again, no sorrow will live in [her] as long as that joy, save one, and [she] thank[s] [him] for that part too” (Rankin).

Her one sorrow is the loss of Prince Lir, her third and final sacrifice. For in the time where she was human, her loneliness, and impending mortality made Prince Lir’s love accessible. The unicorn, as Amalthea the human woman, had begun to love him in return, and cannot continue to be with him in her unicorn form. She even turns to Lir and says, “Lir, I will not love you when I’m a unicorn,” when Schmendrick reveals he must change her back into her original form (Rankin). And though she requests that she remain human so she can be with Lir, Schmendrick turns her back because for her to stay human isn’t “in the story” and that “Lir

knows that, and so does she” (Rankin). She loses the one love she could ever have in order to save the other unicorns and bring some light back into the world.

The final character to make a sacrifice does so willingly and in a classic fantasy manner. Kira, in *The Dark Crystal*, gives her life for the good of the world she lives in. When Kira first appears in the film she is cloaked, hidden within the flora. In fact, “Kira’s clothing was modeled after the Pod people who raised her, and it was loose enough to conceal her gossamer butterfly-like wings that she reveals at a crucial moment in the film. Their costumes were rendered in muted earth tones, suggesting that they are one with the environment and...necessary for survival” of the world (Gaines 73). It’s clear that she connects to nature, can talk to animals, and has knowledge that Jen, the male lead, does not. After meeting Jen she willingly joins his journey without much consideration despite his telling her that she doesn’t have to go; she simply replies, “I know” and goes anyway (Henson). Her first sacrifice is that choice: she leaves those who raised her and the life she knows to help Jen. Her second one is much more dramatic.

By the end of the tale, Jen and Kira have reached the castle during the final ceremony. Jen must take a crystal shard he acquired, and he must “heal” the larger crystal. During the climax where, Jen has jumped onto the large crystal and has dropped the shard among their enemies, Kira reveals herself jumping down, with the aid of her wings, into the middle of danger. She willingly takes this risk, knowing she will probably be attacked. Vulnerable and small among the Skeksis, she grabs the shard and tosses it to Jen saying, “heal the crystal” and an angry Skeksi subsequently stabs her from behind. She crumples to the ground, and dies. Kira takes this chance in order to help Jen fulfill the prophecy and heal their world. Jen is told that their “courage and sacrifice has made [the joined beings or Urskeks] whole and restored the true

power of the crystal” (Henson). Her sacrifice is rewarded at the end as the Urskeks use their power, and the healed crystal of truth, to bring her back to life.

It is a powerful thing to risk dreams, to risk family, to leave one’s home, to lose innocence, and to offer up a life. Each of these women does so in one-way or another yet none of their sacrifices are tragic. The choices they make, and the resulting changes they go through, make them stronger in the end. They seem to recognize a kind of moral responsibility they feel for the world they are individually a part of and that, even if these sacrifices are tragic, they are valuable and perhaps even necessary. Not a single character makes her choices in vain.

## Chapter 5

### The Case of *Willow*

When one sits down to the film *Willow*, the expectation is that it will be a sword and sorcery fantasy about the male protagonist, Willow, and his quest. But when the film is viewed over and over, another fact becomes clear. Willow is in the film, and he is the protagonist, but this particular fantasy film isn't about Willow at all. This film is actually completely female centered. Willow has six important women who each have smaller roles and they are the characters that move the entire story despite the fact that the protagonist and his companions are male.

The first thing to note is that the film itself starts with a text over drifting fog that explains the set up for the story and it reads, "In a time of dread...Seers have foretold of the birth of a child who will bring about the downfall of the Powerful Queen Bavmorda. Seizing all the pregnant women in the realm, the evil queen vows to destroy the child when it is born..." (Howard). Right away the spectator is told that the main antagonist is going to be a baby killing evil queen; emphasis on the queen part of that idea. Then, in that same opening, it is revealed that this oppressed land has only one chance, and that it lies with the fate of a baby. Queen Bavmorda has taken away the agency of the pregnant women in her kingdom by imprisoning them for no crime other than giving life. The sound of a baby crying interlaces with a fade-in of one being lifted up in the air. The shot moves to several sad looking women behind bars as the voiceover of two women speaking, "Is it a girl? Yes. Show me its arm. She bears the mark" (Howard). It is soon revealed one of those voices is Sorsha, the daughter of Queen Bavmorda, but there will be more on her later.

This opening establishes that the land is terrorized by a woman who plans to kill a baby girl, and if she does not kill this baby, then said baby will grow up to cause the queen's demise. Perhaps not the most original tale; yet the opening plot device includes only women. The evil queen archetype reflects the fear that women with power will be self-serving. For Bavmorda, keeping her power is more important than the lives of her people or that of a tiny baby. This is not a kind, caring, or loving ruler and she takes prophecies seriously. The spectator need not worry as the baby is smuggled out by an older lady, who appears to be collecting laundry, before any harm can come to her. It is the interference of a woman who saves the baby's life from Bavmorda. There are then several cut scenes where the spectator witnesses the older lady taking care of the baby before they are being hunted down. The old woman places the child on a makeshift raft and sends her off into the river; she remains behind to face the creatures hunting them, sacrificing herself to save the future of the world. This is a sacrifice that is noble and tragic though it doesn't pull too hard at the heartstrings of the spectator, as there was never any character development. This fact does not diminish the importance of her role as a woman in *Willow*.

Finally, the title character is shown on screen. His two small children are down near the river and they find the baby stuck by the shore on her raft. Willow tells them, "We'll push it down stream and forget we ever saw it" (Howard). The reluctant hero does not want the responsibility of a child that is not of his kind. He gets distracted though and in that time his wife, Kiaya, finds the baby and ends up bringing it up to the house. She goes right by Willow and his protestations saying, "Come on then..." which ends any conversation that could have been had. Kiaya is a gentle woman and her maternal instincts kick in when she sees the baby needs help. Kiaya is both an actual mother and the mother figure within the film. So Willow's

wife is really the one who brings the baby fully into their lives and sets up the beginning of the adventure. If Willow had his way the baby would have been sent on her way in the river, but Kiaya's interference means they are now responsible for the baby's life.

So, baby in hand, the town decides that Willow, and a group of volunteers, should take the baby to the nearest road and leave her with the first of her kind they see. Eventually they settle on Madmartigan and head home mostly satisfied. This is not how the plan was supposed to go though, so, the baby is stolen from Madmartigan, flown over Willow so he will see, and taken into the forest. The Brownies then capture Willow so they can take him all the way into the forest. In the forest Willow meets Cherlindrea who appears as a spirit and welcomes him warmly to her kingdom, the forest. She then tells Willow that she is happy to meet him and that Elora Danan is the one who told her his name (Howard). Cherlindrea next shares that Elora is the baby, that she is very special, and that she has "chosen [Willow] to be her guardian" (Howard). For an ominous moment Cherlindrea appears again, and in a deep resonate voice she warns, "Elora Danan must survive. She must fulfill her destiny and bring about the downfall of Queen Bavmorda, whose powers are growing like an evil plague. Unless she is stopped, Bavmorda will control the lives of your village, your children, everyone" (Howard). While she does state that it is Willow's choice, it doesn't fully appear to be the case.

This fairy queen embodies magic in its purest form as she is connected to nature and thus she is the archetype of the woman as magic. It is she who moves Willow along, putting him back on the quest he thought he was done working on. She sends him to the next woman who will help him, and stay with him, through the end of his journey. The fairy queen also gives him a task, to deliver the wand to the sorceress he is to find, and then disappears before any protestations can begin. Once more Willow's journey is set in motion by a female character. He



is not allowed to go home because the baby has chosen him. The spectator must extend his belief that the baby seems to understand what is happening around her. Elora is the archetype of the woman as an innocent. This tiny figure not only picks her hero and talks to fairy queens, but she also will change the course of the world. She is so important the fairy queen Cherlindrea had been looking for her since she was born. It turns out she, even as a baby, can manipulate the journey to a degree. Willow has no choice in whether he takes the baby onward as he was tasked with her safekeeping and there is no one else to do it.

To add to those characters who seem to be relying on Willow, the spectator finally meets the aforementioned Fin Raziel who was supposed to be a great sorceress in her time. This particular female character travels with Willow and works to teach him how to use the wand to free her from a spell. Until he gets it right she cannot be of any help magically; but it is her teachings, and spell lessons, that are helping Willow become the wizard that he wants to be. Raziel, then, fills the archetypal role of mentor and later that of the crone, as she has aged since the spell was put on her, though the spectator will not encounter that until Willow finally breaks the spell.

By the time that happens the party has gained Sorsha, Queen Bavmorda's sword carrying, warrior daughter, but to understand her position with the group one has to look back and follow her through the film. When Sorsha first appears at the beginning she is a beautiful, redheaded young woman in the service of her mother. The second time she appears she is in full armor and giving her mother a disappointing report about having not found the baby, just the old nursemaid who smuggled her out of the castle. She is both a princess and a fighter, a combined role that the movie has a little trouble making reconcile. Bausman comments on this dichotomy when she notes that while, "...Sorsha is an adept swordsman and military commander, compelling in her

role as ‘warrior,’ she must also live up to the ‘princess’ portion of her double-barreled character description” (46). And through the first part of the film while she is hunting down the baby, the spectator witnesses the warrior side of her. She has no problems ordering her men, who appear to respect and listen to her, and holding command in dicey situations. In fact, she leads a raid on the tavern trying to find the baby, and she is clearly in control. She even kicks Willow out of the way when he tries to stop her from taking a look at the baby Madmartigan has, which the spectator knows is Elora. The hero and company manage to get away for just long enough to find Fin Raziel, before Sorsha tracks them down again. Checking the baby she realizes that she is the one they have been looking for so she captures Willow, Madmartigan, and Fin Raziel the possum to take them all back to Queen Bavmorda. During the capture she is extra rough with Madmartigan, giving him a solid kick to the face after a sharp exchange between the two. The character here fully embodies her warrior status.

Sorsha is about to slip from the warrior that appears in and out of the first part of the film into a much more traditional role of princess. Though she doesn’t fully drop all of her fighting credibility, she becomes vulnerable. “Sorsha flaunts both a wicked serrated sword and a virginal white gown and ringlets with equal appeal” says Bausman of Sorsha’s duality (46). Bausman is referring to the white gown that Sorsha wears during the scene in which Madmartigan confesses his love for her. To be fair, Madmartigan has been accidentally hit with the Brownie’s love powder. In that moment she is both the warrior and a vulnerable young woman. She had been sleeping peacefully on a bed of furs; her lovely face is turned upward and her red hair forms a halo around it. Madmartigan is so smitten that he daringly goes over to her sleeping form twice before she awakens and holds him at dagger point. Because she is distracted by the poetry being spouted in her direction, Willow is able to steal Elora from the tent, and then Sorsha realizes they

are escaping. What ensues is chase scene that ends with Madmartigan taking Sorsha hostage in order for he, Willow, and Elora to get free. Sorsha's capture is symbolic of her vulnerability to this man.

As the new party continues to travel to another castle, Sorsha is able to break free of Madmartigan and escape to go back and join her army. She is not a traitor just yet, but that is coming. The small party reaches the castle where it was predicted Elora would be taken in and be safe; however, there is no one there and it is clear those who lived there were attacked. Followed by Bavmorda's army, and Sorsha, they now must defend themselves. It is during this attack "she seems to evaluate the consequences of her allegiance, judging the actions and motivations of the soldiers around her against the pure and honorable intentions of Madmartigan and Willow" (Bausman 47). The spectator can clearly see that Sorsha "seems physically drawn to Madmartigan, puzzling over what to make of a somewhat schizophrenic mutual attraction while admiring his impressive physical prowess like a princess dazzled by a knightly suitor's display of astonishing skill and bravery" (Bausman 47). One of her mother's soldiers ends up with Elora and he escapes, baby in hand, during the chaos of the attack. Sorsha, turns against her mother's plan at this point in the story. She is not given a speech or explanation; she simply begins to help Willow and his companions thus becoming a traitor to her crown and her mother.

Sorsha's complete turn means that she leads them into Bavmorda's castle, where they must now go to save Elora, and that she fights her own mother's guards. "She impressively defies Bavmorda to her face, struggles to cling to her confidence, and holds her ground against her mother's insults that Sorsha is a 'traitor child' whom she must now 'despise' " says Bausman of this moment in the film (48). She even tries to participate in the final battle but is knocked out for the duration of the magic duel. Still, the prophecy comes true to some degree, as it is after the

defeat of Bavmorda that Sorsha is left holding Elora, a child with red hair just like hers, and the message that she will raise the baby to become a great queen is quite clear. Sorsha has shifted from warrior to guardian queen, from dark armor and weapons to a white gown blowing in the wind, and Elora is safe in her arms.

So, for a film that is titled after its male protagonist, it is women that make anything important in the story happen. Queen Bavmorda gives the film a worthy antagonist while Cherlindra helps encourage the intrepid hero. Sorsha is the warrior who gains a conscience and Raziel's magic is the only force that fully takes on Bavmorada's evil. Willow would never have succeeded or even continued in helping Elora if it were not for these other female characters. These women are not only essential, but they also embody certain literary archetypes centered on the feminine character.

## Conclusion

Fairy tales were the gateway for the modern fantasy film. These stories often contained female representation an area in which fantasy films fell a little short. As a little girl I did not realize how much I needed to see a version of myself on screen, but looking back at the films I loved I can see the appeal. Fantasy films were a huge part of my cinematic diet and the films where women played a significant role stuck with me all these years.

The fantasy film can be just as powerful as a novel in giving insight about the human condition. Characters in these films tend to have a quest or journey. In the case of *Legend* it's Oona who shows Jack what he needs to find to succeed in stopping Darkness. Molly Grue is a true and levelheaded companion for the unicorn in *The Last Unicorn*, she both chides her and comforts her as needed. Both of these women represent a guiding force though their roles are different. Every female in *Willow* seems to navigate Willow's journey; in fact the title character appears to have little agency as a woman always gives him directions. As guiding forces in these fantasy films, the characters demonstrate how people need help on any journey.

People also transform all through their lives and in so doing we lose a little of who we were before. Lili in *Legend* and Sarah in *Labyrinth* lose their innocence as they learn to take responsibility for their actions. They must grow and change from children into women. Sometimes people live half-lives like Isabeau in *Ladyhawke* transforming from hawk to woman each day and night. She is both proctor and hunter at night while she is a watcher during the day. A person might take on a role that requires they be one side of herself at their job only to come home and be a parent or partner at night. These changes don't have to be unhealthy. Accepting age and the movement of time as Fin Raziell does in *Willow* when she realizes how long it has

been is also a human grace that must be learned. Time is ever marching forward and one can fight it or accept it.

Time is not the only battle to be fought. There will be moments in life where one must stand up against tyranny. In *Labyrinth* Sarah faces down both temptation and someone she once believed was more powerful than her. Truly her power comes from understanding that she does have control and can fight her own battles. *Ladyhawke's* Isabeau faces down her captor and oppressor with just one defiant action that speaks volumes. Not all fights will need swords and many can be won with determination. And in the fight requires it, one is capable of sacrifice. It's not just the literal giving of a life, as Kira does in *The Dark Crystal*, but the giving of one's life metaphorically. Any mother who has raised her children secretly understands the deeper meaning of sacrifice. There are also numerous people who have given up family, homes, and security to fight for what they believe as Sorsha does in *Willow*.

Each of these fantasy films that entranced me so as a child, also taught me a little of what I could be as a woman. Their representation of gender led me to believe I did have agency, even if I did not realize that was the lesson I was absorbing. I also learned that love can save or destroy agency. Sorsha is a strong character throughout *Willow* until she is reduced to a love interest of Madmartigan. None of her past accomplishments are diminished, but she does become less assertive over all. Kira's love for Jen and her world lead her to put herself in danger; she sacrifices her life to save what is important. In this case love saves her agency. She does not remain passive but takes action despite the risk. These female characters embodied the innocent, caretakers, fighters, magic, wisdom, age, growth, and abused power. They are not just characters who are noble for being able to create life, but characters who are noble in their freedom. Thus, the archetypal representation of women in these films can clarify female agency, take Sarah or

Lili, but they can also undermine when brushed aside, Sorsha. Despite being undermined with that final representation, Sorsha is still a strong character who selects her own path. She does choose to be with Madmartigan. No one forces her into this match. When Patricia Wrede explains agency she writes, “in order for a character to have agency...she has to have a choice to make. If you are out in the rain with an umbrella, you have a choice: put up the umbrella, or don’t put it up. If you have no umbrella, you have no choice: you are going to get wet. Also note that the definition talks about the ability or capacity to make choices, not whether someone actually *uses* their capacity, and certainly not whether the results are what the person choosing wanted or expected.” Sarah, Lili, Isabeau, the unicorn, Kira, Molly Grue, Fin Raziel, and Sorsha all make educated choices. These female characters decide where they want to go and what they are going to do when they get there. They are the masters of their fate, and that is a powerful message.

To see these female characters in fantasy film grow, change, make mistakes, try to fix them, battle temptation, fight with swords, and guide their friends, changed what I saw as the role of a woman in the world. That statement conveys so much, especially for films meant to entertain, but storytelling in any form is a formidable mover of mankind. These six fantasy films are slightly dated in visuals but not in context; there are children today who could learn the same lessons I did. What I found on the screen was myself; and surely other spectators can discover such an insight for themselves.

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