"You Remind Me of the Babe With the Power": How Jim Henson Redefined the Portrayal of Young Girls in Fanastial Movies in His Film, *Labyrinth*

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When I was fourteen, I was very surprised when one day my mom picked me up from school and plopped a DVD of David Bowie in tights posing with a Muppet into my hands. “Remember this?!” She asked excitedly. I stared quizzically at the cover and noticed it was titled, Labyrinth. For a moment I was confused as to why my mother would bother buying me some strange, fantasy movie from the eighties, but suddenly, it clicked. I had grown up watching this film; in fact I had been so obsessed with it that every time we went to our local movie rental store I would beg my mom to rent it for a couple of nights. However, by the time I was five the store had closed and I began to develop other tastes in film. I completely forgot about my beloved characters of Labyrinth, and as I looked at the DVD in my lap I felt a wave of nostalgia wash over me. As soon as I got home I popped the movie into my DVD player and sat riveted for an hour and forty-one minutes, overwhelmed by how much a film made specifically for children could relate to someone like me. Watching the main character Sarah’s maturation from an innocent, selfish teenager into an empowered young woman is a transformation I admire a transformation that should be focused on more in fairy-tale based films. Society has become too accustomed to trivializing the role of princesses; rather than a strong figure, audiences prefer the damsel in distress in a revealing dress waiting for her knight in shining armor to save her. In Labyrinth, however, director Jim Henson proves that stereotype isn’t necessary by portraying Sarah as the courageous hero. She is the one who unites the various characters of the labyrinth, saves her baby brother’s life, and overcomes the power of the Goblin King (also known as Jareth) all the while wearing a sensible outfit. By depicting Sarah’s metamorphosis from adolescence to adulthood, along with her resistance against and eventual destruction of Jareth, Henson argues that young girls don’t always have to be illustrated as weak characters, and men shouldn’t always have to be presented as dominant and charming. Rather, the roles can be switched and leave just as much of an impact, if not more, on an audience.

The theme of an empowered young woman in fairy-tale films was not very popular when Labyrinth released. Disney wouldn’t start integrating feminism into their movies until the 1990s, and even then the company still ended their stories with the female lead ending up with the prince. When Jim Henson created Labyrinth, he directed a film that was the complete opposite of Disney’s, paving a path for a new attitude toward princesses. The focus of the movie wasn’t just about a girl trying to be with her “one true love” it was about her development into womanhood and the sacrifices she had to make along the way. Henson’s use of a labyrinth, then, is very significant to Sarah’s growth as a character. The labyrinth is symbolic for a journey—whether that journey might be to reach a physical goal or to grow mentally and emotionally—and a symbol for sacrifice (“Labyrinths”). Writer T.S. Miller asserts this notion by insisting, “more than anything, the labyrinth becomes the figure for fear, for entrapment, but also the figure for what a passage through...the fantastic can or cannot accomplish for the individual confronted with his or
her emerging sexuality, external violence, bodily powerlessness, and everything else that lurks inside its twistings and turnings” (Miller). In a labyrinth, a young child can be transformed. They must give up their immature ways and accept the reality of adulthood in order to be successful in their excursion through the labyrinth Jim Henson conveys this process though the main protagonist, Sarah, showing the struggles she faces internally in a fun movie that is approachable for younger children.

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Of course, feminism is a touchy and difficult subject to explain to people, which is why Henson's creative mind was important in making the film because he was able to portray this social issue in a entertaining way that the public could enjoy. Henson and his team used the technique of puppetry or, the term that Henson coined, “muppetry”, which was “his own combination of marionette and foam-rubber hand puppets” (Blau). Unlike his other movies, though, Henson had to construct puppets that would be able to converse and interact smoothly with real people (“Journey”). Brian Froud, a close friend of Henson’s and also the creature designer for the film, discussed, for example, the science and technology they had to use to build the beast, Ludo. He describes the process as, “We wanted it [Ludo] to have muscles. It had to have fluidity to it, and it had to have personality” (“Journey”). Henson didn’t want his Muppets to look like they were being controlled by people, he wanted them to be realistic as possible so that they would be able to reflect the feelings that Sarah was dealing with throughout her journey. Often there were several different Muppets for one character because they needed to show various emotions through their facial expressions, along with different actions that could only be controlled by standing up or sitting down (“Journey”). David Goelz, a puppeteer/performer in the film, claimed that what was particularly difficult about shooting *Labyrinth* was that there were three or four puppeteers for each character, and how they had to go through every line in the movie and match up a function to go with a word in that line (“Journey”). Froud emphasizes the soul that Henson put into *Labyrinth*, remembering, “he [Henson] was always wanting to make it better and more expressive...and what we discovered was that it [Labyrinth] was timely, that it was being of its time, but it continues to be meaningful for especially teenage girls” (“Journey”). Henson produces a film that contains complex characters, but a concept that every young girl can relate too. Henson conveys Sarah’s journey to heroism through a creative and unique form of art that is entertaining and also deeply relevant to its audience.

Initially, Sarah doesn’t appear heroic at all to viewers. She isn’t considerate of others and often acts as if she is the victim of some horrible life in her household. When her step-mother and father tell her that she has to babysit her little brother, she yells, “It’s not fair!” A complaint that she uses frequently throughout the movie. She behaves as if her brother is a burden and the cause of all of her troubles, blaming him for taking her toys from her room and forcing her to stay home every night, even though she doesn’t have any plans to go out anyway. Sarah’s immaturity can also be seen in the manner in which she perceives herself. Instead of acting like a teenager by having an interest in the latest pop culture,
Sarah gives the impression that she is still a child—fascinated only with the world of fantasy instead of the world of reality. Her room is filled with stuffed animals and toys, and she even likes to pretend that an imaginary goblin king is pining for her in his castle. Henson even reveals her naiveté in her outfit by having her wear a white shirt and later on a white dress, a color that is symbolic of purity and innocence. Sarah's callow attitude is the cause of the kidnapping of her brother because she wishes him to be taken away by Jareth; however, once she realizes her consequences for her actions she automatically desires for them to be reversed. Despite Sarah continually claiming that her life is difficult, she has really never had any struggles besides having to stop playing dress up in order to babysit her brother, Toby. This is why, when she is forced to make her way through the labyrinth in order to save him, she is in complete shock because she never had to take responsibility of her problems before. Even Jareth comments on her carelessness and childishness when he shows her the labyrinth and declares that Sarah's situation is “such a pity” his voice practically dripping with sarcasm. Sarah has to learn to give up her selfish, infantile ways in order to focus on what matters most: rescuing Toby. The executive producer of the film, George Lucas, explains Sarah's conflict over growing up by claiming, “She's on that cusp between being an adult and a big sister [...] and it's her struggle to kind of compete with these two things, but of course, in the end, she enters adulthood on her own terms” (“Journey”). Sarah is eventually able to release her fears about accepting adulthood, and once she does, she finally recognizes the power within her to overcome the labyrinth and the Goblin King.

Naturally, Sarah's maturation is not an easy process. She is, after all, stuck in between two different stages of her life: childhood and womanhood. One half of her still wants to rely on her imagination while the other half aspires for the freedom that grown-ups have. Eventually, Sarah learns how to balance each of these desires in her life, but she has to undergo many lessons before she is successful. For instance, she is extremely frustrated when she first enters the labyrinth, complaining about how the path constantly changes on her without any warning. At one point, she begins to draw arrows on the ground to remind her which way she had previously gone; but that plan unfortunately falls through when she spies tiny men popping out of the ground, switching the blocks which she drew her arrows on. Once again, she wails her cliché line “It's not fair!”, but instead of any of the characters showing her sympathy, two goat-like Muppets who guard doors in the labyrinth respond back to her: “No it's not! But that's only the half of it” Later on, when Jareth runs down the hours for Sarah's chances of saving Toby and he hears her childish complaint of injustice, he scoffs, “You say that so often. I wonder what your basis of comparison is?” Sarah finally realizes how petty she sounds when she is talking to Hoggle, a dwarf she befriends in the labyrinth, and he uses her typical objection against her (Carroll). Writer Shiloh Carroll emphasizes Sarah's understanding of her immature conduct by expressing, “Her [Sarah's] sudden look of understanding indicates that she's learned that things may not be fair, but they must be dealt with, not whined about” (Carroll). Like life, the labyrinth is always altering, creating new paths and removing old ones. There is no way for Sarah to stop this reorganizing from happening, she has to endure it; and once she opens her mind to unexpected change, she starts to move more boldly and swiftly through the labyrinth. Her transformation in her attitude describes the notion that if people tolerate the flexibility of life, than they are more likely to achieve success in their future. If Sarah were to continue pouting instead of coming to terms with the fact that life isn't always fair, then she would've never made any progress in the labyrinth or gained the power to defeat Jareth.

Another weakness that Sarah learns to overcome is her vanity. In the beginning of the movie, the audience can clearly tell that Sarah is obsessed with her looks and materialistic items: she is extremely protective of her toys and she also enjoys staring at herself in the mirror while putting on lipstick. As Sarah journeys through the labyrinth, though, she realizes that all of those aspects in her life are
worthless compared to rescuing her brother. Her awareness of her narcissism finally strikes her when she falls into the world of the “junk people”, tiny creatures who carry a massive amount of garbage on their backs. When Sarah meets one of the “junk people”—named the Garbage Lady—the creature takes Sarah to what she thinks is her old room and piles up all of her trinkets and stuffed animals around her. As the mountain of Sarah’s toys grows around her, she suddenly discovers that all of these items are meaningless to her. They can’t have any real, deep connection with her, unlike her family and friends who actually care for her. Her toys are simply rubbish, distracting her from what is really important in her life, and she finally confirms this notion by declaring, “It’s all junk! I have to save Toby!” When she gives this cry, her bedroom walls crumble around her and she finds herself at the entrance of the Goblin City, continuing on the right path. By letting go of her invaluable possessions, Sarah grows into a more confident person, because she no longer relies on materialistic needs to make her feel better about herself (Carroll). Sarah also displays her conceited ways in her relationship with Jareth. In the beginning of the film, her stepmother argues with her about how Sarah doesn’t ever hang out with friends or boys, yelling, “Well I’d assume you would tell me if you had a date. I’d like it for you to date!” Sarah yearns for a romantic relationship, but since she is still immature at this point, she isn’t able to have a real one, so she creates one for herself. She tells her younger brother a story about how a Goblin King has fallen in love with her, and would do anything to please her. When Jareth steps from her imagination into reality, however, Sarah discovers that she isn’t prepared to enter into any type of relationship with him and that the love he is offering her is very superficial and not real at all. She specifically comes to this conclusion while she is at the masquerade ball dancing with Jareth. The setting is very glamourized and Jareth is serenading her with a love ballad, causing Sarah to first be smitten by him. But as the song continues, she notices that none of it is genuine—the people, the costumes, even the ball itself are all fake. She breaks free from the trance that Jareth has put on her, and smashes the glass around the ballroom, releasing herself from the scene. Brian Henson, Jim Henson’s son, comments on this part of the film, concurring, “It’s that thing that happens that girls with that age who can pull off an allusion that they’re an adult, is then they end up with the struggle of what happens when an adult man starts to respond to them? It can be scary…but in the end Sarah makes the mature decision” (“Journey”). By Sarah recognizing that her old habits were very childish and delusional, she vanquishes the hold that Jareth has over her and moves forward with the strength to rescue Toby.

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As Sarah evolves into a mature woman, her capability for heroism expands as well. It’s not often that audiences see a fantastical film where a young girl isn’t constantly relying on or lusting for a prince, and that is why Henson’s movie is so influential. According to writer Susan Sellers, author of the book, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, Sellers observes the impression of women in fairy tales by arguing, “women rarely figure as named individuals but only as the anonymous, ‘beautiful’ accompaniments to great men…such traditions have conspired to teach women to value themselves only in terms of the way they are perceived” (Sellers). Henson, however, moves away from this idea, instead of depicting Sarah as a frivolous princess, he provides her with qualities—such as courage, strength, and intelligence—that are usually associated with the character of a prince; therefore, restructuring the stereotype of lead female roles in fairy-tale-based films. Sarah’s courage is seen when she finds Ludo,
a large, furry red beast, being attacked by small soldiers in the labyrinth. The soldiers have tied Ludo upside down to a tree and are poking him with sticks that have tiny creatures on the end of them with razor-sharp teeth. Ludo is completely defenseless, and while Sarah could just continue to walk right by, she instead decides to help Ludo by throwing rocks at the soldiers. Sarah defeats the whole army on her own and even manages to tame Ludo by scolding at him, “Now stop that! Is that anyway to treat someone who’s trying to help you?” Typically, in most stories, the prince or knight has to confront a beast and try to conquer him, but in *Labyrinth* audiences see a teenage girl with no special powers whatsoever, not only take down a beast, but also a small army of creatures. Sarah also takes over the role of prince by resisting the different characters of the labyrinth who try to demolish her chances of saving Toby. The Fireys, monsters who can produce fire from the tips of her fingers, are perhaps one of her greatest challenges. She finds them in a forest in the labyrinth, and they attempt to straay her from her path by singing a song that contain the lyrics, “Ain’t got no problems to worry about…think small with the fire gang”. They want her to forget about her mission, and they are so desperate that they even try to remove her head. But Sarah manages to escape their tempting words and physical clutches on her by removing their heads. Her fight against them represents how she no longer is thinking emotionally, but logically; a sign of the wisdom and resiliency that she has acquired throughout her journey.

Finally, Henson also emphasizes how ridiculous the structured gender roles are in fairy tales by conveying Jareth as having qualities that are deemed as “princess-like” and also having him depend on Sarah for his survival. In most movies based off of folk tales, such as Disney, the princess, or female protagonist, is usually depicted in a very sensual manner. She dresses scandalously and sings songs to her companions about her dreams and hopes for her future. In *Labyrinth*, though, it is not Sarah who is depicted in this way, but rather the Goblin King. Jareth sings three songs throughout the movie, one about his desire to keep Toby, another that expresses his “so-called” love for Sarah, and another that describes how he has done everything Sarah wishes because he yearns for her so much. And then there is his wardrobe, specifically his tights, which are so notoriously recognized throughout the public that some parents feel uncomfortable showing their younger kids the movie. Perhaps Henson didn’t mean to make Jareth so sexual on purpose, or perhaps he did. Either way, David Bowie’s portrayal of Jareth poses the question of why society is okay with seeing a young girl’s breasts practically spilling out of her dress, but embarrassed when a man’s pants are too tight. Henson also challenges gender norms by displaying Jareth’s need for Sarah’s belief in him so he can carry on living. Jareth can’t survive without Sarah’s imagination; in fact, he only came to life because she created him in her mind. Jareth is used to getting his way, he is the Goblin King after all. Even David Bowie describes him as, “He [Jareth] is kind of spoiled. He gets everything his own way. He’s a big kid” ("Journey). But when Jareth is denied of the one thing he wishes for in life (to have control over Sara), he starts to weaken. His frustration and anger causes him to cling more fiercely onto Sarah, but his desperation only forces her to pull even further away from him. Eventually, Jareth’s power is diminished so much that he is reduced to appearing as half human/half owl at the end of the film and begs, “Just fear me, love me, do as I say, and I will be your slave”. Jareth needs Sarah to trust that he is alive and real, or else he will completely disappear. Luckily, Sarah doesn’t fall for his temptations, and finally demolishes him by declaring, “You have no power over me!”. Henson shows how a lead female character can have more power than the lead male, and still be a successful film years later. By posing Jareth as taking on the “feminine role”, and having Sarah regarded as the hero, *Labyrinth* challenges fairy tale stereotypes and sends a positive message to young girls struggling with the different pressures that growing up entails.

It’s been five years since the moment my mother gave me a copy of *Labyrinth*, and I still feel a profound sense of connection with the characters and ideas behind the film. The lessons Sarah learns as
she grows into a woman, and her wisdom and strength she gains with her maturation, is a process that Jim Henson was able to portray in an honest manner. He didn’t attempt to make Sarah appear any different from who she actually was: a teenager. Yes, Sarah at one point dreams of the life of a princess, but in the end she understands that that’s not really who she is or wants to be. She doesn’t want to always be at the beck and call of a prince; she doesn’t want to reside in a goblin castle for the rest of her life, and she doesn’t want to be able to make her own decisions and choose her own friends in life. Compared to other films being made at this time for young children, Henson directs a film that allows a girl to thrive in the world of fantasy and not be subservient to the prince, but instead have the prince be subservient to her. While the film industry has come a long way from the concept that certain qualities should only be given to certain sexes, there are still some moments where the damsel in distress emerges on screen. These are the moments when society needs to look toward Sarah, a character who truly depicts the struggle girls are faced with as they grow up: how to hold onto the fantasy while accepting reality. Life isn’t about finding a prince, it’s about facing the labyrinth boldly and confidently, even though the goal at the end of it might require sacrifices and a few cheesy musical numbers along the way.

Works Cited


*Journey through the Labyrinth: Kingdom of Characters*. Tri-Star Pictures, 2007. DVD.


