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"Strong Female Characters"? An Analysis of Six Female Fantasy Characters from Novel to Film

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“STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS”? AN ANALYSIS OF SIX FEMALE FANTASY CHARACTERS FROM NOVEL TO FILM

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ABSTRACT:

This project is twofold. The first section analyzes six female fantasy characters in their literary and filmic incarnations—Dorothy Gale (*The Wizard of Oz*), Susan Pevensie (*The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian*), Arwen Evenstar (*The Lord of the Rings*), Princess Buttercup (*The Princess Bride*), Hermione Granger (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*), and Annabeth Chase (*Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*)—noting adaptational changes made to each and placing the twelve incarnations in conversation with each other. This conversation centers around the concept of the "strong female character," and this study attempts to define the qualifications of a true "strong female character," distinguished from a "hyper-strong" stereotype, and show how each of these twelve incarnations meets or fails to meet those qualifications. The second section is an excerpt from my novel-in-progress *Ogelzetrap*, followed by analysis of my female characters and how I've crafted them to avoid pitfalls of harmful literary and cinematic norms.

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Introduction

One of my earliest memories of comparing a beloved literary female character to a shoddy filmic adaptation of her is my second viewing of the fantasy film *Ella Enchanted*. I'd seen the film once in grade school and liked it, but it didn't make much of an impression on me. A few years later, I read Gail Carson Levine's book that had inspired the film, and I fell in love with the book's protagonist: a tenacious, kind, and witty young woman whose magical curse of involuntary obedience clashed with her rebellious spirit. After reading and re-reading the book several times, I convinced my mother to watch the film with me so I could introduce her to one of my favorite characters. That was a mistake. Instead of getting reacquainted with the complex heroine I adored, I met a woman, reimagined by screenwriters Karen McCullah Lutz and Kirsten Smith, whose innocence and passion for societal justice were overshadowed by her preoccupation with the prince and unexplained skill in exaggerated karate kicks. In my embarrassed and apologetic explanations to my mother that no, the book wasn't this cheesy, I didn't yet realize that, regarding Ella, I was witnessing a clash between two different interpretations of what constitutes a "strong female character."

The term "strong female character" is frequently used in criticism of and commentary on fantasy stories, both in literature and film, but it means different things to different people, making it hard to pin down a precise definition. For some, especially those in the academy, this term is positive and describes a character that challenges gender stereotypes and provides audiences with empowered female role models to emulate. Pop culture, on the other hand, can be much less enthused with the term: YouTube is filled with videos disparaging the term, Wikipedia's article on the term devotes its largest section to "Criticism" of it, and even some feminists, like Sophia McDougall of the *New Statesman* and Kelly Faircloth of the blog *Jezebel*,

have spoken out against it for being too simplistic. Exact descriptions of what the term does and doesn't mean will vary on both sides of the debate, yet overall, there appear to be two main interpretations of this archetype: the "strong female character" in literature and film as an active, complex, and admirable heroine (the definition I will henceforward use for the term), and an underdeveloped filmic stereotype that I will call the "hyper-strong" female character.

This latter stereotype is defined not by her inner qualities, but by her physical and/or mental abilities, and to make the character appear "strong," those abilities are ridiculously exaggerated until, like filmic Ella, she appears more like an action figure than a real person. She has no character flaws, weaknesses, or struggles. She's often restricted to exhibiting traditionally masculine traits, while ignoring or even disparaging traditionally feminine traits. She may fire machine guns, fix motorcycles, or instantly solve computer equations that have left men baffled, yet instead of deepening her character, these external qualities are treated as if they're to replace the need for complex character development. While no one would dream of rating a male character's likeability based on whether he carries a weapon, sometimes the cry of "Give her a sword!" is treated by Hollywood writers as the fix-all formula for creating a female character worthy of audiences' love. And once she asserts her toughness in her opening scene, instead of significantly contributing to the story, she'll often find herself constrained to the role of male protagonist's sexy girlfriend, because this version of "female empowerment" has everything to do with combat and nothing to do with being defined apart from the male gaze. Furthermore, the inherent "otherness" of the "hyper-strong" female character sets her apart as an exception to the rule, or as the *Ella Enchanted* film's prince describes Ella, "not like other girls." McDougall sarcastically elaborates, "Of course, *normal* women are weak and boring and can't do anything worthwhile. But *this* one is different. She is strong! See, she roundhouses people in the face."

While the "hyper-strong" female character is a filmic, rather than literary, stereotype, the question of "strong female characters" pertains to both literature and film, and the reinterpretation of literary characters for film provides a unique angle to the conversation by spotlighting disagreement among different writers on what a single female character's core qualities should be. So I will analyze six female characters from popular fantasy novels that were later adapted into film, ordered chronologically according to their novels' publication: Dorothy Gale from *The Wizard of Oz,* Susan Pevensie from *Prince Caspian*, Arwen Evenstar from *The Lord of the Rings,* Princess Buttercup from *The Princess Bride*, Hermione Granger from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and Annabeth Chase from *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief*. After providing some historical context of trends in female character representation when these novels were written, I will compare the book versions of these characters to their filmic versions, noting how the filmic adaptations interpret or alter the original characters' "strength." The twelve versions taken together exhibit a wide and noteworthy range of female representation, with some conforming to the "hyper-strong" female character stereotype, some exemplifying the need for better "strong female characters," and some exposing the flaws of the "hyper-strong" female character by providing a multifaceted vision of what "strong female characters" can look like. This analysis reveals that a true "strong female character" exhibits her strength primarily through inner character complexity, rather than a checklist of external physical or mental abilities: she balances ideal personality strengths with realistic moral flaws and/or circumstantial limitations, so that she neither champions a cheap interpretation of female empowerment, nor falls prey to repressive gender stereotypes that stifle her in favor of developing the story's male characters.

As this essay's argument applies most directly to creative writers, at the end of this essay, I will include excerpts of one of my own novels-in-progress featuring three different female characters. I will then conclude with critical analysis of my writing, explaining how I intend my characters to respond to how the six characters in the main analysis succeed or fail to live up to the above definition of a "strong female character," while also anticipating, based on the main analysis, any plausible issues in translating my characters to the screen.

Cultural Interpretation of the "Strong Female Character" (1800s—Present)

In the nineteenth century, the women's rights movement gaining traction in America and England inspired the development of more independent and complex female characters in popular fiction, thus birthing some of the earliest "strong female characters" defined by their agency and capability, in contrast to their more passive predecessors. After the American Civil War, male writers realized that most of their readership was now comprised of women (Baym 13), which led to some reevaluation of the need to portray compelling female characters. Female fiction writers at this time began to argue that "separate was not equal in a society defined by two spheres" divided by strict gender roles and stereotypes (Egnal 243). Thus, their own heroines became more notably active and capable of confronting difficulties on their own (Baym 35–36), as opposed to playing "damsel in distress" and waiting for a man to solve their problems. Noteworthy examples of these characters that are still recognizable today include Elizabeth Bennet from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and Jo March from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. L. Frank Baum, author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, could not have been oblivious to these character trends when he published his novel in 1899, and this emphasis on female characters as active protagonists likely influenced his own active female protagonist.

American cultural commentary on women's social roles flipped back and forth in the early twentieth century, with the 1920s heralding women's suffrage, the 1930s reinforcing traditional gender roles to curb the Jazz Age's reckless abandon, and the 1940s inviting women into the home front workforce while men fought abroad during World War II. The celebrated film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* came out in 1939, in an uneasy nesting place between 1930s and 1940s ideology toward women. In England, popular fantasy texts such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* series and *The Lord of the Rings* were composed in the 1940s but published in the 1950s, a relative lull period for feminism. Then, across Western culture, the 1960s and 70s ushered in a new "Superwoman" model for female characters, one that posited that women could be "effective executives, efficient mothers, and loving wives all at the same time" (Gaydosik 220). This model thus interpreted female strength as the ability to inhabit both traditionally masculine *and* traditionally feminine worlds. It was in this era, in 1973, that William Goldman published *The Princess Bride,* yet his parodic novel stands out as an exception to the era's general portrayal of women, since his protagonist explicitly conforms to the "damsel in distress" trope. The filmic version of his protagonist clashes even more strongly with then cultural trends, as *The Princess Bride* film arrived in 1987, amidst a growing fascination with the filmic female action hero. This kind of character made her mark in the 80s and 90s by being a woman "willing to fight"—mostly physically, but sometimes mentally—and today she can be considered a "definitive signature of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Hollywood cinema" (Andris and Frederick 2). Examples of these characters include Ellen Ripley (*Aliens*), Sarah Connor (*The Terminator*), and, in a more mental sense, Princess Leia (*Star Wars*). This trend, while empowering, eventually paved the way for the less-developed "hyper-strong" female character objected to today.

The millennial and Gen Z generations grew up with popular young adult fantasy series such as *Harry Potter* (first published in 1997) and *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (first published in 2005). Both these series feature a variety of female warriors, reflecting wider acceptance of this trope in literature. The early 2000s also saw many fantasy film adaptations with prominent active female characters: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian* (2005 and 2008), and *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2010). Yet some credit the popular craze for "strong female characters" as beginning with the success of *The Hunger Games* book in 2008 ("Trope Talk"), which stood out from other popular fantasy series at the time for having a female protagonist—especially an active and independent female protagonist, as opposed to someone like Bella Swann from *Twilight* (2005), infamous for her passive dependency on male characters. Yet as cultural calls for more "strong female characters" grew louder, so did social media backlash against the term—though in most cases, audiences use the term to describe the "hyper-strong" female character. This backlash reached a new height after the release of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* in 2017, which featured female characters that many viewers described as one-dimensional megaphones for a feminist political agenda, pushed through a supposed lack of character flaws, weaknesses, and development.

In short, connotations of the term "strong female character" have changed considerably over the last two hundred years, yet today, however we might technically define the trope, we associate the phrase with notable physical and/or mental strength, especially in female warriors. Regarding inner traits, we commonly recognize modern "strong female characters" for their independence, tenacity, and thirst for adventure—all traditionally masculine traits. Yet the "hyper-strong" female character stands apart from well-written "strong female characters" by

taking these good traits to extremes, exhibiting aggressive or even violent behavior that would be considered toxic "hyper-masculinity" if exhibited by a male character.

While I do note the masculine connotations of the term "strong female character," I intentionally broadened my definition of the term to include well-written female characters who are traditionally feminine. One key oversight in defending the "strong female character" is narrowing the term's definition to include only female characters who reject common expressions of femininity. The very existence of the "hyper-strong" female character and its values influences both novelists and screenwriters to favor female characters with more traditionally masculine traits, and while this trend does produce some wonderfully complex female characters, it sometimes echoes the "hyper-strong" female character's assertions that to be feminine is to be inferior. My definition of a "strong female character" is inclusive of all personality traits, whether interpreted as masculine or feminine, but since today's interpretations of the term favor traditionally masculine traits, I will take special note of any ways in which the characters in this analysis provide a counternarrative to these modern expectations for this trope, while still qualifying as a "strong female character" due to inner complexity and freedom from harmful gender stereotypes.

Dorothy Gale—*The (Wonderful) Wizard of Oz* (1899, 1939)

While the accredited screenwriters for Victor Fleming's film *The Wizard of Oz* are Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson, and Edgar Allan Woolf, many other writers made contributions as well. With so many voices involved in the adaptation, it's not surprising that the film's plot significantly deviates from the plot in L. Frank Baum's original novel, and that these revisions inevitably affect the portrayal of Dorothy Gale. In both novel and film, Dorothy defies modern

expectations for “strong female characters” because she is an adventurer by necessity, rather than by choice, making her an interesting case study. More importantly, her different incarnations highlight different flaws in female characterization: her book self suffers from a lack of distinctiveness and character complexity, and her filmic self suffers from restrictions of her agency that do not apply to the story’s male characters.

Book Dorothy

Surprising to anyone familiar only with filmic Dorothy, book Dorothy has no apparent desire to leave her home, contrasting sharply with common “strong female character” ideals of independence and desire for adventure. Though nearly everything in Kansas is grey, including Aunt Em and Uncle Henry (Baum 1–2), Dorothy does not appear dissatisfied with her home, instead constantly surprising Aunt Em “that she could find anything to laugh at” (2). Her main source of joy is Toto (2–3), and since the book has no Elvira Gulch character to threaten Toto’s safety, Dorothy is content. As critic John Funchion notes, “One of the more remarkable aspects of the book is that when it opens Dorothy desires nothing” (434). As such, the book barely gives us the basic character descriptions of everyone on the farm before the cyclone appears and whisks Dorothy away to Oz. Even then, it’s not until Dorothy realizes she is far from home that she develops any desire at all: the desire to return to Kansas. Because of this, it’s hard to describe Dorothy as a “strong female character” by modern standards, because while today’s “strong female characters” often jump at the chance to go adventuring, Dorothy goes adventuring only as a means of returning to her domestic life. Yet this longing for home does not stop her from being an active protagonist.

Despite her longing for home, Dorothy is still allowed to go adventuring, which makes her akin to the literary “strong female characters” of the nineteenth century who were granted

greater agency than their predecessors. Nineteenth-century "strong female characters" pushed back against a traditional archetypal story that portrayed active, adventuring females as dangerous, often by having the plot punish the wayward females for transgressing the social order. Since book Dorothy's journey to Oz was an accident, she is not held responsible by the plot for doing something wrong. In fact, her adventuring is portrayed positively. At the end of the story, when Dorothy learns that the Silver Shoes could've transported her back to Kansas anytime she wanted them to, the Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Lion point out that had she immediately returned home, she never would've helped them attain their own hearts' desires, to which Dorothy replies, "This is all true . . . and I am glad I was of use to these friends. But now that each of them has had what he most desired, . . . I should like to go back to Kansas" (Baum 196–97). Thus, she implies that her adventures were worth being separated from family because she was able to help her new friends, and it's right to return home now only because her friends have no further need of her. Because she's able to go adventuring, a privilege once reserved for male protagonists only, and because her adventuring achieves good, book Dorothy meets the "freedom from gender stereotypes" qualification for being a "strong female character."

As for personality traits, book Dorothy's most distinctive characteristic is her longing to return to Kansas, which centers around a longing to return to her beloved Aunt Em. The little girl addresses explanations for her homesickness on three separate occasions in the text. First, after meeting the Scarecrow, she tells him her dilemma. When he confesses to not understand her homesickness, Dorothy replies, "That is because you have no brains. . . . No matter how dreary and gray our homes are, we people of flesh and blood would rather live there than in any other country, be it ever so beautiful. There is no place like home" (28). This first example appears more like the moral of the story than a moment of genuine characterization for Dorothy, as her

explanation is hardly personal. Yet the second time she explains her homesickness, this time to the Wizard, she elaborates, “I am sure Aunt Em will be dreadfully worried over my being away so long” (95). Finally, when Glinda asks what Dorothy wants from her, she declares, “My greatest wish now . . . is to get back to Kansas, for Aunt Em will surely think something dreadful has happened to me, and that will make her put on mourning. And unless the crops are better this year than they were last, I am sure Uncle Henry cannot afford it” (194). Book Dorothy’s concern for her aunt thus provides the basis for filmic Dorothy’s desire to return to her aunt. Still, it’s notable that in the entire book, Dorothy only mentions a desire to return to her aunt twice; for most of the story, she does not appear concerned about Aunt Em. Unfortunately, this contributes to book Dorothy’s central weakness as a character.

Because the book’s genre imitates nineteenth-century folk tales, book Dorothy’s actions are largely driven by the plot, making it hard to pin down any consistent characteristics that define her besides her desire for home. Her story is very episodic, and her characteristics vary depending on which mini adventure she’s experiencing. Sometimes she’s brave enough to slap a Lion (46), and sometimes she’s too frightened of a Witch to do anything to rescue her friends (115). Sometimes she acts as leader, organizing the Winkies to find the Scarecrow and Tin Man (122), and sometimes she lets the Scarecrow take charge of the group, such as when they need to escape the Kalidahs (59). Her only consistent characteristic is her devotion to her family, especially Aunt Em and Toto. Yet while the larger narrative remains structured around Dorothy’s desire to return home, her devotion to family barely plays a part in most of the smaller adventures she has, so whenever Aunt Em and Kansas are forgotten, Dorothy appears rather bland. By contrast, because her three male companions all seek character traits instead of family, it’s easier for them to stand out as individuals in their own right: the Scarecrow is the intelligent

one, the Tin Man is the kind one, and the Lion is the brave one. Dorothy is just the "little girl" who functions as the Everywoman. This may be typical for the book's genre, but since even within the story Dorothy appears less distinctive than her sidekicks, her internal character feels especially lacking. So in that regard, she is not a "strong female character."

Filmic Dorothy

The 1939 film's Dorothy is more rebellious than book Dorothy, since she runs away from home, yet even in rebellion she captures book Dorothy's central desire for home. Because Judy Garland's classic song "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" articulates the desire to travel to a faraway land, critic Meghann Meeusen interprets the song as in conflict with the film's central theme: "The desire to live over the rainbow runs contrary to the promise never to leave one's own home again" (190). Yet while the song itself indicates that filmic Dorothy's central desire is to leave home, in the film's context, her daydreams result from Aunt Em's suggestion that she "find [herself] a place where [she] won't get into any trouble" (*The Wizard of Oz*). Dorothy's repetition of "Someplace where there isn't any trouble" shows that *this* is what she's really seeking, and at first, she believes this place exists somewhere over the rainbow. But when she runs away and Professor Marvel suggests that Aunt Em is in trouble, Dorothy quickly refocuses on home, which imitates how book Dorothy had no desire to leave Kansas. Other than declaring that Oz must be over the rainbow when she first arrives there, Dorothy never addresses this concept of a world without trouble again. However, we can interpret her iconic line near the film's ending as a return to this idea: "If I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard. Because if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with" (*The Wizard of Oz*). While she does not specify what her "heart's desire" is, if her heart's desire is that place where she cannot get into any trouble, it makes sense that her many life-

threatening adventures in Oz might convince her that her troubles at home are comparatively inconsequential, and if she's truly seeking a place free of trouble, she's more likely to find it at home with her family than anywhere else. In this way, filmic Dorothy imitates how book Dorothy was an adventurer by necessity rather than choice.

The film does a better job than the book of emphasizing Dorothy's relationship with her aunt, which, combined with the added beginning segment of rebellion, makes Dorothy a more complex character by giving her a character arc. In the film, Dorothy has no perceived love for Kansas itself, but she does love her Aunt Em, and Professor Marvel's white lie about Aunt Em being in trouble is enough to convince Dorothy to return home even before her adventures in Oz begin. Throughout her time in Oz, she keeps thinking of her aunt, especially in moments of crisis, like when the Wicked Witch captures Dorothy and Aunt Em appears in the Witch's crystal ball, calling for Dorothy to return to her. Since book Dorothy also cites her aunt as a reason to return home, filmic Dorothy does not stray far from her book self here, yet she does develop beyond book Dorothy because of her character arc. Book Dorothy has no central flaws that she needs to overcome, yet by running away from home, filmic Dorothy establishes a moral flaw, for she must learn to return her aunt's love by not abandoning her. Thus, while still remaining true in a sense to her book self, filmic Dorothy improves over book Dorothy in terms of character development, which makes her more memorable.

Filmic Dorothy also improves over book Dorothy by possessing added consistent characteristics other than homesickness: moral virtue and girlish innocence. The film constantly emphasizes Dorothy's innocence as she eagerly trusts strangers, expresses shock when others do not conform to her moral standards (like when the Wizard refuses to hold up his end of their bargain), and continually protests that she never meant to kill either Wicked Witch. Of particular

note is when filmic Dorothy melts the Wicked Witch, for the Witch cries out, “Who would’ve thought a good little girl like you could’ve destroyed my beautiful wickedness?” (*The Wizard of Oz*). In the book, the Witch made a similar declaration, but she called Dorothy a “little girl” (Baum 119), so the addition of “good” to the filmic scene reminds viewers once again of Dorothy’s moral purity. This contrasts her with the Wicked Witches, and even with characters like the Scarecrow and Lion, neither of whom are portrayed as paragons of virtue. She’s less unique as a character when held up against the Tin Man, who is defined by kindness, and true, the “innocent little girl” trope is common enough in fairy tales that she hardly stands out as a character in that respect. Yet when her innocence and virtue are combined with her relationship with Aunt Em and her role as adventurer by necessity rather than choice, filmic Dorothy still remains a unique character in her own right.

However, for all filmic Dorothy’s improvements over book Dorothy, by the standards of a true “strong female character” she suffers one notable flaw: the traditional female inability to enjoy both adventuring and familial relationships. Filmic Glinda deliberately refrains from telling Dorothy how she could’ve used the Ruby Slippers to return home immediately, but instead of reasoning that Dorothy needed to help her companions achieve their hearts’ desires as well, she explains that Dorothy had to learn a lesson: to never look beyond one’s backyard for one’s heart’s desire. Strangely, this does not apply to Dorothy’s male companions, for all three of them discovered their hearts’ desires by leaving home. Critic Annah Mackenzie also points out, “Of all the ‘lessons’ the female protagonist could have garnered throughout her adventure—about friendship, courage, ingenuity, kindness, sacrifice—her crowning realization at the end of her journey” is not to stray from home (179–80). Furthermore, since filmic Dorothy’s Oz adventures are only a dream, all her adventures are trivialized. Even though the film keeps the

lines from the book about the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion needing Dorothy's help to achieve their hearts' desires, since Oz was only a dream, this means that technically, Dorothy never aided anybody. Contrasted with book Dorothy's ability to affirm the value of both home and adventure, filmic Dorothy's character arc implies a "this-or-that" dilemma common for traditional female characters: they can either go on adventures or find value in familial relationships, but they can't do both—so they should settle for the latter.

All things considered, filmic Dorothy is the better example of a complex female character, yet book Dorothy is the better example of an active female character. Thus, the virtues and disappointments of Dorothy Gale's two incarnations provide a great introduction to the issue of "strong female characters" in fantasy by revealing the need for two main qualifications of a true "strong female character": first, she must have complex character development, especially through strengths, flaws, and a dynamic arc; and second, she must not be restricted by repressive gender expectations that do not apply to the male characters of the story.

Susan Pevensie—*The Chronicles of Narnia: Prince Caspian* (1951, 2008)

Contrasting with moral Dorothy, the *Narnia* series' Susan Pevensie raises interesting questions regarding female character representation because she infamously stops believing in Narnia in *The Last Battle*, devoting her attention to "nylons and lipstick and invitations" (741). Because these new interests are feminine, many critics have argued that Susan's exclusion from the new Narnia is a sexist punishment for becoming a woman, contrasted with how some male characters are forgiven much greater faults, like when Edmund receives forgiveness for betraying his siblings to the White Witch. While Susan's rejection of Narnia does surprise many readers, both the novel *Prince Caspian* and Andrew Adamson's film adaptation of it foreshadow

her decision, each offering different interpretations of her moral decay—and implicitly, each offering different interpretations of what a "strong female character" looks like. As it turns out, the novel offers the interpretation that grants Susan the most respect and development.

Book Susan

In the novel, Susan defies modern expectations for "strong female characters" by being a tenderhearted warrior reluctant to kill, yet the book hints at how this traditionally feminine trait is a strength rather than a weakness. A skilled archer, Susan uses her bow twice: first when rescuing Trumpkin from Telmarine soldiers (*Prince Caspian* 330–31), and second when winning an archery contest to prove her identity to Trumpkin (364–65). Yet both times the narrator notes her compassion. Her first arrow strikes a Telmarine's helmet, and she later confesses, "I wasn't shooting to kill, you know" (331). And since Edmund bests Trumpkin at fencing before the archery contest, the narrator notes, "Susan was so tender-hearted that she almost hated to beat someone who had been beaten already," and she downplays her victory to the Dwarf (365). She also hesitates to fire an arrow at a bear that nearly mauls Lucy; the narrator clarifies, "She hated killing things" (371), which also explains why she didn't kill the Telmarine. When contrasting this attitude to that of her brothers, who don't hesitate to fight, one might flag this as a sexist portrayal of a female character. Yet her compassion does not prevent her from fighting; in fact, it may be what compels her to fight. When the Telmarine soldiers prepare to drown Trumpkin, Susan is the first Pevensie to respond by immediately firing an arrow (330–31). The novel does not tell us what made Susan jump into action, as the scene is told from Peter's perspective, yet Peter had only just noticed that the soldiers were about to drown a Dwarf, so we can assume that Susan had also seen this and instinctively chose to defend the helpless prisoner. Given what we know about her tender heart, this makes sense. Having the traditionally feminine trait of

compassion thus helps make her an admirable character, even though today, we do not typically associate this trait with "strong female characters."

Setting compassion aside, Susan's other traits as portrayed in this novel help foreshadow her eventual denial of Narnia's existence. First, Susan is portrayed as the most forgetful of the siblings. When the children first examine the ruins of Cair Paravel, before they realize what it is, Susan questions whether they're standing in the ruins of a hall; Peter confirms that they are, since it reminds him of the great hall of Cair Paravel, and he comments to his sister, "Anyone would think you had forgotten that we ourselves were once Kings and Queens" (322). Susan then reminisces aloud "in a dreamy and rather sing-song voice," asking, "How could I forget?" (323). It's a short moment, but readers who know of Susan's ultimate denial of Narnia will see how her forgetfulness of Narnia was set up even here. Already she appears a little less "Narnian" than her siblings, who have no trouble remembering their previous lives as royalty. The novel does not clue us in as to why Susan struggles to remember her past Narnia life, so taken by itself, this moment does not explain how Susan regresses into Narnian atheism. Yet she is given another key character trait that influences her regression: her practicality.

Susan is regularly characterized as the most practical of her siblings, which positively develops her character by proving how this trait is an asset to the group. When the children arrive in Narnia, Susan is the first to direct their attention away from playing in the water so they can "make some plans," especially concerning how they will find food in this foreign place (318). She continues to guide her siblings toward making wise decisions like not leaving their shoes on the beach (since they might get lost and not be able to find them again) and changing back into their English clothes before traveling back to England (319, 417). While moments like these may seem less impressive than the feats of her siblings, especially since Peter and Lucy tend to be the

real leaders of the group, Susan's practical intelligence should not be discounted or ignored. It shapes her character just as much as her tender heart does. In fact, in *Prince Caspian* it takes over as her primary trait, and while the novel does affirm the positive side of her practicality, it also warns how this trait can stray too far into a materialistic worldview that discounts simple childlike faith in the supernatural.

Susan's practicality shapes her own dynamic character arc within the story by showcasing her flaws, which, instead of ruining her character, present her as a well-developed "strong female character" even as she regresses into atheism. She does not immediately believe that Lucy saw Aslan across the gorge, and when she questions Lucy, Lucy accuses her of "[talking] like a grown-up" (373), an accusation of Susan being prideful. When the group does decide to follow Lucy down the gorge, Susan resentfully complains about it, and she's the last one besides Trumpkin to see Aslan (383–85). When she does see him, she apologizes to Lucy and explains, "I've been far worse than you know. . . . I really believed it was him tonight, when you woke us up. I mean, deep down inside. Or I could have, if I'd let myself. But I just wanted to get out of the woods and—and—oh, I don't know" (386). This arc, combined with her earlier forgetfulness of Narnia, foreshadows Susan's eventual denial of Narnia's existence and hints that her denial may have had motivations other than a newfound love of nylons and lipstick. While admittedly the *Narnia* series does not give us a solid explanation of her moral decay, *Prince Caspian* provides the most in-depth look at Susan's character, so in interpreting *The Last Battle* as a culmination of the entire series, we should not overlook how Susan struggles to reconcile her innate practicality with a magical world that demands faith, especially since she learns at the end of this novel that she can never visit Narnia again. Thus, this novel's portrayal of a girl

plagued by doubt challenges the caricature of her that some critics create when they judge her solely from a few lines in *The Last Battle*.

Filmic Susan

In contrast to book Susan and her tender heart, filmic Susan has no qualms about fighting and killing enemy soldiers, conforming her to modern "strong female character" expectations for traditionally masculine traits, which come with both gains and losses for female representation. She uses her bow on numerous occasions, especially in the storming of Miraz's castle and the battle at Aslan's How. The film cuts her archery contest with Trumpkin, but she proves her skill with the bow every time she uses it, beginning with when she shoots one of the Telmarine soldiers trying to drown Trumpkin. This time, her arrow kills the soldier, contrasting strongly with how book Susan explicitly refrained from killing. Some critics hail this as empowering as Susan starts fulfilling traditional masculine roles as well as traditional feminine roles (Nickel 271). Yet because of this change, in contrast to how book Susan spends most of her quality time with her sister, filmic Susan spends much more time with the men, fighting alongside them while Lucy is elsewhere. Of course, the film does not completely sever Susan's relationship with the other female lead, and this change does provide more diversity for what female characters can accomplish, for Susan's courage in battle is offset by Lucy's courage that manifests itself in other ways, like trusting Aslan. Still, it's noteworthy that this more battle-hardened Susan appears more comfortable alongside male characters instead of with another female character, a change that echoes the "hyper-strong" female character's desire to not be "like other girls."

Filmic Susan's biggest improvement over book Susan is how, instead of being inexplicably forgetful, she intentionally tries to forget her life in Narnia, adding a new layer of complexity to her character. On the train platform, when Peter complains that they've waited too

long to return to Narnia, Susan says, “I think it’s time to accept that we live here. It’s no use pretending any different” (*Prince Caspian*). Nobody responds to her then, but she and Lucy discuss her complaint later, when Susan confesses that she’d “finally gotten used to living in England.” When Lucy asks if she’s happy to revisit Narnia, she replies, “While it lasts.” This scene, brief as it is, explores what none of the Pevensies ponder in the book: that their time in Narnia is temporary, and therefore it might be prudent not to get attached to this other world. While book Susan seems to forget her time in Narnia sheerly from poor memory, filmic Susan struggles with life in Narnia versus life in England, especially when she seems to know better than her siblings do that eventually she’ll have to accept life in England permanently. One critic connects this realization to Susan’s rejection of Narnia in *The Last Battle*: “In defence of Susan . . . it can be argued [she was], to a certain extent, pushed into choosing the normal reality over a magical one which has rejected [her]” (Macineanu 81). Again, this pushes back against the critique that Lewis had his original character reject Narnia out of an antipathy toward girls maturing into women. The seeds for Susan’s embrace of atheism were already planted in *Prince Caspian*, and the film adaptation puts a greater emphasis on filmic Susan’s struggle to welcome another visit to Narnia when she knows it cannot last.

Unfortunately, the film adaptation cuts Susan’s main arc of doubting Aslan, instead highlighting Peter’s character arc over Susan’s. The film substantially modified the scene when Lucy leads the others through the gorge, especially by omitting Susan’s arguments against following Lucy and her subsequent confrontation with both Aslan and her own doubts. In fact, when the children first vote on whether to trust Lucy or turn around, Susan doesn’t even comment on what she thinks the group should do. Instead, Peter and Trumpkin are the main figures who doubt Lucy; in fact, book Susan’s line asking where Lucy “thinks” she saw Aslan is

given to Peter. Adamson, director and partial screenwriter, admitted in his commentary that of all the Pevensie children, he was most interested in Peter and how he might navigate the English world that treats him like a kid when he used to be High King ("Audio Commentary"). So in the film, Peter's flaws take over and shape the most dynamic character arc of the story—his own. This may provide insight into his character, but it comes at Susan's expense, and she's treated as more of a side character when she could've taken a larger role in *Prince Caspian* than she did in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. In the first installment of the series, both in book and film, Susan is highlighted the least out of her siblings, so the second film could've taken cues from the book and focused on developing her more. Yet by focusing on the arc of a prominent male character, the film misses a key opportunity to develop this female character.

Without an arc of confronting doubts, filmic Susan is left to be defined primarily by romance as she becomes Caspian's love interest, a tradeoff that weakens her character. Adamson interprets the *Narnia* series as exploring adolescence, so he added the romantic tension and buildup to Susan and Caspian's kiss to show Susan growing up by developing an interest in men ("Audio Commentary"). Critic Eleanor Nickel defends this new arc, positing it as a way of foreshadowing Susan's later decline down the "path of feminine wiles" in *The Last Battle* (269). But ultimately this restricts her character more than empowering her. The framing of the adventure in Narnia with Susan's awkward interactions with a smitten boy indicate that her romantic arc is supposed to be her character's main focus, which is unfortunate, since book Susan did not need to play the role of love interest to earn her place in the story. This story arc also does not get much screen time, so it's hard to see how this deepens Susan's character at all. Filmic Susan's finer moments, such as sharing a meaningful look with Lucy before she faces a group of enemy soldiers alone, are diminished in value as the romance takes over, dictating that

Caspian ride in and rescue Susan from the last soldier standing. If the *Narnia* series does explore adolescence, the *Prince Caspian* novel shows that female characters can mature in ways apart from developing an interest in men, and Susan learning to kiss someone is much less impactful than Susan learning to trust in a God-figure she cannot always see.

By offering different interpretations of Susan's moral decay, the *Prince Caspian* novel and film offer different interpretations of what makes someone a "strong female character." Book Susan is compassionate and intelligent, and overreliance on her intelligence may inform why she eventually denies Narnia's existence. Filmic Susan focuses on romance, which may tie into her later love of "nylons and lipstick and invitations," but then to be seen as a "strong female character" per modern expectations, she must join the men in battle. Thanks to their struggles between faith and doubt, both incarnations of Susan are more complex than book Dorothy, who has no dynamic arc. Likewise, both Susans are free of filmic Dorothy's gender restrictions, as they enjoy both adventures and strong familial bonds without being forced to choose between the two. Yet filmic Susan is still confined to certain gender stereotypes, since her struggles with doubt are overshadowed by a shallow romantic arc. Although she is more battle-hardened than book Susan, the latter incarnation proves freer from character-stifling gender restrictions. This shows that the ability to fight does not automatically make someone a "strong female character."

Arwen Evenstar—*The Lord of the Rings* (1954, 2001–2003)

Is Arwen, in either book or film, a "strong female character"? On the one hand, she appears to experience the same pitfalls as filmic Susan: she's a minor character compared with the male protagonists, especially in the books, and in both books and films she is defined primarily as a male character's love interest. She also does not consistently express many

modern “strong female character” ideals, such as independence or fierceness. Yet *The Lord of the Rings* film adaptations stand out from the other films discussed by employing female screenwriters (Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens). Perhaps it should not be surprising, then, that filmic Arwen develops J.R.R. Tolkien’s book Arwen in a way that does not constrict her in the role of love interest, better showcasing how even book Arwen elevates femininity itself.

Book Arwen

In the entire trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings*, Arwen barely appears at all, making her seem less like a fully developed character and more like a minor figure full of potential for a greater story. Tolkien himself confessed that he’d hastily added her to his books’ final drafts, which would explain why she does not appear as a dominant figure in the text. In fact, in the trilogy’s main story, she speaks in only one scene, when she and Aragorn bid farewell to Frodo in *The Return of the King* (Tolkien 974). Most of what we know of her comes from book comparisons of her to her ancestor Luthien, whose likeness she carries (227); what other characters say about her when she is not present, such as when Rangers of the North deliver a gift from Arwen to Aragorn (775); and the full love story between Arwen and Aragorn, told in an appendix instead of in the main narrative. Yet even with such few scenes with her present, book Arwen does not experience the same pitfall as book Dorothy, who had few consistent defining characteristics. By contrast, even though Arwen remains in the background, close inspection of her reveals three positive qualities that define her character.

First, Arwen carries the reputation not just of unsurpassed beauty, but of keen Elvish wisdom, which empowers her. The first time we meet her, Frodo notes, “Queenly she looked, and thought and knowledge were in her glance, as of one who has known many things that the years bring” (227). In Aragorn’s eyes, she carries “the wisdom of many days” (1058). The best

active testament to her wisdom comes when she sends Aragorn her gift, which is a standard carrying a banner with a White Tree, seven stars, and a high crown (847). The White Tree symbolizes the kingdom of Gondor, and the high crown symbolizes Elendil, Aragorn's kingly ancestor. Thus, the banner proclaims Aragorn's identity as the heir to Elendil's throne in Gondor. Combined with Arwen's message to him that "the days now are short. Either our hope cometh, or all hope's end" (775), this indicates that Arwen knows the time has come for Aragorn to declare his identity, right as he prepares to march into Gondor. She is right, for this banner inspires the army in the Paths of the Dead to follow Aragorn and ensure Gondor's victory, and once Gondor learns that their rightful king has arrived, they gain new hope for the final confrontation with the enemy. Both Arwen's banner and her sense of timing help ensure Aragorn's victory, so he could not have adequately fulfilled his destiny without her foresight.

Second, Arwen continually provides much-needed hope and encouragement to others, especially Aragorn. Her message that accompanies the banner mentions hope outright, as quoted above, but this is not her first gift to her lover. She had left "a great stone of a clear green, set in a silver brooch" in Galadriel's care until Aragorn arrives, and Galadriel declares this stone "a token of hope" to remind Aragorn of his kingly heritage (375). Appendix A tells of when the two lovers betrothed themselves to each other: Arwen says, "Dark is the Shadow, and yet my heart rejoices; for you . . . shall be among the great whose valour will destroy it," and Aragorn replies, "Alas! I cannot foresee it, and how it may come to pass is hidden from me. Yet with your hope I will hope" (1061). This emphasizes how Arwen continually gives Aragorn hope, simply by having hope herself. In the books, she provides hope mainly for Aragorn, yet after the Ring's destruction, even Frodo is affected by this quality in her. When he sees her riding to meet and finally marry Aragorn, Frodo remarks to Gandalf, "Now not day only shall be beloved, but night

too shall be beautiful and blessed and all its fear pass away!" (972). His declaration makes more sense when considering how throughout the series, Arwen is continually associated with evening, night, and starlight. Though Arwen appears very little in the book, whenever she does appear, she brings hope with her to impart to others.

Third, and most importantly, Arwen embodies sacrificial love in a way that no other character even comes close to living out. While other characters sacrifice comfort and sometimes their own mortal lives, Arwen stands out for sacrificing an *immortal* life for love, even though she knows this will bring her eventual despair, as it did for her ancestor Luthien. After marrying Aragorn, Arwen parts with her father Elrond in private, and the narrator notes, "Bitter was their parting that should endure beyond the ends of the world" (978). Appendix A elaborates on Arwen's bitter fate, and how though she "had foreseen" Aragorn's death and her own despair, "nonetheless she was overborne by her grief" (1062). Yet she willingly makes this sacrifice, which benefits not only Aragorn, but also Frodo, for book Frodo receives Arwen's place on the ship to the Undying Lands, the only place where he can find healing after bearing the Ring (974–75). Critic Nancy Enright connects Arwen's "taking on mortality out of love" to Christ's sacrifice in leaving heaven and embracing mortality out of love (Enright 97–98), an apt comparison that elevates Arwen's story beyond a mere tale of a woman sacrificing all for a man. Enright further argues that this exemplifies how Tolkien's female characters stand out for denouncing traditionally masculine conceptions of strength by renouncing power rather than holding onto it, while men in the story who fall (such as Boromir, Saruman, and Denethor), fall out of greed for power; she concludes that this "undercuts much of the supposed male dominance perceived by some readers of the novel, a perception largely based on the low number of female characters (which is less significant than the roles they play) and the supposed stereotypes these

female characters fulfill" (106). When viewed in this light, book Arwen no longer appears passive or weak, but ironically, one of the most powerful characters in the series.

Filmic Arwen

Jackson's *The Return of the King* puts more of a spotlight on Arwen's wisdom than the book does by showing her reaction to an added vision of her future with Aragorn. In the book, we don't see Arwen's Elven foresight in action, but we see it in this film when Arwen, en route to leave Middle-Earth, has a vision of a child with her necklace running to a joyful grey-haired Aragorn. This inspires her to ride back to Elrond and declare that a future with Aragorn holds not just death for her, but also life. Elrond tries to dissuade her, saying that this future is uncertain, but she replies, "Some things are certain. If I leave him now, I will regret it forever" (*The Return of the King*). Even if she does not know whether this future will come to pass, she is wise enough to know that she cannot pass up the chance to make this happen. She even has practical advice for her father: re-forge the Blade that was Broken, which substitutes for the book's standard and banner. Upon realizing that Arwen has now become mortal, Elrond is thus inspired to do all he can to support Aragorn's quest. In a twist not present in the book, then, Arwen appears wiser even than Elrond, one of the oldest, wisest, and most powerful beings in Middle-Earth. This scene also interweaves Arwen's wisdom with her two other main qualities: hope and sacrifice.

The films better showcase how Arwen is a source of hope, both for Aragorn and Frodo, by making her more visible. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, she first appears to assist Frodo, who is dying from the effect of a Nazgul blade. To his eyes, she appears clothed in white and ringed in light, and she is the only person Frodo can focus on, signifying how she holds hope for his recovery that the others around him cannot provide. It is she who successfully transports Frodo to Rivendell in time for Elrond to heal him, so while filmic Frodo never comments on the hope

she brings, the films show rather than tell his impression of her. Of course, she remains a steady source of encouragement for Aragorn, both in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*. In the first film, she declares that the "shadow does not hold sway" over either of them, encouraging him before he sets off on his quest with Frodo. She later appears to Aragorn in a dream in the second film, at a time when he doubts his path. In Elvish she tells him, "It [Aragorn's path] is already laid before your feet," giving him both wisdom and encouragement for his journey. Even as Aragorn believes she is sailing away to the Undying Lands forever, when he strengthens a young soldier of Rohan before the battle of Helm's Deep by telling him, "There is always hope" (*The Two Towers*), he reiterates this lesson from Arwen.

Finally, the films spotlight Arwen's sacrifice of immortality by giving her a dynamic character arc that's more central to the story. In the first film, her commitment to Aragorn is made more concrete when she gives him her Evenstar necklace. The second film provides a flashback in which Aragorn tries to return the necklace and persuade Arwen to reconsider, but she says the necklace is hers to give, signifying that her sacrifice is *her* choice to make, not Aragorn's. The second film also shows Elrond telling his daughter exactly what kind of pain she would suffer as a mortal, and viewers get an inside look at Aragorn's funeral and Arwen's mourning as she witnesses death firsthand. Similar to how Dorothy's complexity improves in film because of brief moral regression (running away from home), Arwen's complexity improves in film because of brief moral regression—in her case, deciding to leave Middle-Earth. This new arc highlights both her strong bond with her father and the true price of her sacrifice, should she make it. This arc does not get resolved until the third film, when Arwen sees a vision of the son she will have with Aragorn and determines once again to choose mortality. This choice immediately affects her health, to the point where Elrond declares, "As Sauron's power grows,

her strength wanes. Arwen's life is now tied to the fate of the Ring." Her sacrifice once again becomes more poignant, for Elrond implies that if Sauron wins, she will immediately die. After she and Aragorn reunite, no more is said about her future pain, and the films never say outright that Arwen grants Frodo her place in the Undying Lands. But the films place so much emphasis on her sacrifice already that her character is not hurt or diminished by this deletion.

When expanding Arwen's role in the films, the director and screenwriters wrestled with whether to make filmic Arwen more of a warrior ("From Book to Script"), but providing only brief glimpses of her warrior side was the right choice, for Arwen is a strong character regardless of battle prowess. The first film replaces Glorfindel, a minor character who guides Frodo to Rivendell, with Arwen; with a frailer Frodo to carry and Nazgul warriors at Arwen's heels, this revised scene emphasizes Arwen's power as an Elf warrior as she defeats the Nazgul using Elf magic. Since her focus remains on providing hope for someone else, this change remains consistent with her book self, while also making her more prominent in the story. Jackson then debated sending Arwen to the Battle at Helm's Deep to fight alongside Aragorn, but when book fans heard these rumors, they protested the idea of Arwen as warrior. So this concept was abandoned. This proved satisfactory: as Arwen's actress, Liv Tyler, notes, "You don't need to put a sword in [Arwen's] hands to make her strong. . . . This is an incredibly powerful and fearless woman . . . filled with so much hope and belief. And that is strong enough" ("From Book to Script"). Critic Jessica Yates also notes, "Turning Arwen into a warrior would . . . detract from Éowyn's great deed [of slaying the Witch King], which is for many readers one of the high points of the saga. It is fair to say that we don't notice Arwen's passivity because we enjoy Éowyn's triumph" (Yates 15). And another critic points out that, had Arwen and Éowyn met each other at Helm's Deep, their shared love for Aragorn could've resulted in a catfight

(Gaydosik 226)—hardly a picture of female empowerment. Instead, Arwen relies on the qualities of wisdom, hope, and sacrifice to prove her character's strength.

To return to the question posed in Arwen's introduction, then, neither book Arwen nor filmic Arwen conforms much to modern expectations for what a "strong female character" looks like. However, if this trope can include traditionally feminine characters who prove their strength aside from wielding weaponry, then Arwen is a complex and admirable "strong female character" that critiques the "hyper-strong" female character. While she could've taken after filmic Susan and relied on battle prowess to show strength, filmic Arwen remains true to book Arwen's way of rejecting masculine conceptions of power, the extreme of which define the "hyper-strong" female character. And because filmic Arwen focuses on book Arwen's ideals of wisdom, hope, and sacrifice, she is able to embrace both combat and romance without letting shallow conceptions of either diminish her character, contrasting once again with filmic Susan. Arwen thus stands out for affirming how femininity is a strength, not an obstacle to overcome.

Princess Buttercup—*The Princess Bride* (1973, 1987)

Princess Buttercup presents a unique case in the conversation about "strong female characters" because, as the protagonist of a parodic story, she is a parodic character. Both William Goldman's novel and Rob Reiner's film adaptation (which features Goldman as screenwriter) use several stereotypical fairy tale tropes, one of them being Buttercup's role as damsel in distress—often considered the passive antithesis of the active "strong female character." Yet because the story is a parody, it can be difficult to discern whether it presents the "damsel in distress" trope to be humorously critiqued or humorously reaffirmed, or both. As it turns out, the novel and film both have different interpretations of how to make Buttercup a

parodic character, the former leaning toward disempowering her, and the latter using her circumstantial limitations as "damsel in distress" to showcase her inner strength.

Book Buttercup

In the novel, Buttercup fulfills the stereotypical role of dumb beauty, and while this may be a parody, it runs the risk of reinforcing this stereotype. The story often references her lack of intelligence: Westley asks her when she last read something other than a picture book, and her silence indicates that she does not read much (Goldman 155); she requires Prince Humperdinck's help in writing a letter to Westley because she cannot write well (197), and she isn't good at math (269). These mental disadvantages keep forcing her to rely on men for support, and this trend culminates in the scene when Westley commands her to tie up Humperdinck. Buttercup insists that Westley would do a much better job of it than she could, prompting Westley to yell at her, "You are the property of the Dread Pirate Roberts and you . . . do . . . what . . . you're . . . told!" (279). Since book Buttercup can hardly think for herself, instead of being attracted to her as a person, Westley appears attracted to her just for her beauty: he brags about her looks to the Dread Pirate Roberts and withstands torture by picturing her flawless appearance (163–64, 195). The narrator finalizes how important Buttercup's looks are at the story's end, when he speculates on what bad things might've happened to the four main characters after the "happily ever after": "In my opinion, anyway, they squabbled a lot, *and Buttercup lost her looks eventually,* and one day Fezzik lost a fight and some hot-shot kid whipped Inigo with a sword" (283, emphasis mine). As he envisions the worst things that could happen to each character, Buttercup's envisioned cruel fate is losing her beauty, reinforcing how this is supposed to be her most endearing quality. Unfortunately, since no other major female characters counteract Buttercup's characterization, this reinforces the sexist stereotype of "dumb beauty" instead of challenging it.

Still, the novel does include a couple moments when Buttercup stands up for herself by defying villains, so they should be acknowledged in fairness to her character. The first moment occurs when she defies Humperdinck after realizing he lied to her. To her credit, while Buttercup is not generally smart, she does recognize and call out Humperdinck's slip when he says every one of his ships will accompany them on their honeymoon, when he was supposed to have sent his four fastest ships to search for Westley (219–20). When the prince dismisses her, she calls him a coward, saying, "I think you hunt only to reassure yourself that you are not what you are: the weakest thing to ever walk the Earth" (220). The second moment occurs at the book's end, when Yellin and the Brute Squad corner her, Westley, Inigo, and Fezzik to prevent their final escape. Westley admits he is out of ideas, but Buttercup approaches the Brute Squad and commands them to run to the aid of Humperdinck, who was left tied up in Buttercup's room. When Yellin protests that the Squad takes orders from him because he is their leader, Buttercup tells him,

"And I . . .

am

the

QUEEEEEEEEEEEN." (281)

The narrator comments, "There was no doubting her sincerity. Or power. Or capability for vengeance" (281). So the Brute Squad flees to do her bidding. Both these scenes stand out for revealing a different side of Buttercup, showing that she can be active and even "strong."

To her further credit, book Buttercup has an interesting character arc concerning her battle to keep her emotions walled up inside her, which makes her more complex than most

traditional damsels in distress. When we first meet her, she appears to have a standard emotional range, albeit with some melodramatic infatuation with Westley. Yet after she learns of Westley's supposed death, she becomes decidedly less emotional. She never cries or wails at the news (55), and after a brief seclusion, she emerges from her room "an ocean sadder" than before, though not at all hysteric (56). Later, when the man in black taunts her, calling her cold and comparing her to hoarfrost, she responds, "I am not cold, I swear, but I have decided certain things, it is best for me to ignore emotion; I have not been happy dealing with it" (145). The narrator elaborates, "Her heart was a secret garden and the walls were very high" (145–46). She continues to battle this instinct to bury her emotions even after reuniting with Westley: for instance, when Westley tells her that they'll get through the Fire Swamp because they're together and in love, she says, "I keep forgetting that" in a "standoffish" manner (167). This characterization contrasts with many a past hysteric damsel in distress, adding complexity to Buttercup's character through developed flaws. Unfortunately, the novel takes Buttercup's flaws too far.

Book Buttercup does not have a steady love for Westley, and she even rejects his love in the middle of the story, which, while it could've been done well, makes her too flawed to be likeable. The first chapter ends on an ominous note, for after she declares that she must never love again after Westley's death, the narrator confirms, "She never did" (56). Perhaps this means she never loved anyone other than Westley, as she later tells Humperdinck that she's "always" loved Westley (191), yet the scene in which Humperdinck catches her and her lover outside the Fire Swamp casts doubt on the couple's entire relationship. Buttercup prevents a deadly duel between Humperdinck and Westley by inquiring whether Humperdinck will promise not to hurt Westley if she surrenders (169), but her motivations center not on concern for her lover, but on self-preservation:

> "The truth," said Westley [to Buttercup], "is that you would rather live with your Prince than die with your love."
>
> "I would rather live than die, I admit it."
>
> "We were talking of love, madam." There was a long pause. Then Buttercup said it:
>
> "I can live without love."
>
> And with that she left Westley alone. (170)

This character arc could've contributed to Buttercup's likeability if the novel had only defended her reasons for rejecting Westley. Yet Buttercup's later nightmares of crones and babies telling her that she's heartless and loveless indicate that this is the novel's consensus about her. Rather than sympathizing with her desire for life over death, the story punishes her for not being the faithful partner Westley wants her to be. Westley does not appear to forgive her: instead, by continually visualizing her appearance in the Zoo of Death (195, 207), he appears to still want her solely for her beauty. With her beauty thus confirmed as her only redeeming quality, book Buttercup fails to break out of harmful gender stereotypes, and thus cannot be considered a "strong female character."

Filmic Buttercup

Filmic Buttercup, while still famous for her looks, is no "dumb beauty," and she improves over book Buttercup's characterization by being portrayed as a much more serious character. Gone are the book's many references to her inability to read, write, or work numbers—in fact, the film comparatively pokes little fun at her. If anything, her silliest moments are when she fails to immediately recognize the man in black as Westley, and when she throws

herself down a steep hill after realizing his true identity. Yet Goldman rightly praises actress Robin Wright's performance for making Buttercup appear overall intelligent: "Robin's not dumb and she doesn't play dumb, so some of the dumb stuff Buttercup does, when she's fooled and stuff, you can forgive her" ("1996 Audio Commentary"). In fact, filmic Buttercup is so serious that she contrasts strongly with every other major character, as the others love to quip and act ridiculous. This may be what prevents Buttercup from being a fan favorite, since as actor Cary Elwes (Westley) notes, "Goldman wrote a screenplay that we now know is filled with great, classic funny lines. Unfortunately, few, if any, of those lines are given to Buttercup. Robin is not merely the victim in the film; she is also the . . . straight woman" (145). Yet even if filmic Buttercup's characterization makes her less immediately likeable than the story's male characters, unlike book Dorothy, whose bland character contrasted with the more developed personalities of her male companions, Buttercup does not suffer from an underdeveloped personality. Seriousness is one of her definitive characteristics, and she has others besides.

This new Buttercup is primarily defined by her faithfulness to Westley, which both helps her break away from reliance on her looks and makes her more likeable. Filmic characters still praise Buttercup's beauty now and then, but notably, filmic Westley appears more focused on his beloved's inner character than her body. Whereas in the novel, where Westley piques the Dread Pirate Roberts's interest in his story solely by describing Buttercup's beauty, the film declares that he spoke of both Buttercup's beauty and her faithfulness, with the latter being emphasized over the former, as seen in his outburst to her: "Faithfulness he talked of, madam, your enduring faithfulness! Now tell me truly: when you found out he was gone, did you get engaged to your prince at the same hour or did you wait a whole week out of respect for the dead?" (*The Princess Bride*). Filmic Buttercup well earns this reputation of faithfulness, especially evidenced by the

revised scene in the Fire Swamp. Here she sends Westley away out of concern for his life rather than her own. The film still plays this off as the wrong decision, as Buttercup has nightmares of a crone booing her for forsaking her true love, yet Buttercup's reasoning for her decision is more sympathetic and understandable, so she does not risk inciting viewers' hatred of her. Granted, it could be argued that here Buttercup makes a poor adaptational trade similar to Susan's: just as filmic Susan sacrificed her complex crisis of faith for a shallow romantic arc, filmic Buttercup may have sacrificed character growth for a static personality. Yet even if this change detracts from her complexity, the gain in viewers' sympathy is probably worth the trade.

Of course, when evaluating whether to consider filmic Buttercup a true "strong female character," one cannot overlook her constant dependence on Westley to rescue her, which detracts from her agency and ability; yet for the most part her dependency can be excused. First, we should note that she's not entirely inactive: when held captive by Humperdinck, she makes no attempt to escape, yet when held captive by Vizzini, she does. This contrast makes sense on a practical level, for when held by Vizzini, Buttercup has no goal except survival, and since we know she does not love Humperdinck, presumably she couldn't care less if she never reunited with him. However, when held by the prince, Buttercup aims to reunite with Westley, who, as far as she knows, is somewhere on the high seas. She does not know where to find him, but she knows he knows where to find her, so it makes practical sense to wait for his arrival, rather than escape the castle and try to find him herself. Other problematic scenes are her attempted suicide and the fight with the R.O.U.S. The former plays into the parodic nature of the story, and Buttercup is far from the only character to act melodramatic for laughs. As critics have noted, "Physical action prevails over character development" in this film (Alfonso and Fragо 4), so her sudden decision to end her life proceeds from the film's focus on plot over character, especially

to make fun of such tropes as the suicidal lover. As for the R.O.U.S. scene, yes, Buttercup mostly watches Westley battle the rodent, and when she does join the fight, for some reason she picks up a stick instead of Westley's discarded sword. Her best defense for her actions (or lack thereof) is that she'd been through too many traumatic incidents in the last twenty-four hours to think straight, which may not entirely excuse her. Despite this, however, she is not a character without strength, and this shows most vividly in the dynamic between her and Humperdinck.

The film creates parodic irony in Humperdinck's and Buttercup's relationship as captor and captive by showing that Humperdinck, not Buttercup, is the one overpowered by fear. As in the book, filmic Buttercup calls the prince a coward after realizing he'd lied to her about sending messenger ships to Westley, and the visualization of the scene makes this moment even more impactful, thanks to Wright's performance. In fact, the film implicitly places more emphasis on this scene: when Humperdinck confronts Buttercup and Westley in her room, Westley calls him a "warthog-faced buffoon," to which Humperdinck replies, "That may be the first time in my life a *man* has dared insult me" (*The Princess Bride*, emphasis mine). This scene occurs after Buttercup calls Humperdinck a coward, so this implies that she is the first person to call him out for what he really is. Even more significant is Buttercup's and Humperdinck's conversation during their wedding ceremony. She tells him, "Here comes my Westley now" when they hear an attack on the gates. Humperdinck then tells her, "Your Westley is dead. I killed him myself." Not affected in the least, Buttercup merely retorts, "Then why is there fear behind your eyes?" (*The Princess Bride*). Though he maintains physical power over her, the prince has no power over Buttercup's spirit, and she is never afraid of him. So, in an ironic manner typical to this story, though Buttercup is a "damsel in distress," she hardly ever shows distress. True, as a captive, Buttercup wields significantly less power than all the male characters do. Yet despite her

circumstances, she finds ways of expressing her character's inner strength, especially by pointing out how the real coward in this situation is not herself, but rather her captor.

Is Buttercup, either in book and film, a "damsel in distress"? Yes. Even so, both her incarnations cannot be considered "typical" examples of the archetype, for they subvert expectations by not behaving like traditional damsels in distress. In a way, then, Buttercup resembles Arwen in how she fulfills a traditional female role while showing how this role can empower rather than disempower her. True, Buttercup does not live up to Arwen's standards of subversion, for she still relies on male strength instead of her own female strength to secure her "happily ever after." Yet if we focus more on her character than her circumstances, perhaps we could find a way to consider filmic Buttercup a well-developed "strong female character," one who refuses to let outward circumstances determine the strength of her spirit.

Hermione Granger—*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1997, 2001)

While the film adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, like all the other films discussed in this paper, was directed by a man (Chris Columbus), and its screenplay was also written by a man (Steve Kloves), the book itself stands out among the other books discussed because it was written by a woman (J.K. Rowling). Hermione Granger has been written about extensively in critical research, with critics hailing her as one of the first and most popular modern feminist characters in fantasy literature. She also stands out among the previous characters discussed for championing mental strength: the only character portrayed with similar logical practicality is book Susan, and in her case, logicality proved more a setback than an asset. Finally, most intriguing of all for this paper's purposes, the *Harry Potter* novels arrived in the age when the "hyper-strong" female character was beginning to emerge, followed by extensive

critique in pop culture. For all these reasons, Hermione Granger, both in book and film, is an invaluable case study when examining what well-written "strong female characters" look like: a balance of internal weaknesses and strengths.

Book Hermione

Interestingly, Hermione is first characterized as someone trying to sell herself as a "hyper-strong" female character based on superior smarts, yet the novel's first half provides clues that this simplistic characterization is a façade. When Harry and Ron meet her, she's described as having "a bossy sort of voice," and she proceeds to critique Ron's spell usage and brag that she's "learned all [their] course books by heart," even though the school year hasn't yet started (Rowling 105). In the first few months at school, she dominates her classmates in most subjects, furthering the idea that she possesses a kind of "hyper-strength." Even so, the novel hints at her character's greater depth. For one thing, all students must be sorted into four Houses, distinguished by certain attributes. House Ravenclaw emphasizes "wit and learning" (118), so it would appear Hermione's dream House. But she tells Harry and Ron that she thinks the best House is Gryffindor (106), which emphasizes "daring, nerve, and chivalry" (118), and this is where she gets placed (120). So there's more to Hermione than just attachment to learning. Critic Alissa Burger also highlights Hermione's ostracization from her classmates, not only for her nerdiness, but also for her identity as a witch from a non-magical family (30–31). The first *Harry Potter* book does not explore the implications of Hermione's non-magical heritage, but prejudice from pureblood fanatics becomes a major theme in the series starting with the second book. Knowing this, it's easier to understand Hermione's obsession with excelling in all her classes at Hogwarts: her intellectual drive may be influenced by insecurity about belonging in the

wizarding world. These subtle hints at Hermione's character depth pay off in the book's second half, beginning with the scene in which Harry and Ron rescue her from a troll.

Despite many criticisms that the troll scene is sexist for making Hermione a temporary damsel in distress, this scene improves Hermione's characterization by ripping away the façade of her "hyper-strength." During this scene, Hermione becomes paralyzed with fright while the boys rescue her—behavior that some critics describe as stereotypic rather than legitimate, believable action (Dresang 223, Burger 36). It is true that Hermione performs no decisive action during the attack, yet in her defense, the troll took her completely by surprise. By contrast, Harry and Ron had already been warned about the troll's presence, so it makes sense that they would spring into action here while Hermione cowers. This showcases a strong problem with the "hyper-strong" female character: according to this trope's ideals, no woman, not even a twelve-year-old girl, is allowed to panic when under a surprise attack from a mythical monster. Fortunately, not every critic holds Hermione to these impossible standards: "Hermione shrieks, bawls and hides from trolls in [*The Sorcerer's Stone*] so that when she stands face to face with Bellatrix LeStrange in [*The Deathly Hallows*] and takes the worst torture the second darkest wizard in the world can dish out, it means something" (Bell 11). If Hermione had started out as an invulnerable "hyper-strong" female character in the first book, she wouldn't have been able to grow throughout the series by overcoming her flaws. The death of Hermione's "hyper-strong" façade is what frees her to pursue real friendship with Harry and Ron, who've now seen her vulnerable side and view her as a human being they can relate to, rather than an annoying brainiac who's always proving that she's smarter than they are.

After the troll scene, Hermione oscillates between composure and panic in different dangerous situations, which, instead of making her inconsistent, increases her character

complexity. During Harry's first Quidditch game, in which his broom gets jinxed so that he nearly falls out of the sky, Hermione spots Professor Snape muttering incantations, rushes through the stands to reach him, and sets him on fire to break his concentration (190-91), inadvertently stopping the real villain, Professor Quirrell (388–87). Later, however, when facing the Devil's Snare, she nearly panics when the plant starts to smother Harry and Ron to death. She's able to remember the name of the plant, and that "it likes the dark and the damp," but it is Harry who concludes that she should light a fire, and she forgets that she can use magic to complete that task; Ron has to remind her (277-78). Critic Eliza Dresang flags behavior like this, arguing that Hermione's "hysteria and crying happen far too often to be considered a believable part of the development of Hermione's character and are quite out of line with her core role in the book" (223). But this scene with the Devil's Snare actually does make sense given Hermione's character. Since she is from a non-magical family, it makes sense that she would briefly forget to use magic in this moment of crisis, and that Ron, being from a pureblood wizarding family, would immediately correct her. Overall, it's unfair to demand that Hermione flawlessly handle every crisis by herself, especially as a child who has yet to fully mature. Far from making her character inconsistent, Hermione's oscillation between contrasting emotions gives her greater depth, and this complexity adds to her strength as a well-written character.

Finally, Hermione's empowerment as a character culminates as she solves the logic puzzle for Harry, which affirms her unique strengths as scholar and Muggle-born without pushing a narrative of "hyper-strength." She and Harry encounter a series of seven potions in differently shaped bottles all in a line, accompanied by a roll of paper with a riddle explaining that only after drinking one of the potions can one proceed to the next room. It cannot be a game of mere guesswork, though, for three of the potions are lethal. It may seem strange that this

puzzle, intended to guard one of the wizarding world's most powerful objects, could be solved by a twelve-year-old. Yet according to Hermione, "This isn't magic—it's logic—a puzzle. A lot of the greatest wizards haven't got an ounce of logic, they'd be stuck in here forever" (285). Given how none of the classes at Hogwarts cover basic logic, she's probably right. Here Hermione has the advantage, both because she's naturally studious and intelligent, and because, as a Muggle-born, she's likely had Western education classes that teach logic, to which most of her classmates may never have been exposed. Her comment to Harry reveals that her advantage over other wizards and witches is not due to some "hyper-strength" that she possesses as a female character. In fact, it's because we've seen her weaknesses throughout the story that this victory is so meaningful. As a complex and flawed heroine, she has earned the right to exert her unique abilities and prove how she is a truly empowered "strong female character."

Filmic Hermione

This version of Hermione showcases a common struggle between academia and pop culture in how strong a "strong female character" should be. For instance, in the film, one significant cut scene from the original story is when Hermione solves the logic puzzle, which some academic critics interpret as female disempowerment. In the book, the logic puzzle prevents Hermione from accompanying Harry to face Voldemort in the next room, since only one person can cross over. Yet filmic Hermione stays behind just to attend to an unconscious Ron while Harry finishes the quest. According to Dresang, "From the feminist analytical framework, this is a blatant . . . denial of agency, and in fact it seizes from Hermione the opportunity to journey toward establishing her equality with the male characters. She is relegated at this point to the role of sidekick rather than that of co-equal contributor and determiner of her own fate through her own unique abilities" (239). Of course, there may be legitimate filmic

reasons for cutting this scene, especially since the book doesn't have Hermione work out the problem aloud. She simply tells Harry the right answer without explaining why it is, and if this scene were adapted to film exactly like that, it would be visually uninteresting and look like a cop-out. Yet one could envision Hermione working out the solution to the problem orally, and something as simple as a magical time limit could give the scene more suspense. Basically, the scene did not need to be cut, and Dresang raises an important question: does the omission of Hermione's victory drastically detract from her filmic character's strength and agency?

While it would've been nice to watch Hermione conquer this puzzle onscreen, her filmic self is not drastically disempowered, since her logic and problem-solving skills are played up in other filmic scenes. For instance, as opposed to book Hermione's complete panic throughout the troll scene, filmic Hermione recovers enough to remind Ron how to move his wand properly so that he can cast a levitation spell on the troll's club. So even as a "damsel in distress," Hermione proves a catalyst for Ron's success, which increases her agency. Likewise, in the scene with the Devil's Snare, Hermione worries for Ron's safety but never panics or needs help from the boys. After remembering that the plant doesn't like sunlight, she immediately pulls out her wand to cast a spell, freeing Ron from the plant's clutches. This departs significantly from the scene in the book: whereas in the book, Ron needed to prod Hermione toward the solution, in the film, Ron panics while Hermione remains coolheaded and rescues him. So while the omission of the logic puzzle scene is unfortunate, filmic Hermione does not need that scene to show viewers her intelligence and quick-wittedness. She demonstrates those qualities well enough in these other modified scenes from the book.

Yet in the world of pop culture, the *Harry Potter* fanbase tends to argue the opposite view of that held by critics: that filmic Hermione, far from being disempowered, has been turned

into an over-powered "hyper-strong" female character. Interestingly, instead of taking issue with filmic Hermione as an individual, most compare her to filmic Ron and argue that his competence was dumbed down so that Hermione's competence could appear played up by contrast. Many fans have complained about Ron's filmic character being reduced to comic relief, saying that book Ron is braver, more heroic, and more complex. MsMojo, a pop culture YouTube channel with over two million subscribers, describes Ron as "the glue holding the [Harry/Ron/Hermione trio] together" and declares Ron's lessened role as one of the worst changes made to the films (Brayton). Others have directly connected Ron's diminishment to Hermione's embellishment. YouTube channel The Authentic Observer, which analyzes fantasy books and has over thirty thousand subscribers, declares, "Many of the lines that Ron had in the books that showed his intelligence and his loyalty to his friends were given to Hermione in the movies to try and make her look better" (Van Outersterp). While *The Sorcerer's Stone* film does not trade any of Ron's and Hermione's lines, as noted before, the scene with the Devil's Snare does trade their attitudes, as Ron panics and Hermione doesn't. So the *Harry Potter* fanbase raises another legitimate question: is filmic Hermione too much of a "hyper-strong" female character?

While this may be a legitimate concern in the series' entirety, in *The Sorcerer's Stone* alone, filmic Hermione is not over-powered and does not detract from Ron's significant moment of character development and empowerment. True, filmic Hermione does panic less than book Hermione does, yet she still exhibits fear and sometimes requires rescue. She experiences the same character arc of acting like a "hyper-strong" female character in the first half of the film, only for the façade to fall away when Ron makes fun of her and she runs into the girls' bathroom to cry. And just as he did in the book, filmic Ron nobly sacrifices himself in the giant chess game so that Harry can win the game and confront Voldemort; Hermione did not steal Ron's limelight.

Even the fanbase would likely admit that *The Sorcerer's Stone* does not turn Hermione into a "hyper-strong" female character. Most complaints center around further installments in the series: The Authentic Observer, for instance, cites a scene from *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, in which filmic Hermione stands up to Sirius Black (whom she thinks is a murderer) while filmic Ron whines in the corner, whereas the book has Hermione panic while Ron ignores a broken leg so he can literally stand up and defend Harry from Black. This was probably Ron's most empowered moment in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, and without any other modified scenes to play up his bravery, many fans protest this change. Such a change does not occur in *The Sorcerer's Stone*, however, so in the first film at least, Hermione remains a "strong female character" who does not transgress into "hyper-strong" territory.

Hermione stands out for defying the call for invulnerable superwomen in the age of the "hyper-strong" female character. The question of "hyper-strength" is thus more pertinent for her than for Dorothy, Susan, Arwen, or Buttercup. While filmic Susan and filmic Arwen did confront this question a little, Hermione stands out from them because *The Sorcerer's Stone* is just the first installment of a seven-part series in which she has more room to grow than either Susan or Arwen had. This may be Hermione's greatest asset: as *The Sorcerer's Stone* has her oscillate between weakness and strength, it sets up a larger character arc that develops over a series instead of in a single book. This adds another layer to the conversation about the "strong female character": allowing such a character to have yet to reach her full strength.

Annabeth Chase—*Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* (2005, 2010)

Even though Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* novels are *New York Times* Bestsellers, the academy has largely neglected this series for critical analysis. Yet the series has an intriguing premise: the Greek gods exist and are still producing demigods, whose godly heritage is evidenced by their learning disabilities. In the first book, female lead Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena, struggles with dyslexia (because her brain is hardwired to read ancient Greek, not English) and ADHD (her natural battle reflexes). Yet she and protagonist Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon, must use their godly abilities to their advantage as they track down the thief of Zeus's lightning bolt. Like Hermione, Annabeth was born in the age of the "hyper-strong" female character, and unfortunately, Chris Columbus's film adaptation (with screenplay by Craig Titley) is a key example of how this filmic stereotype can take a complex and admirable female character, and transform her into a character that pays lip service to female empowerment while becoming completely subservient to the male protagonist.

Book Annabeth

As a daughter of Athena, Annabeth prizes intelligence and strategy, and her strengths are made more complex because of her learning disabilities. Athena is the "goddess of wisdom and battle" according to Annabeth (Riordan 95), but unlike Arwen, who connects wisdom to foresight, Annabeth mainly connects wisdom to strategy in a fight. This sets Annabeth apart from all the other characters discussed, for she's the only one whose book self explicitly plays the role of female warrior. We get our first glimpse of her strategy at work when the demigods play Capture the Flag. Athena's children lead the blue team, and though it's never said outright, Annabeth giving out orders implies that she's the real leader (118). Her strategy carries her team to victory, so when Annabeth joins Percy and their friend Grover on the quest to retrieve Zeus's lightning bolt, even though it's technically Percy's quest, she remains the main planner and

strategist. This takes on special significance considering her learning disabilities. The book focuses heavily on Percy's disabilities, but there are hints of Annabeth's disabilities as well: she can't read the sign for Aunty Em's Garden Gnome Emporium (171), and when she tells Percy about her dreams of becoming an architect, he can't imagine her sitting still all day to draw (202). And while she's not unique in her struggles, one critic notes how she stands out from the other demigods for actually enjoying academic study: "Her [disabilities don't] stop her from persistently pursuing her long-term plan to become an architect. And the message Riordan gives us is that it shouldn't stop anyone else, either" (Wein 111). Annabeth's intelligence is portrayed as her greatest strength, and because of her learning disabilities, she has to work harder than most kids to nurture this strength, which adds to her character complexity.

Another key factor to Annabeth's complexity is an emotional weakness that later becomes a strength: her strong emotional attachment to the book's twist villain, Luke Castellan. The *Percy Jackson* series, as it focuses on characters with learning disabilities, contains many subtle critiques of standard Western education, and one critical essay connects these critiques to a general suspicion of the goddess of wisdom herself, since Athena's children "are represented as too sure of themselves intellectually" (Morey and Nelson 10). This suspicion of Annabeth's Athena-inspired strengths might've resulted in a negative portrayal of intellectual women, but for Annabeth, her crush on Luke prevents her from being just a cerebral character learning to be less cerebral. Her attachment to Luke in *The Lightning Thief* sets up an arc that culminates in the fifth book when she's able to save Luke, and consequently the world. This is especially important because Percy is a foil to Annabeth's character, and while he often proves himself morally wiser than her, he believes that Luke is just a villain to be defeated, and Annabeth proves him wrong. For this first book particularly, her obvious crush on Luke informs us of her own backstory, in

which Luke found her when she was seven years old and brought her safely to Camp Half-Blood, where she'd be safe from constant monster attacks. It also keeps her from becoming a clichéd love interest, for while she and Percy end up together later in the series, in this first book he has no romantic interest in her, and she's too caught up with Luke to notice him. But she never gets relegated to Luke's love interest, either: since she is twelve and Luke is about nineteen (Riordan 84), readers can sense that this won't play out. Thus, this emotional weakness-turned-strength further develops her character's surprising complexity.

But her complexity in *The Lightning Thief* is best evidenced in her character arc, as she wrestles with both her godly and human natures and eventually learns to embrace her human side. When we first meet her, she lives at Camp Half-Blood all year round instead of just in summer, signifying her total immersion in the demigod world. Part of this immersion includes her skill in battle, so rather than feeling like a cheap add-on to her character, Annabeth's battle prowess feels natural to her based on her arc. She begins the story's quest completely reliant on her godly heritage, evidenced by how her key possessions for the trip include an invisibility cap from her mother, a Greek book on architecture, and a bronze knife for battles (149–50). Yet her adventures soon reveal the limitations of her Athena side: the ancient rivalry between her mother and Percy's father, Poseidon, keeps her from initially trusting Percy (157); she has to let Percy kill Medusa because Medusa's hatred for Athena would work against Annabeth in a fight (181); and the ancient rivalry between Athena and Arachne gives Annabeth arachnophobia (147), paralyzing her with fright when metal spiders attack (236). While we're learning the limitations of being a child of Athena, we're also learning about Annabeth's strained relationship with her human father, and how she refuses to live with him and her stepfamily because, according to Annabeth, they treat her like a freak (201). Percy advises her not to give up on her human family

(251), and while she initially rejects the idea, by the end of the book she's agreed to reconcile with her father (374). Her story adds a different angle to the book's theme of demigod children wrestling with their dual natures, especially since the book focuses on Percy, who prefers his human mother to his godly father. As Annabeth helps Percy embrace his godly heritage, he helps her embrace her human heritage, giving them both dynamic arcs.

Of course, in many ways this is a "Chosen One" story starring Percy Jackson, and the story focuses so much on him that it barely leaves room for other characters to take decisive action; however, while Annabeth mainly plays the role of female sidekick, she's still an active character who influences the plot. As an intelligent girl who's dedicated years of her life to studying Greek myths, she often supplies Percy with key information that saves his life in battle, such as when she tells him to use a glass ball to look at Medusa's reflection when he fights her (182), or when she tells him to avert his eyes when Ares assumes his godly form that would vaporize mortal sight (331). She participates directly in the action on several occasions, but two moments stand out. First, she accurately calculates when she and Percy should jump off a runaway boat to avoid a fatal crash, and since she relies on her knowledge of "simple physics," this implies that her Athena-inspired strengths are at work (239–40). Second, she tames Cerberus the three-headed dog, preventing them from eating her and her friends (295–97). This last action might seem random, but she reminisces about owning a Doberman back when she lived with her father (297). So this moment signifies when she truly embraces her human heritage, which, in its own way, has provided Annabeth with key strengths she needs to complete this quest. Even as Percy performs most of the decisive action, the book is not so Percy-centric to completely relegate Annabeth to the sidelines. She proves herself an active, complex, and inspiring character who, like Hermione, continues to grow and develop throughout the rest of the series.

Filmic Annabeth

Unfortunately, filmic Annabeth is completely stripped of her original version's complexity so that she can become a "hyper-strong" female character. She doesn't retain her tension between different natures, her relationship with Luke, or even, to all appearances, her learning disabilities. Grover tells Percy that all demigods have dyslexia and ADHD, but we see only Percy actually struggling with them. By contrast, Annabeth's skill as a warrior is played up so much that she gains the reputation of being "hyper-strong." Percy first sees her across a fighting arena when she's singlehandedly taking out several male demigods at once in a practice fight; when he asks Grover about her, Grover curtly responds, "She will squash you like a bug" (*Percy Jackson*). Filmic Annabeth doesn't get to speak until the game of Capture the Flag, but here she reveals her own high view of her fighting ability: as she prepares to battle Percy, she emphasizes her mother's qualities of "wisdom and battle strategy," which, according to her, means, "I always win." And at first, she does win, showing no consideration of Percy being a newbie. Both these moments try to glorify her as an empowered woman strictly by placing her in competition with men—a narrative strategy that suffers when halfway through the battle with Percy, the young male discovers his own water powers and is suddenly able to defeat this seasoned warrior. Still, Annabeth convinces Percy to let her tag along on his quest, pointing out, "You've won one battle, and I've won hundreds. You're going to need my experience" (*Percy Jackson*). This basically sums up filmic Annabeth's value in the story, as she's been reduced to battle skills. Yet even this trait has its shortcomings as the story progresses.

Despite all attempts to glorify filmic Annabeth's battle skills, the character contributes surprisingly little to the actual plot. As with book Annabeth, filmic Annabeth supplies Percy with information about the Greek mythic world they're living in, but while book Annabeth's pro-tips

actually aid Percy, filmic Annabeth tends to give helpful information *after* the point when it would've been most helpful. For instance, she reminds Percy that Hydras grow two heads in the place of each severed stump *after* he cuts off all its heads, and she tells Percy who the Lotus Eaters are *after* they've escaped their lair. Her advice, therefore, serves no purpose other than exposition. Regarding action, as in the book, filmic Percy performs the vast majority of decisive action, yet the film takes this so far that filmic Annabeth basically does nothing useful. She barely affects the turnout of the key battles, and only twice does she actually help. First, she blindly rams a truck into Medusa to rescue Percy from the monster's clutches. This does save Percy's life, but this moment does not measure up to book Annabeth's heroics, because while book Annabeth accomplished feats that only she could do, nothing about driving a truck makes it a true "Annabeth" move. Grover was even sitting shotgun as she did it, so he could've easily driven instead. Filmic Annabeth's second feat is producing a dart gun and shooting a group of janitors in the neck to put them to sleep so she, Percy, and Grover can snatch one of Persephone's pearls without being caught. Again, since this dart gun is never referenced before or after this moment, there's nothing to stop either Percy or Grover from randomly carrying one around. For all filmic Annabeth's insistence that they need her on their quest, she provides no asset to the team that they couldn't have supplied themselves.

Considering this lack of important action and character development, the film makes it clear what filmic Annabeth's real role is: objectified love interest. Again, the film cuts Annabeth's crush on Luke, which may have been a wise move, because since she and Percy have been aged up to sixteen instead of twelve, an interest in teenage Luke could've introduced a clichéd love triangle. Yet not only does filmic Annabeth become an obvious love interest for Percy, but she becomes an objectified one. The male gaze plays heavily into the entire film, with

Grover the satyr suddenly keeping a sharp eye out for sexy women, and even characters like Persephone, goddess of spring, become hypersexualized in their physical appearance. While Annabeth herself does not wear skimpy clothing or get pursued by Grover, our first introduction to her plays into the male gaze, since instead of talking to her, Percy literally just gazes at her from across an outdoor arena. Even at the end of the film, when Annabeth pretends to kiss Percy to disarm him of his sword, the seduction in her tone as she tells him, "First rule of battle strategy: Don't ever let your opponent distract you" clarifies how the male gaze has ultimate power over her character (*Percy Jackson*). While the book was also very Percy-centric, the film focuses so much on Percy that even key characters like Annabeth cannot be fully realized as characters in their own right, but only as characters in relation to him. Thus, as the female lead, filmic Annabeth must submit to the role of the male protagonist's objectified love interest.

Finally, while the film does attempt to give Annabeth a character arc, it grants her only a simplified copy of Percy's own character arc regarding their relationships with their godly parents. While book Annabeth has a relationship with her mother and prefers her over her father, filmic Annabeth tells Percy that she's never seen her mother, though she's heard her mother speak to her in times of trouble; Percy says he's experienced the same thing with his father (*Percy Jackson*). This is played off as a moment of understanding between the two, but it's not as interesting as the tension between them in the book, when they've had opposite experiences of which parents (godly or human) they like most. And near the film's end, when Percy and Annabeth finally meet their divine parents, Annabeth's desire for a relationship with her mother culminates with a simple, "Hi, Mom," and Athena merely returns the greeting. By contrast, Percy gets to have a heart-to-heart with his father in a moment of conflict resolution between the two. So filmic Annabeth's only real character arc gets cut off with no satisfaction, further

emphasizing how insignificant she is compared to Percy and his arc. Of course, she's not alone in this: the film overall suffers from a lack of character complexity, as several key characters have been reduced to bland tropes. Columbus bears most of the blame for this, having openly admitted to demanding "complete directorial freedom" with this film, which explains why the film differs so much from the original book (qtd. in Churnin). Yet as the central female character, Annabeth suffers the most from these dramatic changes. The dilemma of missing her absent mother had greater potential for developing filmic Annabeth's character than did her over-glorified battle skills, and even this is not enough to make her interesting or admirable.

There is no comparison between book Annabeth and filmic Annabeth, so far has her filmic self fallen. Intriguingly, filmic Annabeth's greatest loss may be that of her learning disabilities. This reveals how narrow the "hyper-strong" female character trope really is, since no disabled woman can measure up to its idea of "strength." Yet this "strength" is really no strength at all, as all the other characters discussed in this paper, possibly including even book Dorothy, are more complex, more compelling, and therefore more admirable than filmic Annabeth. Due to combat skills, this 2010 character may appear more empowered than 1939 filmic Dorothy, yet in reality, she suffers just as much, if not more, from limitations placed on her because of her gender. The "hyper-strong" female character is no vision for a true "strong female character."

Conclusion

So, if "strong female characters" require inner complexity more so than a checklist of external abilities, then what kind of inner complexity makes up a "strong female character"? As this analysis has shown, no one size fits all. Well-written "strong female characters" can be as morally pure as Dorothy or as morally insecure as Susan, as emotional as Hermione or as

impassive as Buttercup, as soft as Arwen or as tough as Annabeth. Yet however female characters' personalities develop, it's important to create a balanced combination of what's ideal and what's realistic, because, as the old debate suggests, there's a sense in which life imitates art, and there's a sense in which art should imitate life. Applied to "strong female characters," this duality carries a hope that audiences will imitate the ideals portrayed by female characters, but it also warns that, unlike what the philosophy of the "hyper-strong" female character would suggest, a purely idealized female character with exaggerated strengths cannot inspire audiences because she is not lifelike, relatable, or realistic.

The combination of the "ideal" and the "realistic" works, for it's what makes the six characters in this analysis, or at least the best versions of these characters, compelling. Book Dorothy exemplifies an ideal of young girls being able to lead men on quests, defeat witches, and restore social order, and filmic Dorothy exemplifies a more relatable longing for home and fear of isolation; a combination of these would've produced an even better Dorothy. Susan both inspires audiences with her virtues (whether compassion or courage) and acknowledges the difficulty of maintaining a steady faith in the unseen, with her book version being better at both. Arwen, both in book and film, attains a higher ideal of sacrifice than any other character in the trilogy, while also counting the true cost of realistic despair. Book Buttercup suffers from a deficit of the "ideal" as a helpless woman made fun of for her weakness, yet filmic Buttercup exemplifies an idealized courage that shines because of the "realistic" limitations of her circumstances. Book Hermione balances realistic hysteria with ideal rationality, and filmic Hermione presents softened versions of both. Finally, while filmic Annabeth suffers from a deficit of the "realistic" as a flat hyper-strong character, book Annabeth struggles with realistic inner and outer limitations and overcomes both with ideal tenacity.

There may be no exact formula for how to create and encourage more diverse "strong female characters" in books and films, but one of the best principles writers can adopt is aiming for complexity that specifically moves away from predictability. Reflecting on stock female characters, fantasy writer Gina Oschner says, "Interesting characters, male or female, have their own peculiar story and it's my job to try to find that. So it would be fair to say that I craft characters in response to some frustration I encounter in stories that follow predictable patterns. A predictable character generates no tension and my goal is to create as much [tension] as possible." Some voices in pop culture concur: for instance, Overly Sarcastic Productions, a YouTube channel with over a million subscribers, believes that the root of the problem of "hyper-strong" female characters is not a feminist political agenda, but rather a tendency to base female characters off common fictional archetypes, instead of basing them off women we've encountered in real life. Because the "hyper-strong" female character is crafted specifically to appear "strong" based on arbitrary standards, she is rarely complex, and therefore often predictable. Even the term "strong female character" has its drawbacks, since it prioritizes the vague descriptor "strong" and can appear to limit the traits these characters are allowed to possess: as fiction writer Sara Zarr notes, "Whether a writer errs on the side of 'strong' or 'vulnerable' or . . . anything else, you wind up with the fundamental problem of a character being created to fit into the story's needs [versus] creating a character fully imagined as a whole person and then letting the story come together around that." Just as the best male characters are complex and varied, so the best female characters are complex and varied.

Of course, the six characters and stories discussed in this paper do not comprise the highest ideal we can attain in female representation. As noted before, only one of these books was written by a woman, only *The Lord of the Rings* films featured female screenwriters, and

none of the films' directors were female. According to film critic Melissa Tamminga, the film industry especially needs more women "behind the camera—particularly as writers, producers, directors, and cinematographers," which makes sense considering that the "hyper-strong" female character is "catering, from the beginning, to a male audience and a [perceived] male ideal." A woman's perspective may thus offer more insight in creating female characters who can balance the "ideal" with the "realistic" in a way that affirms women as women, rather than creating women who are trying to be men. This is not to say every female filmmaker would portray better female characters, as shown by how the *Ella Enchanted* film's screenwriters were female, but even so, the normalization of female filmmakers will inevitably result in more examples of compelling "strong female characters." For now, though, Dorothy, Susan, Arwen, Buttercup, Hermione, and Annabeth provide valuable range for female characters in fantasy—a genre that, because of its imaginative nature, can uniquely present the "ideal" of female strength while still embracing the "realistic" in how women (or people in general) experience weaknesses, flaws, and limitations.

With this in mind, I now turn to three scenes excerpted from my novel-in-progress, each from the point of view of a different female character. While technically this story is soft science fiction, rather than strict fantasy, the need for well-written "strong female characters" is applicable in all fiction genres, and these two genres do share an emphasis on the imaginative. At the end of these excerpts, I will discuss how I crafted these three characters to embody different ways to combine the "ideal" with the "realistic," especially based on the issues discussed in the analysis of the six characters above.

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Creative Writing

Lisa Parker

All the buildings in Ogelz City were strange, but goosebumps rose on Lisa's arms as she stood in front of the public library, unsure if it struck her as beautiful or grotesque. The building formed a trapezoid that leaned sideways, as if built on unstable ground, and the entire exterior was covered in glass windows. Though transparent, the windows seemed to grow self-consciously tinted, so that the more she stared at them, the less she could see. She removed her glasses, searching the lenses for smudges, but there were none.

Beside her, Zack scratched the back of his neck. "Uh, problem. We've got a problem."

"Hmm?"

Lisa put her glasses back on. At the library's entrance, two silver droids in crisp green suits stood on either side of the door, facing each other. When a couple approached, they stopped and each produced a pen to show the droids, clicking the ends to emit lasered letters and numbers.

"Identification check," Zack explained, pulling a similar pen from his pocket. "I should've remembered."

She crossed her arms. "You forgot they check ID?"

"They don't usually. After every new terrorist attack, the cities enforce more security. But it never lasts. Give it a couple weeks, and they'll forget it all. No one will care."

Flashbacks of her first day in Ogelzetrap crowded her mind, with the fires and shouts and confusion. She swallowed. "I'm not waiting a couple weeks. Will they let me in with you?"

"No, they check everyone. You'd need your own ID."

"Is it hard to register for one?"

He snorted. "Register? Ogelzians get their serial numbers assigned at birth. If you don't have one, you don't exist." Nodding toward the droids, he said, "But if you want to explain to them where you're really from, be my guest."

She scowled. "If that's the case, how'd you get an identity?"

Zack twirled the pen. "Marla. She knew someone who could cheat the system, so now I'm officially Ogelzian." He flicked the pen up and caught it. "They malfunction sometimes, though. I miss Earth's ID cards."

The windows appeared to grow even darker, hiding what she'd come to learn. "We can't just turn around."

"Nope. Tell you what." He turned so his back faced the library, prompting Lisa to do the same. Then he lowered his voice. "You take mine and go alone. All they'll see is my name and number, no picture. And a droid won't tell the difference between guys' and girls' names. You'll be fine."

She gaped. "It's that easy?"

"Sure. They scan the number and send it to OSA's central computer. That's where my other info pops up, and yeah, the people there would see through you. But OSA monitors the whole city. It'll take them a while to inspect the library."

"But they *will* discover me eventually."

He shrugged and grinned. "Just make sure you've checked out your books by then."

Before she could protest, he pressed the pen into her hand. “Research is more your thing, anyway. I’m the one doing the real work, so go find me some clues.”

He pushed her forward; Lisa shook him off and stalked toward the entrance. Fine, if that’s how he felt. She bristled, though, wanting to remind him that without her idea, he’d be stuck with half-written scientific theories, no closer to returning to Earth than he’d been three years ago.

She stepped to the door. One droid’s head swiveled toward her. She clicked the pen. The droid took three long seconds to blink the sound of a camera shutter. It said nothing, staring with sightless eyes. She tensed. Then, it waved her on.

Stuffing the pen into her capris pocket, Lisa tried to control her breathing as she entered. It was fine. She was fine. There was enough time to get what she needed.

Unless OSA’s computer immediately flagged her. And alerted someone.

Crap, what would they do when they discovered her? Fine her? Arrest her?

She paused in the middle of the floor, itching to turn around. From the inside, the windows weren’t dark at all: between sunlight and light rods above, the room was *too* bright, too exposed. Even the two elevators in front of her were transparent, and she could swear the man riding down to her level was looking at her. Worse than the people, though, were the library’s service droids: they paced along the walls, some watching her, taking pictures of her for all she knew. And between the two elevators stood another security droid, marked by the green uniform, guarding a door marked with red warnings: DO NOT ENTER. STAFF ONLY. UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS PUNISHABLE UNDER AC-707. If these were temporary security measures as Zack said, her being here still sounded like grounds for arrest.

She whirled around and would've exited if Zack hadn't been watching her outside, arms crossed, frowning. "I'm the one doing the real work," he'd said. But it was *her* idea to search here; she couldn't back out. Especially not if he thought so little of her contribution. So she lifted her chin and approached an elevator.

Inside, she found a directory of library resources, so she rode to Floor 3: the nonfiction research center. Instead of a guarded door, the space between elevators here contained a desk where a single employee sat: a young woman who gave Lisa a dimpled smile. Lisa averted her eyes and ducked between the nearest bookshelves, not stopping until the desk was out of sight. She'd landed in the reference section: not quite history, but still useful. She picked up an encyclopedia. Then a dictionary. But as she flipped through this, she realized it didn't list words' origins. Maybe an etymological work would mention Earth; if so, it'd confirm her theory.

"Do you require assistance?"

Lisa jumped, nearly dropping the dictionary. The speaker was a service droid with a black bun for a hairpiece, staring at her with a mechanical smile. Shivering, she held up the dictionary, angling it to shield her face.

"Um, no. I mean, yes. I'm looking for a dictionary of, um, etymology."

The droid took two full seconds to methodically blink. "Etymology?"

"Yes."

"We have no books that meet that description."

She lowered the dictionary. "Nothing on etymology?"

"Do you mean, entry mycology? Estuary ology? Estriol mythology?"

Lisa closed her eyes. Just as she'd long suspected: robots were useless. "Never mind."

She left, taking the dictionary, and browsed until she'd gathered three more books, all from the social sciences. She hadn't found the history section yet, but this was a start. Weaving far around the few other humans around, she brought her stack to the windows overlooking the Ogelz City skyline and released the books onto a side table by a matching metal chair.

First, she reached for *A Chronological Survey of Ogelzian Migration*. The table of contents labeled the fifteenth and final chapter "Present," with all previous chapters headed by numbers: 1458, 1459, 1460. Were these years? She turned to the first chapter:

While 1458 is falling out of public memory, I intentionally begin this survey here because the year marked a significant drop in private familial relocations, even among city dwellers, and this stagnation may be responsible for increased cases of nostalgia nationwide, especially in those fifty and older. Regular migration between Northern regions has been shown to counteract such effects, which is why I devote my attention to documenting migrative patterns…

Lisa leaned back. So this would tell her nothing about historical migrations, much less whether Ogelzians ever migrated from her own planet. Strange that the survey's scope would be so small.

Setting the book aside, she picked up *The Ancient Scourge of 1469*, at which she now frowned. What kind of "ancient scourge" could've occurred within the last decade? Adjusting her glasses, she turned to the back blurb:

Even as terrorist attacks in our country increase, another threat rears its head in 1469: SoTO. As the Zander cult grows, so does the number of nostalgia cases in—

Mechanical footsteps clunked by Lisa, and she jumped. The droid with the black bun passed her; when it looked her way, she held her book to hide her face. Was it normal to be checked on this much, or was she raising suspicion already? Not until the droid disappeared behind another shelf could she breathe freely; a moment more, and she finished the blurb:

In this volume, social scientists offer a fresh perspective on the crisis and propose alternate solutions on eliminating SoTO and its influence once and for all.

"Soto," she murmured. "So-TOE? So-TOO? S-O-T-O?"

She searched for the term in the dictionary, then in the encyclopedia. It wasn't in either.

Only one other book was left: *An Interview with a Professed Historian*. Its cover was brown and drab, with the cracked face of a pocket watch in the center, and she didn't know how to interpret "professed." Still, the passing droid had reminded her to hurry. She skipped to the final chapter:

It's been nearly a year since I talked with Rex Addleston, yet I haven't recovered from the shock of his assertions. What I keep returning to is his story about digging up the pocket watch. The questions I wanted to ask, yet couldn't out of propriety, come rushing back: What possesses someone to dig in the ground for a deceased person's trinkets? And what use can he hope to find in a watch that has long since ceased to work?

Yet there's something about the sentimental way in which he describes his care for this trinket that I find hard to forget. The old man gets teary-eyed as he shows me his "treasure," and he says that he dusts that little watch every day, even twice a day. This is more than a case of mere ancienthood: under SoTO's influence, Addleston genuinely believes that he's found—

More clunking footsteps. Lisa clutched the book, not lifting her head but no longer registering the words. The droid stopped beside her. The longer it didn't speak, the whiter her knuckles became.

"Do you require assistance?"

"No," she said. "Like I said before, no."

"I do not understand."

She snapped her head up. "You already asked, and no. I'm fine. Please stop bothering me."

Crap, did droids register voice quakes?

After another moment, the droid performed its exaggerated blink. "Pardon. It is past the turn of the hour. My memory records have been deleted."

It walked away. Lisa sat frozen until it turned a corner. Then she returned to her page—and the typo. Unless . . .

She grabbed the dictionary and searched:

Ancienthood (n.)—a mental disorder that mainly affects the elderly, involving antipathy toward progress, encouragement of regression, and an incurable yearning for and preoccupation with a bygone era. See also ANCIENT, NOSTALGIA, REGRESSION

She slid it back onto the table, then felt for Zack's pen. Security could discover her any second, and she'd found nothing. But between all these strange terms in the books, one thing was clear: unfortunately, she needed help. So she stood, clutching the *Interview* book, and weaved her way between shelves—and droids—toward the librarian desk.

The librarian brightened as she approached. “Welcome, I am Ava. How may I assist you?”

Lisa cleared her throat. “Where could I access your library archives?”

The spark in Ava’s eyes instantly died. It took another moment for her smile to follow suit. “Archives are restricted. Staff use only.”

Right, those glaring red warnings on the first floor. But what did terrorist security have to do with the archives?

“Um, fine, but if that’s the case, where could I look up historical records?”

“*What?*”

Lisa started. “I, I’m trying to research—” She swallowed. “Could you just tell me where your history section is?”

“I’m sorry?”

“History!” Lisa burst out. “Anything on history, or etymology, or archeology. Anything about life in the past, say, three hundred years. Any old records, journals—or legends, I don’t care. Just anything written by anyone who was a historian, a *real* historian.”

Underneath the white sheen of Ava’s nose and cheeks, a hint of pink appeared.

“This is a respectable Northern library. The pride of Ogelz City’s academic study. We carry nothing of the sort. If we did, the text would join the others in the Ancient Book Burnings.”

“The *what?*”

"And no library in this country would accept a volume written by a professed historian. We take literature seriously."

"But," Lisa raised the book in her hand, "but this one says—"

Ava snatched it from her and stared at its title, exposing the back blurb:

When Rex Addleston, a confirmed member of SoTO, offers me an inside look at his affiliation with the cult, I accept on the basis of learning—

The book lowered, and Lisa was left staring into the librarian's face. As Ava's nostrils flared, Lisa suddenly understood: this had nothing to do with the attack, or even Lisa's false identity. They were hiding something else. Against her better judgment, she asked it.

"What *is* SoTO?"

Ava's eyes flashed. "I'm sorry, but you must leave."

"What?"

"You're causing a public disturbance. Leave before I call security."

Around Lisa, people had stopped to listen. Some stared with open hostility, some with fear. One woman was covering the ears of her child. Heat rushing to her cheeks, Lisa hugged herself and hurried to the elevator.

Marla Sands

The train hit another bump, causing Marla to topple into Brevin Lars's lap. Before he could get any ideas, she shoved him away from her and stood, clutching the back of his chair for balance.

"Hey!" he protested, taking her hand. "You want to sit down, just ask."

"Let go."

She tried to pull her hand away, but Brevin held on, winking. "There's enough room for two."

"We're entering a war zone!" she snapped. "Grow up!"

His lips stuck out. "I'm lonely."

"Sit up front."

"With who, the cyborg?"

Marla yanked his arm around in a tight twist; he yelped and released her hand, but she gripped his wrist. "That *cyborg*," she stressed, "is your captain."

The train lurched after she released him; she stumbled but didn't fall. Only then did she realize other agents were eyeing her from across different seats. She glared at them all in turn, daring anyone else to insult her cousin. Most lowered their eyes. A few crossed their arms but said nothing.

Resuming her walk down the aisle, Marla searched for a seat away from the others. It wasn't easy: the agents were spread out all over the car. The few that did sit together were probably newbies, still entertaining the thought of friendship. She stiffened as she passed a pair of women engaged in whispered conversation, grinning at some inside joke. If she knew their names, she would've ordered them to remain vigilant. Instead, she swerved into an opposite seat as the train pitched to one side, causing one of the pair to slide away from her companion.

Marla pressed her cheek against the window. This was the dead stretch, she'd heard. Five hours by train without encountering any cities or settlements: just flat, chalky ground under a dark cloud cover, shrouding them in premature evening. The clouds were concerning. She'd heard that Southern bombers moved soundlessly, so for all she knew, hundreds could be crossing above, ready to destroy every Northern industrial center. No one would be safe—except those living in the outskirts.

But that didn't justify Zack living there *at all*.

Crossing her arms, Marla slumped in her seat. No one was paying attention to her now, but still, she refused to shed a tear. She'd been moronic to think Zack would try seeing her one last time before her squad got transferred. Without reliable comm service in his area, maybe he didn't even know. She would've sought him out herself if she weren't smarting over their latest argument.

She rubbed her forehead. How had this one started? She'd gone to visit him, and they were walking outside, since it was evening, and the desert climate had entered one of those rare comfortable moments between blistering heat and freezing cold. Yes, and he'd talked about Lisa and how she wanted to find a way back to their former planet. Marla hadn't liked this turn in conversation, but she'd listened.

What was it he said Lisa had done? Something about searching the library for books on history. Marla had laughed, scornfully. But Zack hadn't laughed with her. He'd defended Lisa.

She'd pulled away from him—right, they'd been holding hands—and said he shouldn't encourage Lisa into nostalgia. Lisa was in Ogelzetrap now, and that couldn't be changed: there was no way back. Then Zack had shot back, "How do you know there's no way back?"

Another bump jostled her. She refocused on the view outside, but nothing had changed. No shadows on the ground betrayed hidden bombers above: only rock chips flew past in a blur. She should focus on the present, she knew, but now she was too caught up in the memory to let it go unfinished.

Zack had said Lisa wasn't doing anything wrong, that it was normal on Earth for people to miss their homes, and it shouldn't be normal to—what were his exact words?—"pretend you could forget everything that had ever happened to you." Then she had to ask it: what was so important back on Earth that he couldn't move on with his life here?

"Don't tell me you've moved on," she'd interrupted his protests, "not when you're estranging yourself from everyone."

"*I'm* estranged? How would you know, you're never around!"

"Do you think I can come see you whenever I feel like it? You live three hours away from civilization. I work fulltime in national security!"

He'd stepped closer, towering over her small stature. "So you'd rather keep your job than this relationship?"

She'd stood her ground, masking how his question stung. "I shouldn't have to choose! But here you are, living alone in the wilderness, for what? A past life you can never return to?"

"Well *maybe* if my girlfriend was more understanding about what it's like to suddenly pop into another galaxy and never see your friends and family again and have your whole life turned upside down, I wouldn't have to search for a place to belong!"

Marla didn't remember what else she'd said. There hadn't been anything she could say. She kicked at the seat in front of her, tears pricking her eyes. She'd tried, she'd really tried to imagine what it would be like to get whisked away from everything she'd ever known, land on a foreign planet, and believe that what had happened to her was wrong, and that she should try everything to correct it. But she could never get that to sound right. If something that drastic happened to her, then it would've *had* to have happened, right? It would've been fate, and she'd have to find the good in what had happened and what could still happen. But to go through something like that and live her whole life believing it was a mistake, that her life was ruined because of one unexpected mishap . . . how could anyone live like that?

The train jolted again. She sat up. Only then did she recognize that sick feeling in her chest, the one that felt like her heart was trying to sink but had gotten stuck. It didn't occur often, but it was becoming more familiar, especially when she thought of Zack. She squirmed, as if that would relieve the pressure. This was what she got for losing her focus on the present.

She jerked to her feet, startling the women on the opposite side. Ignoring them, Marla stepped to the front of the car and passed through to the next one. At first, it appeared empty. But down rows of unoccupied booths, she spotted Patrick's dark hair poking out from the seat farthest from her.

He didn't acknowledge her as she reached him; instead, as she sat beside him, he stared out the window, his metal-plated cheek turned to her. His mechanical eye pulsed slowly, morphing from scarlet to crimson; observing it reminded her of Brevin's comment, and suddenly the empty seats behind them felt like an added insult.

Eventually Patrick broke the silence. "Haven't seen trees for over an hour."

She followed his gaze, but the landscape was the same as before: flat, dark, lonely. “Desolate,” she said. “No wonder no one lives here.”

“Some might like the privacy.”

“Anyone who would is a moron.”

He glanced at her then. Maybe he knew whom she was thinking about, but he didn’t respond.

“Moronic,” she muttered. “Nothing changes out here. The whole world would pass you by, and you’d never know what you missed.”

Patrick still didn’t answer, so she nudged him with her boot. “That’s what Zack’s problem is. I’m worried about him.”

“Thought you were angry.”

“Angry *because* I’m worried.”

The train jolted again; as Marla steadied herself, she peered out the window. For some reason, that sick feeling in her chest returned as she studied the blank horizon, so she lowered her gaze to the rock chips flying past the train. At least, they seemed to be flying past. It was hard to tell: the train whizzed on so quickly, maybe the rocks weren’t moving at all. Or maybe they were scraping the cars as they rushed by, and the train would eventually dock full of tiny dents, not knowing what had caused it so much damage in its rush to get somewhere.

But she faced forward, crossed her arms, and slumped. She had a war to join, and rocks were just rocks, best left in the dust.

"It's Lisa's fault," she said, "caught up in—whatever she thinks she's doing. Now it's all Zack thinks about, when he should be thinking about the war."

And how his girlfriend was being called to fight in it, against enigmatic enemies she wasn't trained to fight, and how he hadn't even said goodbye.

"They will think about it now," Patrick said. "Especially Lisa. The war's stalling her research."

"Oh, please." Marla sat up. "Research? That's what we're calling it?"

Patrick straightened. "It's what she calls it."

"I don't care what she calls it. You know she won't find what she wants. Looking for old books? That's exactly what SoTO does. And if she and Zack get tangled up with *them*, there's no going back."

There it was again: that sick feeling. She pushed SoTO, and how she'd failed to apprehend them, out of her mind.

Her cousin turned away. "Lisa isn't like SoTO. She reminds me of Zack when we first found him. Alone. Confused. Suspicious of everything he didn't understand."

Her gaze dropped. She did remember what Zack was like then, and she shuddered. "Right. And the only thing that helped him was learning he could start anew, with us."

Again Patrick said nothing. She gave him a gentle kick. "Whatever you've got to say, just say it."

He looked her full in the face, both natural and mechanical eyes staring her down. "They left everything they knew. By accident. Maybe it isn't natural to forget it all."

She flinched. “That’s what *we* do all the time! We train, we switch squads, we transfer, we lose people, we retransfer—”

“But *we’re* always together.”

Marla broke off. Patrick dropped his gaze. “Tell me. What if something happens out there. What if you survive the war, and I don’t. Could you move on?”

A chill ran down Marla’s spine. In all her daydreams about what her future might hold—being promoted to captain, marrying Zack, securing peace in her country—Patrick had always been there. Only once had she imagined life without him, after a squad-member she’d considered a friend was killed by terrorists. She’d grieved, but still, she’d moved on. And if Zack somehow found a way to leave her for his former planet, she’d have to move on again; she knew that. But life without her cousin didn’t fit. It wasn’t even conceivable.

“That’s not going to happen.” She drew her knees up to her chest. “We can’t have thoughts like that going into war. It’ll distract us.”

Patrick studied her a moment longer before turning to the window. She stared at his back, waiting for a reply that never came.

Salli Starell

Salli’s special eye bored into the computer screen until she could see the coding behind it. A letter turned into numbers—tiny numbers, all stacked together to form an M. There was order in it, though to most people it would look like chaos, a meaningless sequence of numeric values. People like that would never understand why she chose to view the screen this way, but it helped

her focus. At least, it helped her tame the malformed eyeball that seemed to have a mind of its own.

Two hard blinks cleared up the message: MAMBAZ TERRORIST GENERAL CAPTURED BY OSA. She smiled. That *was* good news.

"Salli Starell."

She started and spun around. Her droid stood behind her chair, a metallic replica of a human male, grey except for his brilliant azure eyes. The surrounding box-shaped computers emitted laser beams from their screens at random, so that spots of red, green, and blue danced across the droid's frame. Salli huffed. "Tedge, I'm working."

His head swiveled to face the disassembled monitor on the worktable behind him, and then swiveled to face her.

"I mean, I *was* working. I needed a break. And this is important, come see."

Tedge didn't move. "If you are referring to today's breaking news, that has already been broadcasted into my system."

Her shoulders sagged. "Fine. Tell me the gist."

"The name of the captured general is Arsten Jesser. Ogelzian networks have not received comments from the Arsten clan. Jesser was apprehended in Ambrose and has been moved to Ogelz City. Head OSA Director Maxwell Kren believes this is a turning point for humans in their struggle against foreign terrorism."

Salli waved a hand. "Thanks, I'll—"

A blue laser light from another computer flashed onto her screen, illuminating two words: Patrick Flightscanner. “Wait, Patrick was involved?”

“The broadcast did not mention Patrick Flightscanner.”

Salli tried to focus on the written report, but by now her right eye was spinning on its own, and her vision split in two. She covered the misbehaving eye. “Could you read what it says about Patrick?”

Tedge blinked heavily, adjusting his vision to read without moving closer. “The person most responsible for Jesser’s capture is Patrick Flightscanner, an unranked field agent now promoted to Captain. Kren has requested that Flightscanner’s entire squad transfer to Ogelz City.”

Salli grinned. “I knew Patrick would make it big. Look at him, a captain already!”

“It is strange that you remember him. My data bank indicates that you and he have not had contact for twenty-eight months.”

For a moment, the red lasers prevailed over the other colors, casting the room in a dark haze that irritated Salli’s special eye as she lowered her hand. “What do you take me for, a human? I have better memory than that.” Then her shoulders deflated. “But I’m sure he and Marla have already forgotten me.”

The beams skirting around Tedge gradually morphed into green and blue. “Statistically speaking,” he offered, “you are more difficult to forget than the average human.”

Salli wanted to take that as comfort. If Tedge were a living being, he might’ve meant it as such. *But he really means that I’m different. Who’d forget a deformed half-breed?*

Swallowing, she moved to the worktable, planted in the center of the half-circle of computers. “Time to work again. Cable tester?”

Tedge produced the tool while she tapped a toe in sync with a flashing green light to her right. By the time the light moved, she’d fallen into her rhythm of concentration.

What she liked best about electronics was how they looked from the inside. On the outside they were silver, black, or white, and while white was interesting (sometimes her special eye could discern its full color spectrum), the other colors bored her. Especially black: she hated black.

But if she took apart any electronic device, she’d find colored wires. Why did humans make the insides of machines prettier than the outsides? Even Tedge would’ve been boring to look at if not for his eyes and helmet. Most droids wore hair pieces, but Tedge had lost his years ago, so Salli had him wear the helmet instead. Every month or so she repainted it with new designs. Currently it was white with scarlet silhouetted arrows running down the sides. She liked it, but she still hoped to find the perfect shade of blue to match his eyes.

She’d just fused two wires together when Tedge stiffened. The lights of his eyes pulsed on and off, making Salli frown. “What is it?”

The pulsing stopped. “Someone is requesting access to this room.”

Salli glanced at the door, electronically locked as usual. “Who and what for?”

“I do not know. I do not recognize the signal.” His eyes pulsed on and off again, clashing with the rhythm of the green flashing against his cheek. “Your employer has granted access.”

“What?”

At that moment, the locks clicked, and the door started to swing inward. Salli bristled, clutching her cable tester. “I swear, if Crestin scheduled another ‘routine check’—”

The door opened. Salli dropped the tool. “Patrick?”

It was him, with the telltale silver plating covering the left side of his face, and one crimson laser functioning as his left eye. He smiled as he stepped into the room. “You sound so surprised.”

She tripped over her toolkit moving toward him. “I just, we were just talking about you, and no one ever comes down here, and what are you doing here?”

Patrick’s natural eye winced as a beacon of blue passed over it. “Didn’t you know I was coming? I’d messaged you.”

“You did?” Salli glanced at Tedge, but he said nothing. If Patrick had used the company’s messaging system . . . then it would’ve first gone through Crestin, her supervisor. She forced the thought away.

“I didn’t know. But I heard about your promotion. Congratulations!”

Patrick ducked his head. “Thank you. That’s why I’m here. And,” he glanced backward, “I didn’t come alone.”

A second man stepped into the room. He was shorter than Patrick, but his erect posture indicated that he far outranked the new captain. Salli instantly recognized the thinning hair, wide cheeks, and large nose, as if the shoulder stripes didn’t give him away. She gasped. “You’re—you’re Head Director. Of OSA.”

Maxwell Kren stroked his chin, squinting as he surveyed the laser-ridden lab. “I am. And you are the computer programmer recommended to me.”

He wasn’t smiling, but Salli held herself steady, determined not to flinch as his gaze lingered on her right eye. But she couldn’t stop her heart from beating faster. *He’s not recoiling like most people do—I think?*

When Kren’s attention diverted to Tedge, Salli appraised herself. Her hair was already falling out of its brunette bun, and she’d left her jacket draped over a chair, which left her wearing a strapless top over her baggy trousers. Heat rose to her cheeks as she stepped backward to retrieve her jacket.

Patrick spoke up. “The droid belongs to her, sir. She upgrades him herself, and he’s more complex than any service droid I’ve seen.”

“Hmm.” Kren glanced at Salli as she pulled on her jacket. “Does he assist you in your work?”

“Yeah.” She shuffled forward. “He’s a GEDT, so both his functions help me.”

Kren raised an eyebrow.

“Oh. GEDT stands for Gyroscopic Engineering Droid and Terminal. Regular GEDs aren’t good for most engineering, especially for computers. But Tedge—my droid—is equipped with his own terminal, in his arm. Show them, Tedge.”

Tedge detached his left arm from his socket and held it up with his right as Salli continued, “His arm can plug into any computer to download information. I’m always enlarging his data capacity. He seems to want to know everything about everything.”

As Tedge reattached his arm, Kren shielded his eyes with one hand. “Ms. Starell, I require the services of a specialized computer programmer, and Captain Flightscanner recommends you. Is there anywhere private we can confer?”

Salli rubbed her arm. “This room can be private, if Tedge disrupts any outside signals.”

“Very well. But in that case,” Kren’s eyes squinted to slits, “could you shut off these flashing lights?”

“Oh. Oh! Right.” Salli leapt to the central monitor in the corner and started twisting dials. *Right, humans don’t like the lights. Crestin sure doesn’t, not after he had a seizure in here. Maybe that’s why he hates me.*

As she turned off the lasers, Kren settled into a desk chair, blinking heavily. Patrick also took a chair, so after brightening the white light fixtures above, Salli did, too. Tedge remained standing but retreated to the wall by the door, where there were no computers.

“Now.” Kren rested an elbow on his chair’s arm. “How long have you worked for this company?”

“Almost six years.”

“And how long in this current position?”

“The same.”

Kren leaned back in his seat. “Why is that?”

She twisted the hem of her shirt. “I, ah, was never recommended for promotion. You’d have to ask my supervisor why.”

If it isn't obvious enough from looking at me.

Kren stroked his chin. "Don't take offense, but what I need done concerns national security. I cannot trust just anyone. So I must ask about your disability."

Without the laser lights to calm her, Salli felt her right eye tilt sideways. "What about it?"

"Is it the result of an accident, or is it natural?"

For a moment, she considered lying. But Patrick knew the truth. She twisted her shirt's hem tighter around one finger. "It's natural. I've been like this since birth."

"So you are not fully human."

She lowered her gaze. "No, sir. I'm humanestriol."

"Yet you live among humans, not Estriols."

"I've never lived in the South. I don't feel Estriol enough to belong there."

She lifted her head. Kren's expression was unreadable. But Patrick interjected, "Her disability doesn't impede her work, sir. It strengthens it. Tell him, Salli."

Salli's cheeks grew hot, and she squeezed the finger caught in her shirt until it lost all feeling.

"I see things. Not because I'm crazy. I never see things that don't exist. But I can keep seeing what I've seen even when I'm not looking at it, like a separate page on a computer screen. I can stare at screens until I see the coding behind them. And I can see past some metals, like an X-ray." She pulled her finger from her shirt. "It helps."

"Yes, he mentioned that." Kren exchanged a glance with Patrick. "Which metals can your vision penetrate?"

"I don't know." When Kren frowned, her blush deepened. "It's hard to keep track. It depends on things like color, thickness, metal purity. And sometimes it takes longer than—than other times."

Critz, I sound so stupid.

Kren reached into his blazer pocket and produced a computer drive. "Can you see past this?"

He handed it to her. It was standard Ogelzian: rectangular and black. Stupid black. She could focus for an hour, and it wouldn't do any good. "No, sir. The color absorbs everything."

The Head Director frowned as he took back the drive. But Patrick urged, "Try this."

He pressed a comm into her hand: white, cylindrical, and smooth except for its three buttons, dial, and indentations for finger holds. *Oh, I've done these before, easy!* She closed her normal eye.

"Standard communicator, equipped to match signals with another comm on a private line. Functioning microphone. Four wires, one of them frayed, probably from rubbing against the dial from the inside. You'll need it replaced soon, or it'll short-circuit."

She handed it back, blinking. When her normal vision cleared, Kren was nodding.

"Impressive," he said. "But the device I need checked is more complicated than a comm, and it won't be like anything you've encountered before. I'm not convinced this will work out."

Her heart lurched, and her eyes darted around the room, independently of each other. *I can't let this go, this could change everything. I could finally get out of here and—but what to show them? I know everything here, and they won't believe me, and—*

Wait. Patrick had turned his head, leaving the metal plating on his left cheek facing her. *Patrick.*

She closed her normal eye. The plating was silver, thin, and pure: not a problem. Underneath, scarlet lines bounced and spiraled around the laser that functioned as Patrick's left eye. They stretched back into his empty eye socket, attaching to whatever optic nerve he had left. Bile rose in her throat, which she choked back as she scanned his cheek. It was splotched. Distorted. Angry.

"Salli?"

That was Patrick, sounding concerned, and maybe uncomfortable. She swallowed.

"I never knew. I thought it was natural blindness, but I can see the char marks. You were burnt. That's why you need the covering."

Her eye began to ache, so she blinked until she could refocus. Kren was staring at Patrick, and Patrick was staring at her. She blushed again. "I'm sorry, I should've asked before I, ah—"

"No. It's okay." Patrick turned to Kren. "She's right, and I never told her about my injury. Your device won't be a problem."

Kren considered Salli another moment before leaning back in his chair. "Very well. I'm willing to give your skills a try."

He reached into his pocket and drew out another computer drive, this one shaped like a half-sphere. “I trust you’ve learned of Arsten Jesser’s capture.” When Salli nodded, he continued, “This was confiscated off his person, in a hidden pocket. Anything a general would carry himself is important. But we know from past experience that if handled incorrectly, Mambaz drives will self-destruct. Given past failures, I’m reluctant to give it to our traditional programmers.” He eyed her. “But you are not a traditional programmer.”

Salli straightened. “No, sir.”

Kren delicately dropped the device into Salli’s hand. Though her special eye was tired, she couldn’t resist a peek with it. *Bigger and thicker than Ogelzian drives. Crowded and dark inside—this will be hard. But not impossible.*

She looked up. “Thank you, sir. I’ll do everything I can.”

“That’s good.” Kren stood up. “The details of your work remain between us three. Not even your employer knows why we’ve come. Keep it that way. If you have any breakthroughs, contact Captain Flightscanner using this.”

He handed her the comm she’d examined earlier. Then his expression softened. “And if you succeed, the OSA does not withhold deserved promotions from *our* employees.”

As he moved toward the door, Patrick and Salli both stood. Before Patrick left, Salli tapped his arm. “Again, I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I should’ve asked before looking.”

Patrick cleared his throat softly. “It’s okay. I’m not trying to hide it.” He offered her a half-smile. “I know you can do this. Wouldn’t have mentioned your name if I weren’t sure.”

With that, he followed the Head Director out the door. The locks had barely clicked before Salli squealed and threw her arms around Tedge. “Can you believe it? Can you *believe* it?”

“I am incapable of belief,” he replied.

She broke away. “This is it. This is what I’ve waited for. Did you hear him, he practically offered me a job—working for the OSA! We could get away from Crestin and finally do something important!”

She plopped in front of a blank computer. “Start up the lights, I need to think.”

“What about the monitor?”

She waved a hand. “You could take it from here. Please?”

After restarting her computer, Salli held the Mambaz drive up against the viewscreen’s white light.

You won’t keep your secrets for long.

Creative Writing Analysis

I've had ideas for my novel and its characters for years, long before I started working on this project, so Lisa Parker, Marla Sands, and Salli Starell are not direct products of my current research. Yet as I continue to work on this story, I want to devote special attention to how I craft my female characters as compelling and complex characters, especially in learning to balance the "ideal" with the "realistic." In the scenes excerpted above, I see Lisa demonstrating principles learned from Arwen and Buttercup, Marla demonstrating principles learned from Dorothy and Hermione, and Salli demonstrating principles learned from Annabeth and Susan.

In a way, Lisa provides an "ideal" counternarrative to traditionally masculine conceptions of strength, just like Arwen does, because she embodies "feminine" humanities knowledge at odds against "masculine" STEM knowledge. Before getting transported to Ogelzetrap, Lisa was a college student studying both history and English, and these disciplines shape how she thinks and the kind of knowledge she seeks. Zack, however, was an atomic physicist, so unlike Lisa, he values scientific achievement over the study of literature. Thus, when Lisa determines to uncover the way back to Earth through historical research, Zack claims that he's the one doing the "real work" because he's working on the practical solution of returning home, implicitly devaluing Lisa's interests and strengths. This scene also introduces Lisa's larger conflict with Ogelzian culture, which values societal progress (especially through scientific advancement) so much that they deliberately neglect the study of their own past; consequently, as Lisa reveals her interest in history, the Ogelzian librarian treats her as a threat. Both these conflicts could be interpreted as battles between "masculine" and "feminine" knowledge because today, educational degrees in STEM are overwhelmingly pursued by men, while degrees in the humanities are overwhelmingly pursued by women. Instead of adapting Lisa to conform to masculine ideals, as

the “hyper-strong” female character would do, following the example of Arwen, I let Lisa embody the “feminine” humanities’ approach to knowledge, valuing literature over gadgets and asking questions of ultimate purpose instead of embracing innovation for innovation’s sake. In this way she follows in Arwen’s footsteps by fully embracing these “feminine” ideals, even if they stand against certain “masculine” ideals.

Lisa is also reminiscent of Buttercup because, in this scene, she is continually trapped by “realistic” limitations beyond her control, yet she falls back on her own inner strength to navigate her way within these limitations. In the story, both Lisa and Zack are seeking a way to return home to Earth. Again, since Zack is an atomic physicist, he is working on the practical scientific question of how to leave the planet Ogelzetrap, a question that Lisa cannot help him answer, having no scientific expertise or knowledge. Yet while she must rely on Zack for a practical solution to their dilemma, much like how Buttercup must rely on Westley for rescue from Humperdinck, Lisa does not stand idly by while Zack does all the work. Instead, she determines that she can use her own skills in historical research to confirm her theory that all humans on Ogelzetrap are descended from people from Earth, and in uncovering these historical secrets, Lisa aims to provide Zack with information to help him understand the mysterious process that transported them here, and consequently reverse it. Of course, this scene ends in failure, as outside limitations pile up until Lisa is expelled from the building for causing cultural offense. Yet even in the limited research she is able to conduct, she’s uncovered clues that will aid her in her quest, and like Buttercup, she will refuse to accept defeat.

Marla’s “ideal” side takes after book Dorothy, rather than filmic Dorothy, by pursuing both “adventure” (in this case, a demanding and dangerous career) and meaningful domestic relationships without believing that, as a woman, she needs to choose between the two. She feels

little pressure to choose one element of her life over the other, except from her boyfriend, shown when Zack accuses her of preferring her career to him, to which she responds, “I shouldn’t have to choose!” Though Marla has no intention of sacrificing her job, she also does not want to sacrifice her relationship with Zack: as shown near the end of her excerpt, she maintains dreams of marriage alongside dreams of advancing in her career, and she fears Zack’s obsession with returning to Earth because that might mean he’d leave her. While this scene focuses on the tension Marla experiences between her dual desires, rather than the benefits of pursuing both desires, her embrace of this duality can still be seen as a strength. Her strongest relationship is the one she shares with Patrick; since they’ve always been together, she’s never had to choose between her job or her cousin. As Marla holds no expectation for Zack to join her squad at work, she cannot balance this relationship with her career as easily as she can with Patrick. Yet this dilemma provides a chance for Marla’s inner resilience to shine through as she refuses to give up on her relationship with Zack just because it’s not as easily maintained. Like book Dorothy, she can value both “adventure” and “home,” finding a way to affirm both.

The “realistic” side of Marla takes after Hermione, because both characters have flaws set up early on to provide them a chance to grow throughout a series. I intend for this novel to be the first in a series, so just as Hermione’s character development could stretch over more than one book, I want Marla’s character development to do the same. Marla’s scene establishes her central character flaw as a lack of empathy for those she doesn’t understand. As a Northern Ogelzian, Marla believes that societal progress can occur only when individuals deliberately forget their own pasts so they can focus on the future. But Zack and Lisa both come from our modern American culture, which allows for memory and nostalgia and the preservation of history. Marla devalues all of these, both because she was cultured this way and because she fears this

"regressive behavior" will take her boyfriend away from her. So instead of trying to appreciate a culture different from hers, she disparages it and all who hold to its values. Another flaw evident in this scene, which is less a character flaw and more a limitation, is Marla's lack of meaningful relationship with other women. This scene shows how she values relationships with two male characters, but she has only criticism for Lisa and the unnamed female agents on the train. In the larger story, Marla tends to be isolated from other women and doesn't try to pursue relationships with them. Thus, she falls prey to the common "hyper-strong" female character defect of choosing to associate with men over women, often to prove that one is "not like other girls." Marla does not fully conquer either of these flaws in this novel, just as Hermione does not fully conquer her hysteria in the first *Harry Potter* novel. So Hermione's drawn-out character development inspires similar character development in Marla.

Salli easily takes direct inspiration from Annabeth, as both characters have disabilities that, while viewed by society as disadvantages, are turned into strengths as the characters find creative uses for their abilities. Of course, Salli's disabilities are physical as well as mental, since she's visibly marked by an eye that can move independently of the other, so in that regard she differs from Annabeth, who possesses only learning disabilities. Yet while I am not modeling Salli's abilities on any specific diagnoses in the real world, at times she behaves like someone with dyslexia and ADHD: at the scene's opening, she struggles to read, and her need to work in an environment full of flashing lights resembles how those with ADHD work better amid concentrated distractions. The most relevant similarity between Salli and Annabeth, though, is how they use their disabilities to their advantage. Salli is a skilled computer programmer because of, rather than despite, her "special eye," and this gives her an edge over other programmers in trying to extract information from a rigged hard drive. Salli turning her perceived weakness into

a strength is even more significant because, unlike Annabeth, she does not have a community of others just like her. In this world, humanestriols like Salli have a wide range of physical and mental disabilities, and no two cases are exactly alike, so no one can relate to her exactly. Furthermore, Salli does not even have humanestriol friends: her only reliable friend is her droid. Still, like Annabeth, she is able to conquer her physical and mental weaknesses by turning them into strengths.

Salli's similarities to Annabeth comprise the most significant examples of the "ideal" and "realistic" at work in this excerpt, but regarding how well she is written as a character, I want her to take after book Susan more than filmic Susan by not being defined by a romantic arc. Making a female character a love interest is not inherently wrong: Arwen shows how this role can even be empowering. Filmic Susan's problem was not that she became a love interest, but rather that her dynamic character arc from the book was replaced with a shallow romantic subplot that did nothing to deepen her character. In my novel, Salli and Patrick are never established as a romantic couple, but I see potential for that in subsequent novels. Certainly, this scene could've based Salli's desire to crack the hard drive on a need to impress Patrick. But I don't want Salli's arc to be defined by romance. While I'm not against the possibility of her pursuing a romantic relationship, looking at the character arcs of Susan's two incarnations, I'm struck by how much a female character can develop without falling in love, and I see that a romantic arc, poorly executed, is much less interesting than a dynamic arc devoid of romance. As this scene introduces Salli's character in the novel, I intend for it to set up Salli's desire for more recognition in work, her attachment to her droid in the absence of attachments to other living beings, and her struggle against societal prejudice because of her biracial heritage. In this way she'll take a stand against the shallow "hyper-strong" female character by developing a dynamic

arc just as contingent on her weaknesses and limitations as on her strengths, rather than being an over-powered chick for Patrick to date.

Of course, as my main essay has shown, we should expect Lisa, Marla, and Salli to all undergo adaptational changes if this novel were ever adapted to the screen. While there is potential for these characters to grow and improve in adaptation, I will briefly note some pitfalls into which each of these characters could fall.

Lisa fits the least into modern expectations for "strong female characters": compared to Marla the warrior and Salli the coder, she can appear underwhelming as a college student interested in history and literature. Furthermore, both her caution in breaking rules and her timidity around droids in this scene do not easily lend themselves to the portrayal of an independent and tenacious woman. Yet this is intentional. I want Lisa to stand out from common portrayals of characters from the real world entering a new fictional world (like Dorothy, Susan, and Hermione) by *not* easily adjusting to the new world. She's much less conscious of the thrill of adventure than she is of the scariness of suddenly finding herself alone on a bizarre planet. In this respect, she takes the most after filmic Dorothy in her constant longing for home amid fear of the danger she's constantly in. Of course, filmic Dorothy's terror was a bit overplayed, since she proved far more in need of rescue from her male companions than book Dorothy was. So I could see a filmic version of Lisa falling into two opposite extremes: either her anxiety might disappear so that she would appear more superficially "strong," or her anxiety might be overplayed so that Zack proves far more capable and admirable by contrast. The best filmic version possible might have to take its cues from how Arwen was adapted to screen: providing unique ways of showcasing Lisa's strength without transforming her into a warrior or anything else that she's not.

Marla fits best into modern expectations for "strong female characters," since she's not only a warrior, but also a self-confident and assertive woman. However, a filmic version of her could potentially fall for the "hyper-strong" female character defect of relying on outward shows of toughness for likeability, rather than relying on inner character complexity comprised of both admirable strength and relatable weakness. The ongoing conflict between her and Zack is intentionally too complex to portray either one of these characters as the one entirely at fault: on the one hand, Zack shirks away from responsibly preparing for the future and taking his relationship with Marla to a deeper level, but on the other hand, Marla refuses to empathize with his struggle in adjusting to a new life in a new culture. Whether this conflict were simplified to portray Marla as totally right or totally wrong, such a change would detract from her complexity, through a loss of either her inner strengths or her inner flaws. In addition, observing the differences between book and filmic Buttercup, I note that character relationships are often necessary for keeping a character likeable, since a Buttercup who spurns Westley's love is much less likeable than a Buttercup who returns it. Similarly, Marla's relationships play a huge role in her own character's likeability, and this is more important than her skills as a warrior. A filmic version of Marla would have to successfully convey both her strong bond with her cousin and her love for Zack despite bumps in their relationship. Without these, Marla could easily be reduced to an angry girl who picks fights with everyone to prove how tough she is, which would turn her into an insufferable "hyper-strong" stereotype.

While a narrow definition of "strong female character" might want Salli to be more forceful and less awkward, I think the biggest temptation in adapting her to the screen would be designing her deformity in a way that makes her *more* alluring and attractive instead of less. The excerpt provided shows Salli most self-conscious about her eye as a sign of biracial heritage, but

she is also self-conscious of ugliness, as she wonders, "*Who'd forget a deformed half-breed?*" While I don't provide much detail about what her eye looks like, contextual clues make it clear that Salli is supposed to look odd. This would run counter to prevailing filmic trends in visually portraying women, for as film critic Melissa Tamminga notes, "Women on screen can never be relatively ordinary-looking in the same way male actors are more often allowed to be. They have to . . . fit into a very narrow definition of a specific kind of beauty." Especially if a film based on my novel were written and directed by men, I can easily envision Salli's deformity being beautified, or even ignored altogether. Such a change would imitate how Annabeth is sexualized on screen, or even how the filmic incarnations of Dorothy and Susan wear perfect makeup throughout their adventures. However, if a filmic Salli could be visually portrayed as abnormal over alluring, it could mark a huge milestone in portraying more realistic "strong female characters."