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## Heroism, Humanity, and the Celtic Mythology in Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles*

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It is well known that Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles* are inspired by medieval Welsh mythology. Throughout the series however, Alexander does much more than simply pull incidents or names from his sources. Instead, he interacts with Celtic mythology—both the Irish and Welsh material—to explore themes of heroism and humanity. The original mythology almost always depicts heroism as a personal and exclusive act. The *Prydain Chronicles* however, interacts with mythological themes of glory, honor, courage and magic to illustrate heroism as a communal and cooperative act that is beneficial to not just one person, but all mankind.

Throughout Celtic mythology, heroism is equated with personal strength, glory, and knowledge. Heroes like Cú Chulainn and Finn Mac Cumhaill strive to not only be good in such things but the *greatest* and consistently aim to set themselves apart from others. From the moment they are born, in fact, these heroes seem to have a supernatural or extraordinary birth that immediately sets them apart. Cú Chulainn, for instance, is of both royal and supernatural blood. He is born to Dechtire, the sister of Conor Mac Nessa, king of Ulster and to Lugh of the Long Arm, a member of the Tuatha de Dannon race and “one of the most important personages



from the Land of the Ever Young" (Heaney, 70). Of Cú Chulainn we're told, "everyone knew that this child, the son of Lugh, was destined to be a great hero" (Heaney 71). Likewise Finn of the Fenian cycle and Pryderi of the Welsh *Mabinogion* are born in unusual and supernatural circumstances. Finn is born to the beautiful and supernatural Muirne and to Cumhall, "head of Clan Bascna and leader of the Fianna" (Heaney 155). Pryderi is also of supernatural and royal blood, as he is son of Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed and the otherworldly Rhiannon.

Being born of supernatural, extraordinary, or royal circumstances is in fact, a convention of the traditional hero. In *The Hero: A study in Tradition, Myth and Dreams* scholar Lord Raglan not only speaks of the hero's supernatural origins (187) but also of having to be raised by foster parents. He states, "the attempt on the hero's life at birth...happens in almost every case...having escaped death, our heroes are all removed to a distance, and are usually brought up by a foreign king" (Raglan, 187-188). Though it happens through various circumstances, Cú Chulainn, Finn, and Pryderi alike are all brought up by a foster family. In the first branch of the *Mabinogi*, for instance, Pryderi mysteriously disappears shortly after his birth and is later found by Teyrnon Twrf Laint and his wife as "a small boy in swaddling clothes...strong for his age" (Davies, 18). The couple raise Pryderi for four years until Teyrnon realizes, "that he had never seen a son and father so alike as the boy and Pwyll Pen Annwfn" (Davies 19) and returns Pryderi to his rightful parents. Likewise Finn's mother Muirne,

knew that her son was in danger while he was with her and though she was sad to part with the child she handed the boy over to two of her trusted women attendants...they took him away and hid with him in the woods and valleys of Slieve Bloom. There they guarded him closely and reared him and cared for him as if he was their own child (Davies 157).

Cú Chulainn is similarly raised by foster parents. In fact, the moment he is born, the men and women surrounding him, "took counsel with each other about how he would be raised. Conor said the child should be given in fosterage to Finnchoem...but others objected to this for they all wanted a hand in raising this chose child" (Heaney 71). After each person offers to foster Cú Chulainn, the decision is made that "they *all* should share in the child's upbringing, each one teaching him his special skills" (Heaney 72).

In Celtic mythology being raised by a foster family allows heroes to both develop skills they otherwise might not have learned as well as discover their own inherit supernatural skills. In the First Branch of the *Mabinogi Pryderi* develops at a supernatural pace and is described as a one year old that "was sturdier than a well-developed and well-grown three-year-old boy" (Davies 18). Translator Sioned Davies notes, "these features evidencing supernatural growth are traditionally associated with the wonder-child who develops into a great hero" (231-232). Indeed, it's not long before Finn, too, develops a list of great skills under his two foster mothers. He is not only a superior tracker and chess player, but it also becomes clear "to all that the newcomer had no equal as a hunter" (Heaney 160). Likewise, Cú Chulainn later explains, "I was reared at Conor's court...my companions have been chiefs and champions, warriors and druids, judges and poets. From them I have learnt hospitality and benevolence, battle skills, champion's honor, wisdom and sound judgment" (Heaney 92).

It takes, however, more than just a supernatural birth and fostered upbringing for these mythological characters to become heroes. For two of the most important things about being a hero are proving personal prowess and gaining glory. Both Finn and Cú Chulainn do so by

deciding to leave their foster parents and prove themselves in a series of boyhood deeds. For instance, Finn and Cú Chulainn alike first set themselves apart by joining their youthful peers in a game. When Finn comes across boys playing hurley in the forest we're told, "he was the fastest player among them...then a third of them measured themselves against him but Demne still beat them" (Heaney 158). It soon becomes clear that Finn is not just physically stronger than boys his age, but is cleverer and braver than most as well. He not only beats a neighboring king at chess but wins "seven games in a row, making his own moves and advising the king on the moves *he* should make as well" (Heaney 160). Later on he proves his courage as he deftly kills both "a fierce boar that was terrorizing that part of Munster" (Heaney 160) and "a tall terrible warrior" (Heaney 161) that turns out to be the Grey of Luachra. Finn, however, knows he is not a worthy hero until he is "as good a poet as he was a warrior and hunter" (Heaney 162). Yet, as he learns poetry from the great Finnegas he also tastes the Salmon of Knowledge and personal, exclusive knowledge of "everything in the world, past, present and future" (Heaney 163) becomes his. Finn's superior physical and mental strength, along with this supernatural knowledge not only sets him apart, but are qualities that make him a heroic figure.

In his boyhood deeds and quest to become leader of the Fianna Finn obtains the personal acclaim and glory that is traditional of the mythological hero. Yet, there is perhaps no Celtic hero that does this more than Cú Chulainn. Like Finn, he takes it upon himself to leave his home at an early age in order to prove himself a legend. He too, first proves himself stronger than boys his age as he not only beats them at the game hurley but claims leadership over them:

'I fell every one of them...until they agree to come under *my* protection in the same way that I came under *theirs*.' The terrified boys agreed and placed themselves under the protection of Setanta, though he was not yet seven years old (Heaney 75).

In his next boyhood deed Cú Chulainn not only proves his prowess in taking up arms and fighting, but also demonstrates another significant motif of the traditional hero: that glory and fame far surpass life itself. Scholar Eamon Greenwood states,

The enthusiasm with which a warrior performs his duties and the related concept of fame, which are characteristic of the good hero, are to be considered as central features of the heroic ethos. For Cú Chulainn, heroic fame and the call to battle were more desirable than life itself (Characterization 100).

Indeed, Cú Chulainn heartily responds to the druid Cathbad's prediction of, "Whoever takes up arms today will become the most famous warrior in Ireland. Though he will have a short, swift life, stories of his exploits will be told forever" (Heaney 80). Cú Chulainn, encouraged rather than deterred, takes up the challenge. His statement, "I would happily live for one day only if my name and fame live after me" (Heaney 81) is sincere and echoes throughout his story as he continually puts himself in harms way in order to gain fame.

Thus the traditional Celtic hero sets out to prove himself in boyhood deeds of physical and mental prowess. They are set apart by supernatural warrior skills, poetic and prophetic knowledge. Along the way, they become a leader among men and obtain glory and fame that will live on after their own death. It is undoubtedly tales like these that Taran, the Assistant Pig-Keeper of Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles*, has grown up hearing from "The Book of

Three". For throughout the beginning of *The Book of Three*, Taran's perception of heroism seems to fall in line with the traditional Celtic hero: full of physical prowess and deeds of glory. This is clear even from the very first sentence of the novel, as we're told, "Taran wanted to make a sword; but Coll, charged with the practical side of his education, decided on horseshoes" (*Book of Three* 11)<sup>1</sup>. For Taran, sword and sword fighting is equated to the heroism of glory and honor in battle. Though there is no need for Taran to actually learn sword fighting, he urges Coll to teach him, envisioning himself a hero if he only could leave Caer Dallben: " 'What of Prince Gwydion?' cried Taran. 'Yes! I wish I might be like him!'" (18). A heroic life away from his foster home and family is a far more interesting and ideal life for Taran, who is clearly uninterested in an ordinary lifestyle full of blacksmithing and pig keeping. He emphatically states,

"What's the use of studying much when I'm to see nothing at all?...I think there is a destiny laid on me that I am not to know anything interesting, go anywhere interesting, or do anything interesting. I'm certainly not to *be* anything. I'm not anything even at Caer Dallben!" (19).

Although we are certainly meant to sympathize with Taran it immediately becomes clear that the idea of heroism in the *Prydain Chronicles* is meant to be far from what we see in the traditional Celtic mythology, and even further from Taran's rather naïve perception. In response to Taran's complaint about not "being anything" Coll states, "If that is all that is troubling you, I shall make you something. From this moment, you are Taran, Assistant Pig-Keeper. You shall

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, quotes from Alexander's *Prydain* novels are from the first in the series, *The Book of Three*

help me take care of Hen Wen" (20). Coll's naming of Taran is undoubtedly meant to echo other "naming" moments of heroic characters like Cú Chulainn or Finn, who receive nicknames only after they display supernatural abilities or features. For instance, Cú Chulainn only receives his name after he kills Culann's most feared and vicious dog and accepts the duty of being own "Culann's Hound" (Heaney 70). Likewise Finn is named after his unusual and supernatural fair colored hair (Heaney 159). Names and titles are a significant part of becoming a hero and are naturally connected to personal glory and fame. Cú Chulainn, in fact, protests his new name until Cathbed tells him, "In days to come the name Cuchulainn will be famous throughout Ireland and Scotland" (Heaney 79). In naming Taran however, Coll keeps him grounded, giving him a title that is less about himself or personal glory and more about helping take care of something and someone *outside* of himself.

Thus, from the very beginning of the novel personal and glorious heroism is contrasted with the idea of an ordinary and communal hero. Throughout *The Book of Three* Taran's highly idealistic and adolescent expectations for heroism are time and time again proved false. Indeed, Dallben asks Taran, "do you set yourself to be a glorious hero? Do you believe it is all flashing swords and galloping about on horses? (17). But Taran must learn through experience, as Dallben acknowledges when he states, "you will very likely reach your own conclusions...since they will be yours, you will feel a little more satisfied with them" (18). And as Taran leaves Caer Dallben one of the most important things he must do is shift his perception of heroism and glory. The first step in doing so is actually meeting the great hero Gwydion himself. As Gwydion approaches he described as a stranger with,

"the shaggy, gray-streaked hair of a wolf. His eyes were deep-set, flecked with green. Sun and wind had leathered his broad face, burnt it dark and grained it with fine lines. His cloak was coarse and travel-stained. A wide belt with an intricately wrought buckle circled his waist" (26-27).

Because of his outward appearance, Taran assumes Gwydion could not possibly be a war hero, proclaiming, "'Gwydion!' Taran chocked on the liquid and stumbled to his feet. 'I know of him. He is a great war leader, a hero! He is not...'" (27). But Taran trails off as he soon realizes he has mistakenly judged and valued appearance over heroic actions or skill. Undoubtedly he expects the warriors of the great stories to look similar to how they do in the first branch of the *Mabinogion*: "[Pwyll] could see a war-band and retinues coming in, and the fairest and best equipped men that anyone had ever seen" (Davies 5). Additionally, the heroes of Celtic mythology are not only almost always described as beautiful and fair but also in splendid and rich armor. In the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* Cú Chulainn even makes a point to show off his beauty:

Gorgeous indeed was Cú Chulainn Mac Sualdaim as he paraded himself before what was left of the army. His hair was arranged in three layers...A hundred curls of purple gold shone round his neck; a hundred amber-beaded ribbons bedecked his head...He had put on his festive garb for the day...a beautifully becoming purple mantle...an oxblood red shield with ornamented gold rings and a rim of white bronze (Carson 111-112).

With his travel stained clothes Gwydion looks nothing like this image of splendor and glamour. Taran is certainly disappointed and openly "stare[s] in disbelief at the simple attire and the worn, lined face" (27). But his first lesson in shifting his perception of heroism is to realize that "it is not the trappings that make the prince...nor indeed the sword that makes the warrior"



(27), as Gwydion is quick to tell him. Heroism is clearly not about a glamorous physical appearance put on for show, but about hard work—work that scars the face and callouses the hands. Gwydion's first impression teaches Taran that true heroism lies not in one's personal appearance but in one's actions.

The idea that true heroism is not about appearances rings true throughout the *Prydain Chronicles*. Most interestingly and consistently, perhaps, in the character of Fflewddur Fflam and in his magical harp. As soon as we meet Fflewddur it is obvious that he likes to embellish tales and that every time he does so his harp strings magically break. Fflewddur explains, "I've noticed it usually happens when—well I'm an emotional sort of fellow, and I do get carried away. I might, ah, readjust the facts slightly, purely for dramatic effect, you understand" (109). This magical harp that breaks a string every time its player tells a lie highlights how shallow or misleading heroic songs of glory can be. It not only suggests that there is no point in putting something in song that is not true, but also that glorified actions are simply not needed for true heroes. Indeed, one of the most important turning points for Taran is when he begins to understand this idea. When they are speaking of battle, Fflewddur emphatically states, "The mightier the foe, the greater the glory! We shall seek them out, set upon them! The bards shall sing our praises forever!" (101). But Taran, though tempted by his earlier ideas of heroism, makes a significant choice when he decides *not* to take action:

"Carried away by Fflewddur's enthusiasm, Taran seized his sword. Then he shook his head, remembering Gwydion's words in the forest near Caer Dallben. 'No—no...the bards would sing of us...but we'd be in no position to appreciate it'" (101).

In this moment Taran begins to realize that heroic battles are simply not about personal fame and that the outwards appearance of a hero—whether it's in beauty or a ballad—does not matter. And Taran wisely comes to very opposite conclusion of the Celtic hero Cú Chulainn—that fame simply does not outlive life.

While perhaps meant to inspire, exaggerated and glorified songs of heroes, in the end are meant to glorify and make famous the hero himself. In the *Prydain Chronicles*, true heroic actions are more important than personal glory because they always involve helping someone *outside* oneself. As Taran learns to shift his idea of heroism from personal prowess to others in *The Book of Three*, one of the most important steps he takes along the way is meeting and befriending Gurgi. When he first meets the creature Gurgi, Taran "could not be sure whether it was animal or human. He decided it was both...it had long, skinny, woolly arms, and a pair of feet flexible and grimy as its hands" (37). Taran has an obvious disgust and annoyance for Gurgi, shaking him (50), calling him names (99), and threatening him: "Where is Hen Wen, you silly hairy thing?...Tell us straight off! After the way you jumped on me, you deserve to have your head smacked" (40). Although Gwydion disapproves of how Taran views Gurgi, Taran does not change his mind about Gurgi until he understands both pity and respect. Taran thinks Gurgi a selfish creature, motivated purely by "crunchings and munchings" (119) for himself. Yet when Taran and company run out of food, Gurgi offers to find some, ends up hurting his leg, and selflessly decides that he should either be left to die or have his head cut off by Taran himself:

Taran looked closely at Gurgi. The creature was in earnest. His eyes pleaded with Taran. 'Yes, yes' cried Gurgi. '...Gurgi cannot walk! All will be killed with fearful smittings and bitings. It is better...'

'No,' said Taran. ' You wont be left in the woods and you won't have your head chopped off...' The poor creature was right, he knew. The injury would slow their pace...still Taran could not bring himself to draw his sword' (121).

Gurgi's selflessness moves Taran and allows him to develop respect and pity for someone he once thought beneath him. As he recounts Gurgi's actions to Medwyn, he states, "At first I wasn't too fond of him...Now I've begun to like him in spite of all his whining and complaining" (142). Gurgi's own heroic actions simultaneously reinforce the idea of selfless heroism and teach Taran to understand and pity someone other than himself.

Indeed throughout the *Prydain Chronicles* heroism is more than just not seeking personal fame or glory, it is about *shared* heroism. Just as Taran is reluctant to accept Gurgi's friendship, so too is he hesitant to accept both Eilonwy and Fflewddur's help and friendship. Shortly after he meets the two in *The Book of Three*, he states, "first, tell me how may reach Caer Dathyl as quickly as possible. Second, I beg you to conduct this girl safely to her own people" (111). Taran steadfastly thinks he is on an independent and personal journey and almost immediately sends off Fflewddur and Eilonwy both, changing his mind only when he stubbornly decides that "there is greater safety in greater numbers" (112-113). But it's not long before each companion shows his or her worth. Gurgi's act of heroism is perhaps the most obvious, but Fflewddur's knowledge of the terrain (115) along with Eilonwy's brave efforts to repel the cauldron born with magic

(126) both impress and touch Taran. He soon tells Eilonwy, "I thought I would be able to reach Caer Dathyl by myself. I see now that I wouldn't have got even this far without help. It is a good destiny that brings me such brave companions" (129). Once they reach Medwyn's hidden valley, Medwyn reflects these sentiments, stating, "Neither refuse to give help when it is needed...nor refuse to accept it when it is offered...you must learn to help yourselves, that is true; but you must also learn to help one another" (143-144). Indeed, throughout the *Prydain Chronicles* Gurgi, Fflewddur, and Eilonwy continually help Taran along his many journeys. Yet they become more than just heroic sidekicks; they become his closest and most beloved friends and it is together, as a team, that Taran is able to act heroically: "'Take heart, my friend,' Taran said. He smiled and put a hand on Gurgi's trembling shoulder. 'We companions shall see no ill befalls any of us'" (*Castle of Llyr* 36). If one must fight heroically in the *Prydain Chronicles*, it is for the love and care for another, not for oneself.

When Coll gave him the title "Assistant Pig-Keeper" Taran thought it lowly, uninteresting, and simply anything but heroic. Now, after his experiences, Taran begins to understand the notion. For he is tempted to stay with Medwyn in *The Book of Three* and when he makes the decision to go on with his quest, he does so not with visions of grandeur, but with a heavy heart:

"From all over the valley it seemed to Taran there came voices urging him to remain. The hemlocks whispered of rest and peace; the lake spoke of sunlight lingering in its depths, the joy of otters at their games. He turned away. 'No' he said quickly, 'my decision was made long before this' (149).

Through his relationships with Gurgi, Fflewddur and Eilonwy, Taran begins to understand heroism as something larger than himself. Taran has experienced the hardships of heroism and adventure and longs to rest in the peaceful valley of Medwyn. But he finds his true purpose lies elsewhere. In *The Black Cauldron* Eilonwy states, "Pig-boy!...You're not a pig-boy, you're an assistant Pig-Keeper! That's honor in itself! One is proud and the other isn't. Since you have a choice, take the proud one!" (193). Taran ultimately makes this choice to accept his title, to not only save Hen Wen to continually heal and help others—not for the sake of heroism, but for the sake of those he loves.

*The Book of Three* clearly lays the foundation for a new perception of heroism that lasts throughout the *Prydain* series. Throughout the following novels Taran puts these ideas into practice, demonstrating time after time that heroism is a communal act—something done not for the sake of oneself but for (and with the help of) others. *The Black Cauldron* in fact, is largely about what happens when someone tears themselves away from their companions for the sake of pride and ambition and glory. Ellidyr becomes an example of everything Taran once thought heroism was about, yet he stands in stark contrast to the man Taran has now become. For the end of the novel sees Taran willingly give up the glory of finding the great and terrible Crochan: Ellidry states, "The Crochan is mine...it is I who fought for it and won it. So you shall say to Gwydion and the others" (183). But Taran has learned that heroism should not be for appearances or glory, but for the good of all, and agrees to Ellidry's terms, stating, "It is not for him...but for the sake of our quest" (185). Likewise throughout the novels Taran uses his new

definition of heroism to become a man who lives and loves and heals, instead of one who destroys and lives only for glory and fame.

In the *Prydain Chronicles* heroism is about pity, honor, love, and sacrifice. In the beginning of *The Book of Three* it is clear that Taran has grown up listening to tales undoubtedly similar to the Celtic mythology. As an orphan, Taran believes he is destined to be more like the heroes of the mythology and has grandiose ideas of gaining personal and glorified heroism. His own journey, however, teaches him to appreciate the qualities that make him human. He needs no supernatural intelligence or strength, no extraordinary prowess or fame. In *The Black Cauldron* Adaon states, "Is there not glory enough in living the days given to us? You should know there is adventure in simply being among those we love and the things we love, and beauty, too" (96). Throughout the *Prydain Chronicles* Taran takes what he has learned in *The Book of Three*, the value of looking outside oneself, in healing and helping and loving, and uses it to embrace and share in an ordinary life. And in this way, Taran ultimately becomes a hero.

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