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# ‘As the World Falls Down’: David Bowie’s Role as a Father Figure in Jim Henson’s *Labyrinth*

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**N**early halfway through his cult classic film *Labyrinth* (1986), Jim Henson presents a strange and striking image.<sup>1</sup> David Bowie, in the role of Jareth the goblin king, sprawls on a golden throne, dandling a baby – the cherubic Toby Froud, more or less playing himself. Jareth bounces Toby on his knee, and remarks to the room in general. ‘Well, he’s a lively little chap – I think I’ll call him Jareth. He’s got my eyes.’<sup>2</sup> As if on cue, Toby turns and stares up into Jareth’s face. Bowie smiles, effortlessly and tenderly. For a moment, Bowie seems less like a goblin king or rock star, and instead like a father remembering when his own son was a baby.

The unaffected naturalness seems like a spontaneous, unscripted gesture; considering the age of the baby, it probably was. The scene itself, however, is far from a mere establishing shot. Rather, I suggest that this curious interaction is the crucial, interpretive centre of David Bowie’s role in the film. Jareth’s seemingly offhanded remark that the baby ‘has my eyes’ takes on a peculiar intensity when one considers that Bowie’s eyes had been damaged when he was a child, leaving his right eye perpetually dilated.<sup>3</sup> By holding the baby, identifying a distinctive shared physical characteristic, and naming the child after himself, Jareth claims the human child as rightfully, distinctly, his own; to put it bluntly, he declares himself to be a father.

Henson’s choice of this particular moment between Bowie and Toby Froud, with its natural, paternal delight, appears to verify that claim. In this essay, I wish to suggest that this paternal relationship defines both Jareth’s character and Bowie’s performance in the film; Jareth appears as a father figure, not only for Toby, but also for Sarah, the baby’s teenaged sister. I will look first at how Henson appears to have understood the genre of fairy-tale film, and how that understanding provided a framework for David Bowie’s role within it. I will then analyse several of Bowie’s key scenes and offer a tentative explanation of how *Labyrinth* may fit into his overall body of work.

## ‘A Really Good Metaphor’

*Labyrinth* makes no delay in identifying itself as a fairy-tale film. The opening frame reveals a wide shot of a rather British-looking park, with a pair of swans on a placid river, wildflowers

dotting the grass, a bench under a spreading tree, and an owl perched on an obelisk. A young woman in flowing medieval costume comes running over a stone bridge. The camera cuts to a close-up, and the young woman – 14-year-old Jennifer Connelley as Sarah, the film's protagonist – declaims: 'Give me the child. Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered, I have fought my way here to the castle beyond the goblin city to take back the child you have stolen.'

In mood, style, and substance, this could be a scene out of any B-grade fantasy, with Cambridge redecorated as Middle-Earth and dialogue plucked from Lord Dunsany's wastebasket. It is only when Sarah realises the time, hitches up her skirt to reveal a sensible pair of blue jeans, and rushes for home through a thoroughly modern American suburb, that the viewer realises the trick. From the start, the viewer is made complicit in Sarah's attempts to escape from her everyday life. Henson employs the conventions of cinema to lure the viewers into Sarah's imaginary world, making them party to her game before jolting them back with her to mundane, middle-class anxieties. His narrative deception playfully warns them that, as a talking worm remarks later, 'Things are not always what they seem in this place'; *Labyrinth* will be a *tour de force* of visual trickery.

Simply because Henson has abandoned the conceit of a fantasy world for a simulacrum of suburbia does not mean he has ceased to tell a fairy tale. The characters, indeed, seem almost too self-consciously aware of their fairy-tale role. Sarah's stepmother wails, 'She treats me like a wicked stepmother in a fairy-story no matter what I say!' Sarah herself, left at home to mind baby Toby while her father and stepmother go out, tells him a story: 'Once upon a time, there was a beautiful young girl whose stepmother always made her stay home with the baby.' It is not clear, however, whether the characters self-identify this way because they really are living in some variant of ATU 510A 'The Persecuted Heroine', or because Sarah wishes they were.

Henson takes pains to clarify not only that he is telling a fairy tale, but also to suggest the type of fairy tale he is telling. In another establishing shot, the camera pans slowly across the clutter of Sarah's bedroom. Significantly, the room is covered with books, and the camera lingers long enough for many of the titles to be read. Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and *Outside Over There* (1981) are both present, as are Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), and a picture-book adaptation of L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900); clumped in the middle are three books of fairy tales: a collection of Andersen, a collection of Grimm, and a worn copy of *Walt Disney's Snow White Annual* (1938).<sup>4</sup> As the camera pans over the books, Sarah repeats her lines from the opening. Henson appears to be signalling that this film is a fairy tale about a young woman who reads fairy tales.<sup>5</sup> Sarah's imaginative roleplay of her reading will be actualised in her own experience; the fantasy world to which she will shortly find herself transported is made out of the flotsam and jetsam from her fairy books.

Since Henson appears so eager to establish *Labyrinth* as a fairy-tale film, it is worth considering what he might have understood that to mean. *Labyrinth*, he explained,

is about a person at the point of changing from being a child to being a woman. Times of transition are always magic. Twilight is a magic time and dawn is magic—the times during which it's not day and it's not night but something in between. Also the time between sleeping and dreaming. There are a lot of mystical qualities related to that, and to me this is what the film is about.<sup>6</sup>

The inherently liminal quality of transition, then, seems to be central in Henson's understanding of the film. Specifically, he emphasises adolescence as a liminal, mystical time; *Labyrinth*, he says, ponders what those mystical qualities are which mark the transition of adolescence.

And here an unfortunate fact of chronology intrudes itself. Given this relation of fairy tale with mystical passage from childhood to adulthood, and given that he was a folklore and mythology enthusiast in the 1970s and '80s, Henson appears to have embraced the psychoanalytic structuralism propounded by Joseph Campbell. This assertion may cause folklorists everywhere to cringe, but however unfounded his theorising, faulty his evidence, prejudiced his views, and inexpert his psychoanalysis, Campbell was believed. Many writers and artists who encountered his theories about mythology and the hero's journey seized upon them with enthusiasm and incorporated them into their own works. As Sir James Frazer and Jessie Weston are due diligence reading for early 20th-century literary study, Joseph Campbell, for good or ill, must be read to understand the late 20th. His theories may be dubious at best, but they were inarguably influential.<sup>7</sup>

Although Henson's other fairy-tale films – such as *The Frog Prince* (1971) and *The Storyteller* (1987-8) – show less of Campbell's influence, both *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* show it in abundance, *Labyrinth* most particularly. This may be, in part, the influence of George Lucas as executive producer of the film.<sup>8</sup> Lucas read Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1975, and consciously reshaped the *Star Wars* trilogy to match its theories.<sup>9</sup> He and Campbell met personally in 1984, while *Labyrinth* was in pre-production, and in 1987 he produced Bill Moyers' interviews with Campbell and a hagiographical documentary about Campbell's life and ideas.<sup>10</sup> As well as Lucas, Brian Froud, the conceptual designer for *Labyrinth*, acknowledged Campbell's influence on his thinking, explaining in an interview with Terri Windling:

Mythologists and psychologists like Joseph Campbell, James Hillman and Clarissa Pinkola Estes have done much good work to popularize the notion that the symbols of myth and folklore have much to offer to modern life.

[...] Joseph Campbell has said that artists are the ‘shamans and myth-makers’ of our modern world, charging us with the sacred task of keeping myth alive. I hope my pictures will do their part in helping to keep myth, and the faeries, alive for the next generations.<sup>11</sup>

Froud, indeed, connected *Labyrinth* with a distinctly psychoanalytic understanding of folklore from its inception. Brian Jay Jones relates that, when Henson responded enthusiastically to Froud’s suggestion that their new movie be about a baby stolen by goblins, Froud then ‘suggested that perhaps a maze “would make a really good metaphor for the soul’s journey”’.<sup>12</sup>

These quotations from Froud suggest that it is not simply the structure of the hero’s journey, but its underlying theoretical framework that provides the most helpful critical interpretation. Reiterating the whole of Campbell’s theory here would be tedious at best; to clarify an understanding of *Labyrinth*, only a few key points from Campbell’s work need to be considered. Campbell, like Bruno Bettelheim, understood the fairy tale in psychoanalytic terms, as a Jungian soul’s journey towards psychological or spiritual wholeness:

It is the business of mythology proper, and of the fairy tale, to reveal the specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior way from tragedy to comedy. Hence the incidents are fantastic and ‘unreal’: they represent psychological, not physical, triumphs. [...] The point is not that such-and-such was done on earth; the point is that, before such-and-such could be done on earth, this other, more important, primary thing had to be brought to pass within the labyrinth that we all know and visit in our dreams.<sup>13</sup>

Campbell uses this image of ‘the dark interior way’ and the labyrinth of dreams in blatantly Jungian terms, combined with his own understanding of Freudian theory.<sup>14</sup> He refers elsewhere to ‘the divine being that is the image of the living self within the locked labyrinth of one’s own disoriented psyche’.<sup>15</sup> The woods and wilds of folk and fairy tale were, for Campbell, ‘a dream landscape of curiously fluid ambiguous forms’ which try the hero’s mettle.<sup>16</sup> He specifically casts this in metaphysical terms, saying

[...] if anyone—in whatever society—undertakes for himself the perilous journey into the darkness by descending, either intentionally or unintentionally, into the crooked lanes of his own spiritual labyrinth, he soon finds himself in a landscape of symbolical figures (any one of which may swallow him) [...] This is the process of dissolving, transcending, or transmuting the infantile images of our personal past.<sup>17</sup>

For Campbell, myth and fairy tale were symbols which could enable psychological healing. The labyrinth is one of many metaphors he used to elaborate this point; by accentuating it here, I do not mean to suggest that Henson derived the idea of the film directly from Campbell's work. Rather, when Henson's camera pans over the books in Sarah's room, he seems to be showing the fairy tales as Sarah's symbolical guides for her transition to adulthood.

Sarah, surrounded by dress-up clothes, picture books, and stuffed toys, is shown to be still clinging to 'infantile images of [her] personal past'. The labyrinth serves as the externalisation of her 'own disoriented psyche'.<sup>18</sup> It becomes all the more striking, then, that an open scrapbook sits beside the volumes of fairy tales. The scrapbook is filled with pictures from Disney's *Robin Hood* and newspaper clippings about a beautiful young actress; in crayon, beside them, Sarah has drawn hearts and written 'Mom'. Additional copies of the clippings are tacked up around the vanity mirror. Most of the clippings concern her mother's tempestuous romance with a dashing young man – portrayed, in the pictures, by David Bowie.

### **'Forget about the baby'**

Seen through Campbell's amalgam of Freudian and Jungian ideas, Bowie's silent cameo as Sarah's mother's lover appears neither accidental nor surprising.<sup>19</sup> Rather, it aligns the details of the story into place. Sarah's intense fascination with playacting – dressing herself up in faux-medieval gowns, putting on lipstick, and reciting monologues in front of her vanity mirror – displays a longing to be like her mother. As Sarah enters adolescence, her identification with her mother includes a subconscious desire to replace her sexually in her lover's affections. These fantasies, given form in picture books and stuffed animals, are shown to be connected to childhood and immaturity. At the end of the film, after solving the labyrinth, Sarah is shown taking down the pictures of her mother, and putting them away in a drawer, a thoughtful smile on her face. Through her ordeal in the labyrinth, Sarah outgrows her need to identify with her mother, and comes to a deeper, more mature understanding of herself as an independent individual.

This understanding of the film helps elucidate the precise nature of Bowie's role as Jareth. Tom Holste wittily comments that

If Jareth is indeed a projection from young teenage Sarah's imagination, of course he would be a rock star. Naturally, for a girl just entering puberty, her fantasy man would be hyper-sexualized. Of course he would have a sexy British accent, and for that matter, in 1986, a male rock star would inevitably have long hair and wear makeup.<sup>20</sup>

More precisely, and more narrowly, Sarah's fantasy concerns her transition out of childhood and into the adult world, as Henson suggested. Jareth is not dressed merely as her fantasy rock-star boyfriend, but specifically in the physical appearance of her mother's lover; this detail takes on perfect clarity seen in a Jungian sense.<sup>21</sup> Clad in the glamour of her childhood fairy tales, Jareth appears as a guide to lead through her 'spiritual labyrinth' from infantile sexual fantasies to mature adulthood. He is, in Campbell's phrase, 'the mystagogue (father or father-substitute)'.<sup>22</sup> Campbell explains:

*When the child outgrows the popular idyll of the mother breast and turns to face the world of specialized adult action, it passes, spiritually, into the sphere of the father—who becomes [...] for his daughter [the sign] of the future husband. Whether he knows it or not, and no matter what his position in society, the father is the initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger world.*<sup>23</sup>

The 'specialized adult action' thrust upon Sarah is, of course, minding her baby brother; she needs to take on a wholly grown-up responsibility that prefigures her own adulthood and possibility of motherhood. Confronted with a squalling baby who wants to get out of the crib, however, Sarah retreats from the invitation to adulthood and begins telling a fairy tale that imagines herself as a persecuted heroine. When she inadvertently utters the spell that allows the goblins to steal the baby, she must confront the reality of her responsibility for her brother, and rescue him from the distorted fantasy world that her childish behaviour has created.

It is then that Jareth appears, a tall, menacing presence in her parents' bedroom. He regards Sarah with mild amusement, but speaks with some asperity when she begs to know where her brother is. He speaks, in fact, precisely like an exasperated parent: 'You know very well where he is. [...] Sarah, go back to your room.' The familiar refrain scolds and cajoles and disciplines the wakeful, wandering child; it at once belittles and infantilises Sarah while giving her what she ostensibly wants: room to sulk in peace. Before Toby's tantrum, and after she exasperatedly tucked him back in, Sarah had been trying to spend time alone in her room. Yet this classically teenage desire is now shown to be equated not with the grown-up independence she perhaps imagined and wanted for herself, but with childish refusal to grow up. 'Play with your toys and your costumes,' Jareth sneers. 'Forget about the baby.'

When Sarah protests that she can't forget her brother, Jareth offers her a crystal that 'will show you your dreams' with a pointed caveat: 'But this is not a gift for an ordinary girl who takes care of a screaming baby.' The gift of a marvellous toy is intertwined with tacit denigration of the sticky realities of parenting; to earn a vision of her dreams, Sarah needs

to abandon the child left in her care, and embrace her self-glamorising identity as the persecuted heroine in a fairy tale. Jareth instructs her to choose, in other words, between entering into her spiritual labyrinth to pass the threshold of her adolescence into adulthood and towards psychological wholeness, or to refuse and remain in wilful childhood. In making this offer, he appears both in the ogre-aspect of the father – strict, condescending, belittling her affections of maturity – and in his role as mystagogue, pointing her towards her personal, emotional goal.<sup>24</sup> The castle beyond the goblin city, where the labyrinth ultimately leads, and her confrontation with the idealised father figure, are the necessary tasks to overcome before she can enter into the nurturing, maternal role she has selfishly rejected. Viewed in this perspective, the film can be seen as a fairy tale about a young girl's transition to adulthood by moving beyond dependence on her parents. Jareth's role, as father-figure and mystagogue, is to provide her with a definite goal to strive towards; by appearing as an antagonist to be overcome, he in fact facilitates her transformation from childhood to adulthood.

This understanding helps explain one of the more vexing sequences in the film: Sarah's dream-visit to a royal ball. After wandering about and apparently becoming lost in the woods, Sarah hungrily accepts the gift of a peach from her dwarf companion, Hoggle. But the peach had been enchanted by Jareth, and Sarah falls into a drugged stupor, clinging to a tree, wide-eyed, and murmuring, 'Everything's dancing.'<sup>25</sup> She then finds herself at a magnificent masked ball inside a bubble. Confused and curious, she wanders through the crush of vaguely orgiastic dancers, all the while under the keen gaze of Jareth. Presently, Jareth invites her to dance, and they swirl round the ballroom together until, with devastating finality, the clock strikes twelve. Sarah flees through the jeering crowd, shattering the glass walls of the bubble, and tumbles down through the floating wreckage to land in a junkyard.

Structurally, the sequence is a pastiche, combining easily recognisable elements from those most familiar of fairy tales: Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella, curiously concluding with a nod to Alice's descent down the rabbit hole – many, indeed, of the stories shown earlier in Sarah's bedroom. The narrative hodgepodge is emphasised by the tawdry, self-consciously garish costumes of the dancers – a horned mask here, a cocked hat there, dishevelled silks and fake curls, giving the feel of a bedraggled fairy court. Henson described the sequence as Sarah's fantasy of the adult world,

Well, the ballroom scene is Sarah's fantasy. So I wanted it to have a dream—trance-like quality. [...] We were trying to create a—kind of an adult world. [...] Sarah is still a child and she's walking into a very adult situation where she knows she's too young to be there. It's something that's attractive to her, and it's also repellent.<sup>26</sup>

To a certain extent, this appears to explain the fairy-tale pastiche of the scene: Sarah is fantasising about being like the grown-up fairy-tale heroines she admires and, by extension,



about enacting a fairy-tale version of her mother's life. But her self-evident attraction to this rather distressing adult world is often repellent to viewers, as well.<sup>27</sup> This is partly by design. Elliot Scott, the production designer, remarked that 'the people in the ballroom were meant to be vaguely depraved, as it were'; Brian Froud clarified 'that they were the gentry, dressing up, and they were playing at being goblins'.<sup>28</sup> It also arises partly from the obvious age gap between the lead actors. Despite the tense affection between the characters, Jennifer Connelly, as Sarah, is only fourteen; David Bowie, as Jareth, is thirty-eight.<sup>29</sup>

With that degree of age gap between the ostensible Prince Charming and Cinderella, it is tempting to assume yet another fairy tale is being invoked: the Wolf and Red Riding Hood, with its grim warnings against sexual predation. However, the age difference between Connelly and Bowie might be best understood as further indication of Jareth's paternal role within the film. Bowie was literally old enough to be Connelly's father; his own son, Duncan Jones, is only five months younger than Connelly. Jareth intently watching Sarah wander round the room could thus be understood as the possessiveness of an overprotective parent. Sarah's fascination with Jareth, then, would seem to be a manifestation of the infantile fantasy about becoming her mother and possessing her mother's lover. The scene in the ballroom demonstrates the dual nature of Jareth's role. On the one hand, by indulging her fairy-tale fantasies, Jareth tries to prevent her from rescuing baby Toby and to keep her restricted within the infantile fantasies of childhood; this is his manifestation as the ogre-father. On the other, by showing her the pathetic, even revolting spectacle of grown-ups aping the goblins, Jareth attempts to guide her through the difficult transition of adolescence towards maturity; this is his manifestation of the father as mystagogue.

### **'Your eyes can be so cruel'**

This inherent duality finds expression in the song that Bowie sings during the sequence.<sup>30</sup> After crooning a promise to 'place the sky within your eyes' and 'the moon within your heart' – that is, to help her realise frankly impossible dreams, Bowie laments:

As the pain sweeps through,  
Makes no sense for you,  
Every thrill has gone,  
Wasn't too much fun at all—  
But I'll be there for you  
As the world falls down.

The idea of falling, or descending, can be heard in the music. The central melodic motif of the verses and the chorus slowly descends the octave from E to E in a sequential pattern, concluding with Bowie singing in the lower end of his vocal register. This is supported

harmonically by a common chord progression that descends by thirds from A major to F# minor to D major, which is then lowered to become D minor before returning to A. Ironically, on the phrase 'the world falls down', the melodic descent continues until the word 'down' itself, which leaps up a fifth, dramatically returning to the highest note of the octave where the melody began.<sup>31</sup>

Bowie's melody and lyrics suggest a recognition of the inevitability that the childish, fairy-tale world will collapse; the soaring vocal on 'down' suggests that this is no bad thing. Despite the airy promises of sky and moon and stars, Bowie recognises that the pain and regret of growing up bring disenchantment and disillusion, and promises his own steadfast presence in lieu of fantastic dreams; the song, in other words, can be understood as a parent's promise that they will 'be there' for their child as the child makes the difficult transition to adulthood.

Indeed, the image of the world falling down recurs three times after this song, beginning with Sarah's violent shattering of the ballroom itself, and her subsequent Alice-like fall through the floating wreckage. Waking from her drugged sleep, she wanders through a junkyard into what appears to be her own bedroom. A gibbering goblin dustman appears and begins piling Sarah with all her toys and books. Sarah is repulsed and declares, 'It's all junk! [...] I have to save Toby!' She throws the toys into the mirror, and the room collapses, the walls falling down on themselves. Sarah actively rejects her infantile identification with her mother by rejecting the material objects that supported it, and assumes the once-despised adult responsibility of caring for her baby brother.

The imagery of the world falling down recurs a third time at the end of the labyrinth. After a dizzying confrontation with Jareth on the staircase from M.C. Escher's *Relativity* (1953), Sarah, unable to navigate the dimensional maze, simply jumps down towards her brother. The castle flies apart, and she lands once more in the midst of floating rubble. The suspended collapse of the labyrinth provides the backdrop for her final ordeal, with Jareth once more offering her the crystal containing her dreams. He again adopts the aggrieved paternal voice, almost to the point of cliché, declaring, 'I am exhausted from living up to your expectations of me. Isn't that generous?' Here he reiterates the claim he sings earlier in the ballad 'Within You': 'Everything I've done, I've done for you.' In return for becoming the father figure of Sarah's fantasies, Jareth demands that she reciprocate with dutiful, childlike honour for her parents: 'Just let me rule you, and you can have everything you want. [...] Just fear me, love me, do as I say, and I will be your slave.'<sup>32</sup> This, again, borders on the cliché; like the command to 'go back to your room', 'do as I say!' is the stereotypical command of last resort for the frustrated parent. Jareth promises indulgence of Sarah's childish whims if she will stop misbehaving, and do what he wants rather than what she wants. Sarah responds by quoting, for a third time, the lines that began the film; in this context, however, her declaration that 'You have no power over me' becomes a rejection of paternal authority. By repudiating Jareth's assumption that what matters most to her is a childish desire to have her wishes gratified, Sarah accepts

her transition into adulthood. The world of the labyrinth falls down in a montage of billowing fabric, and Sarah returns home to care for Toby.<sup>33</sup>

'As the world falls down' three times, three distinct stages of Sarah's psychological healing are visualised. First, her subconscious fantasy of becoming her mother collapses with the breaking of the ballroom bubble. Second, she moves beyond her attachment to the material traces of her childhood with the collapse of her room in the junkyard. And third, by rejecting Jareth's claim for due parental honour and obedience, Sarah reconciles herself to young adulthood, finding her way out of the labyrinth of her psyche into wholeness. This wholeness takes the form, in Campbell's phrasing, of Sarah's 'recognition by the father-creator'.<sup>34</sup> As Jareth has earlier claimed paternity of Toby by remarking on his eyes, he makes a similar claim about Sarah in the scene on Escher's staircase, singing the ballad 'Within You'. At the emotional climax of the song, his voice high and ragged, Jareth sings, 'Your eyes can be so cruel | Just as I can be so cruel.' Here, again, it is the distinctive, mesmeric eyes which provide evidence of paternity. The parallel structure of the lines and the homonymic wordplay of 'eyes' with 'I' suggests a deep affinity; Jareth is acknowledging the image of himself present in Sarah.

It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that the next line he sings is 'Oh, I do believe in you.' This appears to be a lyrical allusion to Bowie's song 'Kooks', from his 1971 album *Hunky Dory*. Addressed to his newborn son, his quavering vocals on 'Kooks' detail all the toys and games he's bought for his son, but ultimately express mingled pride and sadness that '[s]oon you'll grow', and plead with the child not to forget his parents: 'If you stay, you won't be sorry | 'Cause we believe in you.' By echoing this line in 'Kooks', Bowie underscores Jareth's paternal identity towards Sarah; recognising the shared attitude and appearance – cruelty and eyes – Jareth expresses a paternal support for Sarah that echoes the promise of constancy in 'As the World Falls Down'. This recognition, however, accompanies the understanding that Sarah, too, is growing, and must become her own individual, free of parental oversight. At the end of the ballad, Jareth tremulously sings: 'I can't live within you.' Within the superficial context of the film, the lyrics seem almost abstract, their relation to the action on screen – Sarah chasing Toby around the stairs – merely tenuous. Held alongside 'Kooks', however, and heard as a father's acknowledgment that his children soon will grow, it assumes a melancholy clarity; in recognising their paternity, Jareth also recognises that the children must live their own lives and he cannot live childhood vicariously through them. In gaining recognition from the father-figure, Sarah is thus freed from her childish need for parental attention and able to venture into the world of adulthood and parenthood herself.

### **'What the hell, I've done *Laughing Gnome*'**

Bowie's turn as Jareth occurred in a peculiar moment of his career. Henson first approached Bowie for the role during the 1983 *Serious Moonlight* tour; in support of his chart-topping

album *Let's Dance*. With the album's release, Bowie had abandoned both his glam-rock persona and his avant-garde conceptual projects to adopt the coif and necktie of a conventional soul-singer and pop-star. But Jareth became a new, contrasting persona; he was very much Bowie's creation. Bowie recalled that 'Jim gave me a complete free hand. He allowed me to say what I wanted and write the things that I wanted.'<sup>35</sup> So it is puzzling why, after seemingly moving away from his over-the-top characters of the 1970s, Bowie so flamboyantly and enthusiastically embraced the role of Jareth – a fright-wigged, jazz-handing, eye-lined, tight-trousered, bare-chested glam king.

On the one hand, the simplest explanation is that Bowie thought it would be fun; he remarked that he considered *The Dark Crystal* to be 'a fascinating piece of work' and that he 'could see the potentiality of making that kind of movie with humans, with songs, with more of a lighter comedy script.'<sup>36</sup> He did not, regrettably, specify whether he saw artistic or financial potential, but in one sense it hardly mattered. As the most powerful rock star in the world at the time, he could undertake any project he liked, for any reason he liked, whether artistic or pecuniary, or, in this instance, both. This entirely pragmatic explanation, however, dodges the question as to why this particular character at this particular time. The glam king persona appeared old and tired, a reminder of a rebellious, daring, bi-curious youth which Bowie had already seemed to abandon. Bowie, indeed, was fully aware that Jareth was something of a throwback to his earlier work, remarking, 'I thought, what the hell, I've done *Laughing Gnome*, I might as well—[laughs]—cut all the way, we're back—I never thought in twenty years I'd come back to working with—gnomes.'<sup>37</sup> Strikingly, Jareth's soul-weariness seems to have been an integral part of the persona. Bowie recalled:

One feels as if he's rather reluctantly inherited the position of being Goblin King, as though he really would like to be—I dunno—down in Soho or something. [laughs] But he's not, he's—his—uh—thing in life is to be Goblin King, and he runs the whole place as well as he can, and he's kind of spoiled—gets everything his own way. He's a big kid.

What has happened is that the goblins—without his command—have just gone off and taken another baby brother, from another girl, and he's got to sort out the whole situation.<sup>38</sup>

Jareth, in other words, is something of a playboy who has found fatherhood thrust upon him against his will; rather than some brooding, wizardly Oberon, Jareth is a world-weary, cynical upper-level bureaucrat. He wears the trappings of power reluctantly but despotically; when he makes a joke and the goblin court is awkwardly silent, he sneers in irritation, 'Well, laugh!' And when Sarah is on the verge of unravelling his well-orchestrated plan, he seems more concerned with his own exhaustion than with keeping the baby.

Intriguingly, this performance has striking similarities to Bowie's next major film role: Pontius Pilate in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Bowie's Pilate, like Jareth, is a tired, worldly-wise bureaucrat, with yet another seditious rabbi to crucify. The roles are at first glance dissimilar; certainly, Scorsese and Henson are markedly different directors. But Bowie's Pilate is, ultimately, a sensible, exasperated bureaucrat who finds Christ intriguing and a bit tiresome, and orders the execution of the Messiah for dispassionately practical reasons. In *Labyrinth*, Bowie takes on a persona markedly similar to his extra-terrestrial superman, Ziggy Stardust,<sup>39</sup> and helps a teenage girl to realise that she has outgrown her need of him. In both films, a cold, clear-eyed producer orchestrates the demise of a messiah. The shallow, tatterdemalion nature of Jareth seems to be the entire point. Both the coiffed soul-man and the prancing goblin king were crucifying Ziggy Stardust.

As Jareth, Bowie appears to be acknowledging the extent to which young fans – the age of his own son – had idolised him, both as a sex symbol and a role model. For good or ill, he had been a very real father figure for millions of devoted listeners. In taking up the disco stylings of *Let's Dance*, he could create a new role for himself as slickly professional rocker and producer; no longer plagued by the drug-addled confusion that marked his earlier work. By entering into Henson's fairy-tale labyrinth, he could acknowledge the emotional and psychological need his fans felt for his older persona, celebrating what they had created together, while pointing them to their own self-sufficiency: they could become satisfied and healthy individuals without relying on him. Through the exhausted and paternal Jareth, Bowie suggested to his young fans that they, like Sarah, could become their own independent selves, without depending on a fairy-tale prince or moon-age Messiah.

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### Notes

1. Throughout this article, I refer to *Labyrinth* as Jim Henson's work. This is not to disregard the immense number of profoundly talented artists, performers, and craftsmen who laboured on the film; rather, I maintain that Henson is most usefully understood as an *auteur*, and approach his diverse oeuvre accordingly. From a literary standpoint, the authorial trail of *Labyrinth*'s script is tortuous. Brian Jay Jones (*Jim Henson: The Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2013, p.380) writes that after 25 drafts, 'the final screenplay [was] an amalgam of contributions from [Elaine] May, Laura Phillips, Jim [Henson], Dennis Lee, Terry Jones, and even executive producer George Lucas—talented chefs all, but a far too crowded kitchen.' This may in part account for the muddled lack of clarity in the narrative and characterisation that so frustrated critics, for which see Jones, pp.389-93; and Tom Holste, 'Finding Your Way Through *Labyrinth*', in *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson: Essays*

on *His Work and Legacy Beyond The Muppet Show and Sesame Street*, ed. by Jennifer C. Garlen and Anissa M. Graham (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland, 2012), p.117f. Indeed, upon its release *Labyrinth* was a critical and financial disaster; unlike the modest success of *The Dark Crystal* (*contra* Juliette Wood, 'Filming Fairies: Popular Film, Audience Response and Meaning in Contemporary Fairy Lore', *Folklore* 117 (2006), p.285); Jones, p.390, notes that '*Labyrinth* only grossed \$12 million on its \$25 million budget—a "costly bore," snarked *Variety*'; Henson, he says, 'was devastated by the response' and fell into depression.

2. *Labyrinth*, directed by Jim Henson (1986; Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1999). All subsequent references to the film refer to this printing: all transcriptions of dialogue and lyrics are the author's.
3. Cf. Stephen Thomas Erlwine, 'David Bowie', *Billboard.com*, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/300407/david-bowie/biography> (accessed 26 March 2016); Mark Kemp et al., 'David Bowie: Biography', *RollingStone.com*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/david-bowie/biography> (accessed 26 March 2016).
4. Along with the books, an assortment of toys prefigure her adventures in the labyrinth: a muppet-like Fiery sprawls on a table, a doll in a miniature version of Sarah's ballgown spins in a music box, and a stuffed toy Sir Didymus is propped against a wooden maze; a stuffed Ludo is later shown on a dresser. A carving of Hoggle is used as a bookend, and a model of Jareth himself sits on the vanity table. TheHalloweenInn.com has compiled a detailed list of the most readily seen artefacts in Sarah's bedroom, with accompanying screenshots and links to online sources for replicas, but without significant analysis. Especially considering the thematic echoes between *Labyrinth* and *Outside Over There*, and the note in the end credits that 'JIM HENSON | Acknowledges his debt to the works of | MAURICE SENDAK', it seems likely that this slow pan of Sarah's books is Henson's tacit acknowledgement of his source material. Interestingly, Jones (*Jim Henson: The Biography*, pp.380-1) notes that Henson 'had seen Sendak's original drawings for [Outside Over There] during a visit to the author's Connecticut home', but clarifies that this credit was added in response to a lawsuit served by Sendak, who accused Henson of plagiarism, and that Sendak 'grumble[d] about it for years'. A full intertextual study of these works with *Labyrinth* would likely prove fruitful.
5. Andrea Wright, in 'Selling the Fantastic: The Marketing and Merchandising of the British Fairytale Film in the 1980s', *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 2 (2005), pp.266-7, intriguingly connects this display of books with 'literary and cinematic traditions of the "girl's adventure"', observing:

These narratives follow the adventures of an adolescent or pre-adolescent girl whose journey is one of self-discovery, realization of responsibility or the value of the home. [...] [T]he stories begin in an unsettled domestic setting, where the female leads are restless, and trapped by their environment. To escape, they enter into a fantasy world where they are able to confront and explore the problems associated with their feelings towards their family and home.

Wright (p. 271f) also includes a brief but cogent discussion of the fan communities that have sprung up around *Labyrinth* since its release, 'which [have] elevated a largely forgotten family film to the realms of adult nostalgia for the eighties'; cf. Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore and Sean Redmond, *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/time/body/memory* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p.253.

6. Christopher Finch, *Jim Henson: The Works – The Art, the Magic, the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1993), p.183 inset.
7. A full investigation of Campbell's work on Henson's fairy-tale films – and, indeed, the whole of the late 20th-century literary fairy tale – would enrich critical understanding of the field, for better or worse, but has to my knowledge yet to be undertaken.
8. Finch (*Jim Henson: The Works*, p.183 inset) states that 'Lucas brought his knowledge of story structure to the project'. By the time he began work on *Labyrinth*, Lucas's 'knowledge of story structure' was no more nor less than a fanatical devotion to Campbell's theories. Cf. notes 9 and 10, below. Holste, 'Finding Your Way Through *Labyrinth*', *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson*, pp.128-9, has observed that the narrative structure of *Labyrinth* adheres closely to Campbell's notion of the hero's journey, and rightly attributes this to Lucas's influence. Holste's particular gloss of how the hero's journey is developed through *Labyrinth* is intriguing but lacks nuance, in part because he does not include the atonement with the father, as discussed below, or the implications of Campbell's wider theoretical framework to the film.

9. Lucas O. Seastrom, 'Mythic Discovery Within the Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Joseph Campbell Meets George Lucas – Part I', *StarWars.com*, <http://www.starwars.com/news/mythic-discovery-within-the-inner-reaches-of-outer-space-joseph-campbell-meets-george-lucas-part-i> (22 October 2015; accessed 27 March 2016). Seastrom makes a convincing case by relying heavily on interviews and direct quotations from Lucas, Campbell, and their close associates to elucidate the depth of their friendship and mutual admiration.
10. Seastrom, *op. cit.* and 'Mythic Discovery Within the Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Joseph Campbell Meets George Lucas, Part 2', *StarWars.com*, <http://www.starwars.com/news/mythic-discovery-within-the-inner-reaches-of-outer-space-joseph-campbell-meets-george-lucas-part-2> (6 November 2015; accessed 27 March 2016).
11. Terri Windling, 'Making the Invisible World Visible: Brian Froud Brings Folklore to Life', *World of Froud*, <http://www.worldoffroud.com/about/articles/folklore.php> (2011; accessed 26 March 2016).
12. Jones, *Jim Henson: The Biography*, p.355. Jon D. Solomon, 'In the Wake of "Cleopatra": The Ancient World in the Cinema since 1963', *The Classical Journal* 91:2 (Dec. 1995 – Jan. 1996), pp.121-2, observes that in 1968, George Lucas produced *Electronic Labyrinth: THX-1138: 4EB*, a twenty-minute short which offers a futuristic vision of the Minoan mythological motif', and remade it 'as the feature length *THX-1138* (1971)'. Solomon specifically connects these films with Lucas's work on *Labyrinth* and 'Darth Vader's shocking Oedipal disclosure in *The Empire Strikes Back*'; in p.122 n29, Solomon relates these films to Lucas's enthusiasm for Campbell's theories. Evidently the image of a labyrinth as a soul's journey was one which had long interested Lucas, and Solomon is shrewd to sense a connection between this motif and the atonement with the father theme which recurs in the *Star Wars* trilogy.
13. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.46, emphasis added.
14. Cf. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, pp.9-10, where he seems to argue that Freud emphasises the psychology of birth, and Jung of death, and to regard their works as sober, scientific fact. It could, of course, be objected that Jung, not Campbell, may be the primary influence on Henson's thinking about fairy tale and mythology; it seems, at any rate, likely that Henson would have known a bit of Jung, and Jung carries rather more academic cachet than Campbell. But the idiosyncratic structuralism that Campbell called *monomyth* is largely absent from Jung, and, as even a cursory viewing demonstrates, is followed almost religiously in the structure of *Labyrinth* (cf. note 8, above). For this reason, as well as those given in the main text, and without minimising the importance of other authors and texts for understating Henson's work, Campbell appears to remain an important influence.
15. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.55.
16. *Ibid.*, p.89.
17. *Ibid.*, pp.92-3.
18. Cf. Shiloh Carroll, 'The Heart of the Labyrinth: Reading Jim Henson's *Labyrinth* as a Modern Dream Vision', *Mythlore* 28 (2009), p.104: 'Nearly everything in Sarah's room is reflected in the Labyrinth in some way, indicating that her journey through the Labyrinth is a journey through her own subconscious.' Carroll correctly identifies the dream logic of *Labyrinth*, but her conflation of it with medieval dream vision literature is not wholly convincing, and her attempts at an allegorical interpretation of the characters seem somewhat speculative. But her observation concerning the reflection of Sarah's everyday life in the labyrinth appears to refute Tracie D. Lukasiewicz's assertion that there is 'no parallel between the fantastical and the real' in the film, and 'the fairy tale' element of *Labyrinth* 'remains disconnected from the real world' ('The Parallelism of the Fantastic and the Real: Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*/*El Laberinto del fauno* and Neomagical Realism', in *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, ed. by Pauline Greenhill and Sidney Eve Matrix (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010), p.68). Anne McGillivray, 'A State of Imperfect Transformation: Law, Myth, and the Feminine in *Outside Over There*, *Labyrinth*, and *Pan's Labyrinth*', in *Law and Childhood Studies: Current Legal Issues*, ed. by Michael Freeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.17ff, offers a more straightforwardly Jungian interpretation of the labyrinth as a mythic symbol of childhood, arguing that 'it is [Sarah] who made the labyrinth, in the image of her desire'; overall, McGillivray's analysis is intriguing but not wholly convincing.
19. For a detailed discussion of Bowie's own fascination with Jungian theory, see Tanja Stark, 'Crashing Out with Sylvian: David Bowie, Carl Jung and the Unconscious', <http://tanjastark.com/2015/06/22/crashing-out-with>

sylvian-david-bowie-carl-jung-and-the-unconscious/ (accessed 26 March 2016); the online article reproduces Stark's chapter from *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin Power (London: Routledge, 2015).

20. Holste, 'Finding Your Way Through *Labyrinth*', *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson*, p.127. The 'inevitability' of the fright wig is perhaps overstated, given Bowie's own debonair, soul-singer style at the time.
21. It seems, indeed, rather too likely that Henson may have intended a psychoanalytic subtext when, in a moment of pique, Sarah sits on her mother's bed.
22. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.125.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Carroll, 'The Heart of the Labyrinth', *Mythlore* 28, p.108, notes that despite Jareth's hostility and attempts 'to sabotage her journey', '[h]e may still be considered a guide because Sarah learns to do the opposite of what he tells her in order to find her way and because interaction with him shows her the parts of adulthood that she is not yet ready for'. To nuance this claim of reverse psychology further, it is precisely Jareth's hostility that indicates his role as the guide; by presenting the ogre aspect of the father, he shows Sarah how to overcome her own fears and fantasies and earn his recognition of her individual selfhood.
25. An alternate interpretation of *Labyrinth*, in fact, would view it as a morality play on the dangers of drug addiction; certainly, the ballroom scene could be seen as a prolonged drug trip. The erotic undercurrent between Sarah and Jareth, then, would be suggestive of the destructive fascination of drugs, and the choice between adult responsibility and a bauble that shows her all her dreams would be an invitation to shirk material reality for what Aldous Huxley called 'visionary experience'. Sarah's quest would be to prevent her younger brother from succumbing to the addiction, breaking the habit herself and regaining a whole, healthy, and independent sense of herself. Certainly, given Bowie's tendency for his lyrics to conflate blatant sexuality with drug addiction – consider, for instance, his work on *Aladdin Sane* (1973) – and the extent to which the dangers of teenage drug abuse had seized the popular imagination in the mid-1980s, such an understanding does not seem entirely implausible. But an adequate treatment of this idea falls beyond the scope of this paper.
26. *Inside the Labyrinth*, directed by Desmond Saunders (Jim Henson Television Co., 1987).
27. T. Miller, 'The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths: Escaping Escapism in Henson's *Labyrinth* and Del Toro's *Laberinto*', *Extrapolation*, 52 (2011), pp.30-1, details the 'superabundance of phallic imagery' in this 'ostentatiously Freudian' scene: 'dripping candles, outsized wands, a serpentine staff, and protuberant noses and horns adorning all of the masks further accent Jareth's always-prominent genital bulge.' Bowie's trousers, however, rather than being 'always-prominent' in the sequence, are hardly in the shot, and the two times that they are, their contours are wholly obscured by his swirling coattails. The camera, rather focuses on Bowie's eyes, particularly the permanently dilated left-pupil. Given his remark to Toby earlier, and his later song to Sarah, this hardly seems accidental. It also suggests that the shots were composed to draw attention to Bowie's eyes and face and that, despite popular mythology, the fit of his trousers are only of minor importance to appreciation of the film.
28. *Inside the Labyrinth*.
29. Cf. Holste, 'Finding Your Way Through *Labyrinth*', *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson*, p.127.
30. Liz Guiffre, 'Entering the Labyrinth: How Henson and Bowie Created a Musical Fantasy', in *The Music of Fantasy Cinema*, by Janet K. Halfyard (Sheffield: Equinox Pub., 2012, p.104), correctly points out that it is, particularly, Bowie who is singing:

Bowie's voice is recognisable in the vocal [...] Jareth, however, does not perform the song, but rather moves silently through the crowd until he meets Sarah. It is only after the two have been dancing for a short while that Jareth mouths one line of the song, "I'll be there for you as the world falls down", singing to Sarah directly as they continue to dance. This is markedly different from how music is presented elsewhere in the film, and is the only place in the narrative where a song is presented without being overtly performed. [...] This disconnection makes the masquerade sequence seem more like a music video than the *Muppet Show*-like performance pieces in the film so far.



Holste ('Finding Your Way Through *Labyrinth*', *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson*, p.127) incorrectly identifies the song in this scene as 'Within You'. Juliette Wood's assertion ('Filming Fairies: Popular Film, Audience Response and Meaning in Contemporary Fairy Lore', *Folklore* 117 (2006), p.287) that '[t]he journey culminates in a masquerade scene in an Escher-like ballroom at the heart of the labyrinth' makes a similar mistake by conflating the masquerade ('As the World Falls Down') with the confrontation on the staircase ('Within You'); this is both inaccurate and misleading. Cf. Ron Magrid's interview with Alex Thomson, the cinematographer for *Labyrinth*, and their detailed technical discussion of how the two very different scenes were shot ('*Labyrinth* and *Legend*, Big Screen Fairy Tales', *American Cinematographer* (August 1986), p.70).

31. The musical gesture here is strikingly similar, though not identical, to the octave leap in the refrain of Bowie's 1971 hit 'Life on Mars', which, interestingly, is also about a teenage girl who quarrels with her parents and escapes into a dream world.
32. Holste ('Finding Your Way Through *Labyrinth*', *The Wider Worlds of Jim Henson*, p.126) misquotes this line, truncating it without ellipsis and glossing 'slave' as 'master'.
33. T. Miller strikingly observes that Sarah's experience of the masquerade ball is a fantasy within a fantasy; as she has lost herself in her imagination and roleplay at the beginning of the film, she loses herself in a hallucinatory, eroticised fantasy while within a fantasy work; 'as [Sarah] becomes enraptured by this second fantasy, the narrative world of the film collapses into the yet narrower space inside the single tiny bubble.' With the three subsequent collapses of her fantasies, Sarah's narrative world is expanding from narrow, childish self-absorption to a full integration into the real, grown-up world.
34. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p.354.
35. *Inside the Labyrinth*.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.* At this point in the interview, Bowie is commenting specifically on doing voiceover work for Toby Froud in the 'Dance, Magic' song, but appears to realise midsentence that his comparison to *The Laughing Gnome* (1967) could apply to his work on *Labyrinth* as a whole.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Cf. Giuffre, 'Entering the Labyrinth: How Henson and Bowie Created a Musical Fantasy', in *The Music of Fantasy Cinema*, p.102: 'the musical-fantasy film rewards audiences who have previous knowledge of Bowie's musical personae by recreating part of the Ziggy Stardust look'.