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Bigger On the Inside: Codifying the Chronotope of the Labyrinth

by

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Committee Approval

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Dedication

In memory of Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018). She dances and sings now upon the Other Wind, but I still hear her song.

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Bigger On the Inside: Codifying the Chronotope of the Labyrinth

Thesis Abstract--Idaho State University (2018)

My thesis examines how Patricia McKillip, Robert Holdstock, and John Crowley exemplify what I term the labyrinth-polder story; each creates a distinct fantastical labyrinth sequestered from the larger world that combine trials of time, space, memory, and imagination to enact transformation upon the characters. Fantasy studies is a relatively young field and much work remains to explore the genre's various narrative types. Mikhail Bakhtin provides a useful tool for defining new narrative subcategories with his theory of the chronotope, which invokes both time and space to influence and fashion both theme and form within a story. Chronotopes account for the way recognizable genre fragments (characters, timing, etc.) intermix in a specific time and space. My study catalogues and evaluates narrative echoes across my chosen texts to define the chronotope of fantasy labyrinths, which uses a limited space to portray vast stories about identity and personal transformation.

Key Words: fantasy, labyrinth, polder, chronotope, Bakhtin, McKillip, *Kingfisher*,

Holdstock, *Mythago Wood*, *Lavondyss*, Crowley, *Little, Big*.

Chapter 1: Introduction

It is a truth universally accepted, that any lengthy attempt at fantasy scholarship must be in want of defining the genre. Fantasy and the criticism surrounding it continue to mature, building upon the example and methods of forerunners. Between the field's relative newness and the genre's tendency to evolve, new narratological techniques are needed to help navigate these stories. As Marek Oziwicz has recently argued, much of the trouble within the scholarship comes from attempts (by Tzvetan Todorov, Gary K. Wolfe, Eric Rabkin, etc.) to produce blanket statements that fully encapsulate the genre and pin down its essence (*One Earth, One People* 14). The problem is that these tend to be nebulous and exceptions always abound. J.R.R. Tolkien's base concept of "unreality" ("On Fairy Stories") can lead to claims that the genre is frivolous, to say nothing of intersections between literature of the fantastic and other modes, such as theology, mythology, speculation, etc. Despite fantasy's aloofness, Ursula K. Le Guin argues that "when definition by genre applies and is applied fairly, it is invaluable both to readers and to writers" ("Genre" 63). My thesis attempts to add to and provide a technique for defining a specific breed of story, what I will refer to as the labyrinth-polder, within the fantasy genre, using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope.

The most useful¹ attempt to define fantasy comes from Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992). Attebery approaches fantasy as a "fuzzy set," meaning a core of exemplary texts with relatively similar overlapping and intersecting traits that can

¹ In her introduction to the 2012 *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, Farah Mendlesohn insists that Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* is "the most valuable theoretical text for taking a definition of fantasy beyond preference and intuition", after Tolkien's "On Fairy Stories" (I).

provide a basis for identifying and cataloging other texts according to their closeness to that center. By extension, there must be constellations of fantasy novels that are closer to each other than to the center of fantasy, whatever that may actually be. In fact, because fantasy is such a subversive genre, I suggest the privileged position of “center” might rotate, depending on what element of fantasy the reader wants.

The current thesis follows Attebery and Oziewicz, claiming that fantasy does have its own unique narrative abilities—namely to treat things that violate experiential reality as both metaphor and literal manifestation—that impact how it is written and read. My research is narratological, using Bakhtin’s chronotope and adopting Attebery’s fuzzy set method to identify patterns within a body of related texts. I highlight similarities which seem to signify a common center, while also noting variations, indicative of individual artistic vision.

To date, narratological treatments of fantasy are few. Partially this is because scholarly analyses of any sort for the genre are few, and because socially-oriented theories (e.g. feminism, ecocriticism, etc.) dominate the current conversation. Examinations of specific authors are even more difficult to find, unless the author in question is Tolkien, Le Guin, C.S. Lewis, or Diana Wynn Jones. Despite tradition’s sway, this thesis does pursue a narratological examination of texts by fantasy authors Patricia A. McKillip, Robert Holdstock, and John Crowley that are each set in what I refer to as a labyrinth-polder, applying Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope as a lens.

Labyrinth, polder, and chronotope are crucial critical terms for this thesis, so I define them here:

A labyrinth is an enclosed space, one with set pathways that both obstruct but also guide anyone caught within their borders. Characters journey towards the center, sometimes unwittingly, and the intensity of the journey (which is often highly symbolic) enacts transformation upon the intrepid pilgrim.

Labyrinths enjoy a robust history, regularly permeating our culture. Instantly I think of the hedge maze I walked in Williamsburg, Virginia during my fifth grade year; hedge mazes have provided a popular garden piece for centuries. From there I remember how Milton's Satan must weave a path through foliage to reach Eden in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*. They appear in churches, whether as the Celtic cross or as a simulated pilgrimage, most famously on the floor of Chartes' Cathedral (Doob 118). Reaching farther back, Herodotus mentions the Egyptian Labyrinth (Matthews, 7), while the most famous is Daedalus' Cretan Labyrinth, where Theseus slew the minotaur. More recently, film and literature constantly feature and even function like labyrinths; consider Jorge Luis Borges naming James Joyce "an architect of labyrinths" ("When Fiction Lives in Fiction" 162). Popular video games, including Nintendo's *Legend of Zelda*, Sony's *Kingdom Hearts*, Microsoft's *Halo*, and more base their storytelling and gameplay upon a series of labyrinths in the form of dungeons, temples, and other structures partitioned off from their outside world. The image of a mouse scuttling through a maze remains a popular science exercise. Clearly the image and idea of the labyrinth persist as an object of fascination for people in nearly every strata of society—humanities or sciences, religious or rationalist, etc.

However, not all labyrinths are envisioned equally. Not only do they vary in appearance—cities, forests, caves, castles, etc.—but they can serve distinct narrative functions. *The Lord of the Rings* features several labyrinths throughout the text, such as the Mines of Moria or Shellob’s lair, but these are episodes within a very different, though related, type of story. More recently, Brandon Sanderson’s mammoth Stormlight Archive series features the Shattered Plains, a desolate region of canyons and mesas that create twisting paths where characters face trials and horrors. However, in each of these examples the labyrinth is merely *a* setting where a few set events occur; they do not provide the primary setting nor do they contain the full breadth of the story. My research focuses specifically on what I am referring to as a labyrinth-polder, which can only happen in fantasy stories, and their magical dimensions allow them to contain the stories primarily rather than as episodes.

There exists some debate about the interchangeability of the words “labyrinth” and “maze”. Umberto Eco ascribes to three specific categories: labyrinth, maze, and net. For Eco, a labyrinth is specifically a unicursal route, while a maze “proposes alternative choices, but all the paths lead to a dead point—all but one, that is, which leads to the way out” (52). A net is such a structure wherein “every point may be connected with any other point” (53). While these distinctions lead to any number of compelling discussions, applying them would stretch the current thesis far beyond its current limits. For the purposes of this project, I have chosen to follow Penelope Reed Doob’s much simpler approach: “the words have different etymologies but mean the same thing” (1). Within

my thesis, I use the terms interchangeably and, when relevant, apply either “unicursal” or “multicursal” as modifiers.

Originally from Old Dutch, a polder “is a tract of low-lying land reclaimed from a body of water and generally surrounded by dykes; to ensure its continued existence, these dykes must be maintained” (“Polder”). Within fantasy criticism, a polder refers to “enclaves of toughened reality, demarcated by boundaries [. . .] from the surrounding world” (“Polder”). The Green World where Shakespeare sets some of his plays is an easy example of a type of polder, being “a place free of crowds, noise, and daily business, where elemental passions and eternal conflicts take the foreground” (*Fantasy Tradition* 12). However, the Green World is only one type of polder, one Northrop Frye specifically aligns with comedy (*Anatomy* 182). Polders can just as easily provide places of horror, romance, tragedy, etc. They are microcosms clearly apart from while also a part of the larger world. The Forest of Arden from *As You Like It* and the Pequod from Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* are each a small space that rigidly contains characters and story, and somehow creates a large-scale microcosm of story.

In these examples, however, the polder’s toughness of reality stems from the intense focus the story places upon that location. The inner largeness of the space is perceptive thanks to the author’s intense focus on the place and the characters’ relationship to it. Often we might assume that this is mere narrative convenience, or maybe a psychological examination. In contrast, the conventions of fantasy and science fiction augment the powers of a polder. In fantasy, a polder can literally be much bigger inside its established boundaries. Time and space can expand or contract within a polder,

and when fused with a labyrinth, an enormity of story opens up. Merged with a labyrinth, a polder provides the crucial fantastical contribution. Without the polder's magical dimensions, a labyrinth is merely a place, often one of many within the narrative. The polder makes the labyrinth a realm of its own, one with all the spatial and temporal sprawl needed to produce a complete plot on its own. A polder makes the space stranger and so more believable on its own terms. Rather than a wide, sprawling story that covers whole continents, a polder produces an enclosed area that can still contain a large and significant story. The labyrinth, in turn, grants symbolic weight to the narrative.

The polder, then, establishes a distinctive realm for the story, and the labyrinth gives that world its structure. The questing nature of the maze makes the labyrinth-polder chronotope a story with an adventure plot. According to Bakhtin, adventure plots requires an adventure world for "facilitating the reader's difficult journey through the labyrinth of philosophical theories, images, and human relationships all packed into a single novel" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 103). The specific structure of an enclosed space, one that can have a breadth similar to an epic adventure but contained to a limited space, creates a distinctive plot. These stories tend to feature a confrontation with the self, and the quest towards the labyrinth's center tends to double as a magical journey within the hero's mind or spirit. Forces of memory and imagination have potent impact on the story. The space embodies and influences the identity quest, helping to shape the traveler's transformation.

Perhaps the most famous combination of labyrinth and polder within the last decade would be Christopher Nolan's 2010 movie *Inception*. The film follows a team of thieves who can enter the dreams of others to steal information on behalf of political and

business rivals. Within the dreamworld of their targets, space becomes malleable to the whims and designs of whoever can structure the dreamscape. Cities come to be contained within hotels, which are then situated within the Swiss Alps, and five minutes of waking-time yields one hour of dream-time. Not only does the affordance of genre make this extremely fun, but the virtues of genre allow Nolan to bring these narrative events into dialogue with each other. The polder can sustain such an enormous story and creates relationships between the scenes, rather than creating a travelogue that seems arbitrarily constructed. The distinctive composition and relative positioning of scenes within a polder raises questions about the story's structure and help us discern the story's inner workings.

Not all polders are ships or dreamworlds, however, though they certainly can be. A polder can take on any number of forms. We must bear in mind that a polder is different from a secondary world, since a polder need not be equivocal in time or space to the character's point of origin. A polder is "armed against the potential wrongness of that which surrounds it" ("Polder"), meaning the space is not an alternative world, but rather a distinctive part of the known reality actively operating on its own as counterpoint to the macro land. The division can be topographic, where the space inside the polder is completely different from the outside, such as a massive desert inside a patch of rainforest, but more typically it is temporal, as Stefan Ekman suggests: "the internal and external realities are set up as opposing forces, and as long as the polder is successfully maintained, it does not change. The world outside does, however, and its change widens the temporal gap between the two realities" (Ekman 100). Narnia is completely distinct

from and has no quarrel with C. S. Lewis's England, but Tolkien's Lothlorian "is like a piece of Faerie surrounded by mundanity, the High Elves' last remaining kingdom and, as such, an anachronism preserving a piece of the Elder Days" (100-1). Such a specific spatial structure, one that compounds multiple approaches to space and time, requires specialized narratological treatment, and so I turn to the last critical device necessary to this thesis.

Finally, a *chronotope* (literally "time-place") is a device introduced by Bakhtin as a way of defining certain narratives according to their specific use of time and space to create the narratives. We can identify a *chronotope* by its use of time and space and how they interact, because these forces influence where the story spends its energies, which in turn may reveal the story's themes. Scholars Nele Bemong and Pieter Borghart define four critical elements for designating a *chronotope*: "(1) they [*chronotopes*] have narrative, plot-generating significance; (2) they have representational significance; (3) they 'provide the basis for distinguishing generic types'; and (4) they have semantic significance" (6). Each of these will be treated in turn in the following chapters, but here I will provide brief explanations:

1. Narrative, plot-generating significance, I take to mean the way the time and space of the story create specific narrative options. For instance, a story set in a school can feature children and adults. If it is a boarding school, then the plot can include nighttime events. If it is a typical American public school, then for a scene to take place at night means some sort of transgression—either by the characters or the author—is in effect.

2. Representation significance refers to how the elements of time and space are conveyed to the audience. Are flashbacks/flash-forwards regularly used to knit the temporal zones of past, present and future, or is the story locked in the present? Does each chapter encapsulate a full year of a character's life, or, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, we experience an extremely intimate day in the city because the entire novel is contained to that one day? Notice that the restriction of time expands the experience within the space. How the plot is dispersed across the biographical time of the characters significantly impacts the type of chronotope in play.
3. Generic distinction, I believe, means that the use of time and space inform the sort of story we are reading. A story that chronicles the time and places of an individual from youth to adulthood we call a *bildungsroman*, and a story that turns an obscure boy into the Messiah through a methodically outlined quest of travel and sacrifice we call a monomyth.
4. Semantic significance refers to the language by which a story is told. As Samuel R. Delany explained, "Put in opposition to 'style,' there is no such thing as 'content' (1). The way a story is told, especially as regards its references to temporal and spatial markers ("suddenly," "the next day/week/month/year," "enormous," "claustrophobic," etc.) is just as significant for conveying the meaning and experience of the story as anything else. Le Guin adds that "narrative is language used to connect events in time" ("Some Thoughts on Narrative" 38). Hemingway's trim style always leaves his novels feeling a bit vapid, while *War and Peace* feels like it contains absolutely everything.

In other words, a chronotope establishes the grammar for a specific story model. Granted, fantasy literature more than any other challenges the notion of a universal narrative grammar. Brian Attebery has pointed out, “If one strips away everything distinctive, then of course all stories become the same” (*Stories About Stories* 108). But just as so much poetry and other canonical texts have agreed to conventions in order to distort them, so does my reading of magical labyrinth stories create a framework within which distinctions can be noted and understood.

Labyrinth-polders have a much older tradition than *Inception*, though it may not be readily apparent. Some will cite Jim Henson’s 1986 film, *Labyrinth*, and while it is a valid example, the tradition dates back much farther. I have already suggested Milton and Theseus as forerunners, but the polder qualities of their labyrinths are more debatable. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, do provide a few verifiable examples in the tradition. George MacDonald’s short story, “The Golden Key” (1867), follows a young boy and girl into an enchanted pocket of reality where they wander about and fulfill the stages of life in rapid succession. Then in 1900 L. Frank Baum began his landmark *Oz* books for children. Each of these examples is an established but liminal place within the story, somehow cordoned off from the rest of the world, that continually unfolds to allow nearly endless travel. The journey may have specific designs or an aimless meandering, but it does take on significant meaning for each character, encapsulating either important stages or maybe even the entirety of their lives.

After Baum the tradition reached what may be its apex in the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges. Labyrinths are a particular obsession for Borges and his oeuvre is riddled

with them. Ana M. Barrenechea suggests that Borges saw such structures as “The exitless labyrinth where Man wanders erringly finally becomes the double symbol of the Infinite and chaos” (*Borges the Labyrinth Maker* 61). Perhaps the most famous is “The Garden of Forking Paths”, wherein a man has a book that is small enough to be handled by one person, but somehow contains every possible choice a character could make or a reader might desire. Such a maze is referred to as “A labyrinth of symbols, [...] an invisible labyrinth of time” (124). Borges postulates that time, something that we live through in a forward direction, is the ultimate labyrinth, and our choices are the pathway we walk. However, invoking what we today call multiverse theory, the labyrinth must allow for us to have made other choices at each temporal fork, and so, in some parallel space we can assume our lives are somewhat different, either by large or small degrees. Most important for my purposes is that this particular labyrinth emphasizes the importance of a character’s choices within the labyrinth.

Which brings me to the texts I will focus on in this study. I have chosen Patricia A. McKillip’s *Kingfisher* (2016), Robert Holdstock’s *Mythago Cycle*, most especially *Mythago Wood* (1984) and *Lavondyss* (1988), and John Crowley’s *Little, Big* (1981). All three authors have established pedigrees within the fantasy genre: both *Little, Big* and *Mythago Wood* won the World Fantasy Award in their respective years (1982 and 1985), and McKillip was the first author ever to win the same². Each author belongs to the first generation for whom Tolkien’s Promethean influence on fantasy literature struck during their adolescence and so was extremely formative. In contrast, authors like Ursula K. Le

² McKillip is also one of only five authors to win the World Fantasy Award for Best Novel twice.

Guin and Jack Vance had already achieved adulthood and so could adopt Tolkien's influence without being overwhelmed by his example.

Each of these authors read and wrote fantasy during its revival and reformation. However, they did not rehash what we might refer to as the Tolkienian chronotope, namely secondary worlds filled with people and creatures who wield supernatural powers, kingdoms at war, and possibly a Dark Lord of Evil looming in the background.³ Instead, and especially in the texts chosen for this study, each uses a focused and labyrinthine space to tell a story that would probably serve merely as an episode in the more common form. These stories are recognizably works of fantasy, but fundamentally different from the more popular sorts that flood the genre. Overlapping labyrinth and polder creates a space that is not only bewildering in its route but also impossible in its spatiotemporal dimensions. This yields an alternative story that veers away from formula, one that can encompass a sweep reminiscent of what Tolkien accomplished with an entire world.

Chapter 2 examines McKillip's *Kingfisher*, the most recently published text in my study. The labyrinth and polder of the novel are very present but more separate than the stories of Borges or those I will discuss in later chapters. This allows for a cleaner demarcation between the structures, and so I use this chapter to review and clarify the principles of labyrinth, polder, and make my first case for the existence of a specific chronotope in this type of setting. This labyrinth functions as a bildungsroman, lifting the protagonist out of his intended life goals until he makes the transition from boy to man.

³ Granted, McKillip's rather sizable corpus does have some stories rather reminiscent of Tolkien's work, but these are not the norm for her.

Chapter 3 tackles Holdstock's Mythago Cycle, most especially the first two books, *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*. The mysterious Ryhope Wood is one of the most complex labyrinth-polders in fantasy literature of which I am aware. The elements of labyrinth and polder that are distinguished in *Kingfisher* are tightly fused together in these novels, making distinctions difficult. I conclude by noting similarities and echoes between the two texts, specifically as related to the telling of a story in this particular setting. This labyrinth recreates various journeys to the Underworld, themselves classical examples of labyrinth-polders. Transformation here can move backwards into myth or forward into death. Most importantly, the center of the labyrinth is the end.

Chapter 4 considers Crowley's *Little, Big*, the most lauded novel in my study. Whereas *Kingfisher* kept labyrinth and polder as distinct, though connected, entities and the Mythago Cycle tightly weaves the two together, *Little, Big* is a mansion made up of many labyrinths and polders that overlap and connect to one another. The story is dominated by time and the ultimate form of the narrative is the text itself. However, Crowley also demonstrates that labyrinths can serve as portals to other realms, like passing from one line of Borges's Garden into a different thread entirely.

I hope to discover a tradition for the labyrinth-polder, from MacDonald and Baum to Borges down to Crowley, Holdstock, and McKillip, one that can be defined not only by a common symbolic setting, but also for how that setting helps to create the story. Should my interpretation and application of Bakhtin prove accurate, I hope to demonstrate the utility thereof in helping to identify and define other constellations of story-types within the fantasy genre.

Chapter 2: “I Think We’re Inside a Spell”: Labyrinths, Polders, and Life-Stages in

Patricia McKillip’s *Kingfisher*

As I said previously, a chronotope has at least four identifiable layers: narrative, plot-generating significance; representational significance; it “provide the basis for distinguishing generic types”; and semantic significance (Bemong and Borghart 6). In this chapter I will use a primary text to identify narrative hallmarks that will repeat in future chapters, helping me identify those elements most central to telling a story in this specific type of time-space setting while also allowing room for variation and subversion. For just this chapter I have demarcated the sections that specifically treat each of the four layers of the chronotope. Following a brief introduction to the primary text, this chapter will establish the separate labyrinth and polder qualities of the plot and then provide a chronotopic reading thereof.

I begin my examination of the labyrinth-polder chronotope with American author Patricia A. McKillip and her most recent novel, *Kingfisher* (2016). As the title suggests, the book draws upon the Fisher King storyline from Arthurian myth. Pierce Oliver lives and works with his mother, a sorceress and innkeeper, until he meets three knights from a nearby city who inspire him to pursue knighthood. He soon finds himself journeying toward King Arden’s court, but first he visits the rundown and eponymous Kingfisher Inn, a restaurant that sits along the road and seems detached from the rest of the world. Before he leaves, Pierce steals an enchanted kitchen knife, one that endows him with unprecedented powers with cleaving and dicing food for cooking. At King Arden’s court, Pierce is united with his estranged father and older brother. At the same time, kitchen

helper Cassie from the Kingfisher Inn finds herself custodian of an enchanted cooking pot that can produce any dish, and the illegitimate Prince Daimon is recruited by a secret sect of enchantresses to try and find that same pot before Arden's knights claim it.

Other studies of McKillip have been few, though they are much more expansive than what I will present in this chapter. Most recently, Audrey Taylor has used chronotope theory to examine the role of past-tense narratives in McKillip's secondary world fantasies. My own study immediately diverges from Taylor's, as this chapter focuses strictly on *Kingfisher*, published after Taylor's study and not set in a strictly secondary (i.e. a wholly fictional) world, but rather a magical reimagining of the primary world (i.e. the recognizable world of the reader). The locations within *Kingfisher* are fictional, never specifically mentioning names like California or New York City; instead we walk the streets of small settlements like Cape Mistbegotten, Chimera Bay, and Wyvernhold. However, little imagination is needed to visualize these coastal towns and roads the characters travel and link them to western Oregon, McKillip's home state. Additionally, the presence of modern technology, including automobiles and cell phones, makes this world feel far more similar than different to our own.

Significant for pointing out distinctions between this chapter and Taylor's work, the characters in *Kingfisher* come to us from the various legends of King Arthur, which signals a connection to the world of experience. Just as Taylor dismisses *Lord of the Rings* from her "strict definition" of secondary world because Middle Earth presents itself as a mythological precursor to our own, so does the invocation of Arthur push *Kingfisher* away from being called a secondary world (Taylor 4). Furthermore, whereas Taylor

examines time in a much broader context across a significant portion of McKillip's oeuvre, the present study makes a specific interplay between time and space in a novel published a year after Taylor's doctoral thesis. These distinctions aside, Taylor's examination of temporality, specifically in terms of the chronotope, do contribute to my own research.

Generic Significance

A chronotope provides generic significance by focusing the reader on the narrative's temporal perspective. As Gary Saul Morson helpfully suggests, "for Bakhtin genres are neither sets of rules nor accumulations of forms and themes, but are rather ways of seeing the world" (185). Because we experience time by living, a story's temporal frame will inform how we understand and interact with that story. The theory of the chronotope, as I understand it, considers how certain treatments of time and its relationship to space can generate a specific type of story. This creates the chronotope's "own ineluctable logic that defines all its characteristics" (*Dialogic Imagination* 103). Each model, then, will allow for certain tropes and conventions within the story.

Time and space are crucial for understanding a given genre because they provide a sense of trajectory. The clichéd adage claims that "a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end;" a chronotope helps us understand how the treatment of those points can help distinguish one genre from another. Because *Kingfisher* finds its roots in Arthurian lore, I will use Bakhtin's analysis of the chivalric romance chronotope as an example. According to Bakhtin, the chivalric romance operates in what he calls "adventure-time", which is a suspension or retardation of time between the points of

beginning and ending the adventure. “Time breaks down into a sequence of adventure-fragments, within which it is organized abstractly and technically; the connection of time to space is also merely technical” (*Dialogic Imagination* 151). Sir Gawain rides for a full year to reach the Green Knight’s castle, which we know because he passes through the four seasons and arrives on Christmas Eve, which is a temporal marker. However, the time passes for its symbolic purposes, and Gawain is unchanged by the intervening year. The space traveled is just as insignificant—one year on horseback will cover a rather impressive amount of English countryside; the important fact is that Gawain had to travel extensively to reach a place few people would venture. Within this chronotope, time and space are mentioned, but they do not have mimetic value.

Other important markers of this chronotope include a mixture of fate, chance, and Providence influencing events, as well as “fairy-tale motifs that are ultimately linked to the issue of identity: enchantments of every sort, which temporarily take a man out of the ordinary course of events and transport him to a strange world” (151). This last point is particularly important, because the story hinges upon this “rupture (when some hiatus opens up)” (152) and transforms the mundane world into a wider sphere, one drenched with mystery and wonder. Everyday life suddenly flips from experience to innocence in preparation for a dialectical encounter with this bigger, unknown world.

The chronotope of the labyrinth-polder inverts the paradigm of adventure-time and space, emphasizing and expanding time while restricting space. The labyrinth, by its nature, is a contained space, and so time must expand to allow a full breadth of story to take place within the winding pathways. I suggest the chronotope of the labyrinth is an

elaborate evolution of what Bakhtin called the chronotope of the road (*Dialogic Imagination* 235). The road is an open space that fuses time and space to signify life and generate encounters—since everyone uses the road, so all strata and types of people can be found there. A story of the road, whether that road leads to Canterbury or Mordor, emphasizes encounter and destination, and often a return journey (though that part is often hyper-truncated). A labyrinth folds the road into itself like a coiled rope inside a bag. The space isolates travelers, who often enter alone, so whereas the road promotes encounter and unites characters seemingly at random, the labyrinth manufactures meetings, steering characters where they need to go in order to achieve transformations necessary for completing the task.

While the ultimate trajectory of the labyrinth-polder is to reach the maze's conclusion, the purpose to which an author puts this liminal space provides one important opportunity for artistic variation. In *Kingfisher*, Pierce begins his journey after he meets the knights and decides to leave home. Because the labyrinth comes from the road, it becomes a journey and quest by default, and a travel novel begins with departure from the familiar (*Dialogic Imagination* 103). The knights' appearance and Pierce's frustration with his mother for keeping him stagnant creates the rupture that opens up Pierce's mind to a grander world: "There were no answers, Pierce realized finally, in this place where he had been born" (14). Beginning at home and going forward, his journey takes the shape of advances followed by reversals until he arrives at the center point. The novel's genre, then, is a bildungsroman shaped like a labyrinth, and Pierce's transformation will be the move from adolescent to adult.

Representational Significance

Obviously time cannot be fully nullified within a novel, since that would prevent the story from progressing. Fantasy comes close to challenging this assumption, thanks to its ability to situate natural forces like time within a diegetic frame (*Strategies of Fantasy* 61-4). All stories, however, acknowledge time by how they organize and represent action between the central points of the narrative. Some novels are strictly linear, always building one event atop the next in an unbroken progression. Others play with cyclical time, and typically there is the non-linear structure that complicates many novels and films, most especially from the modernist and postmodern movements. Any of these can be used to inspire suspense, enforce the mundanity of a task, emphasize the importance of an action, direct audience attention, simplify narrative, demonstrate correlations, etc. Time's treatment in narrative, according to Bakhtin, becomes an inextricable component of the work's structure and helps us identify the type of novel being read.

A sizable portion of commercial literature—and much of fantasy certainly qualifies—gives little thought for time and so it is regularly violated with reckless abandon. Diana Wynn Jones pokes at this in her lovingly poignant *Tough Guide to Fantasyland*:

TIME taken on the Tour is often vague. Only if there is a public festival which happens all over the continent will you be able to tell how long you have taken getting anywhere. You may be slogging happily along and find

yourself surprised that you have had *months of travel* (OMT)¹. Or you may think you have been a year on the way and find it has been only days.

The Management likes to keep you guessing. (199, original emphasis)

However, in the hands of an author as acutely aware of her craft as McKillip, time is refined to perform whatever its function may be within that story. I do not mean that hers is a Proustian obsession with the topic, but rather she deliberately expresses and nullifies time according to the needs of her novel.

Time in *Kingfisher* is a latticework of narrative blocks Bakhtin referred to as “adventure-fragments,” small episodic moments of character action that are specifically bound to the plot. The novel’s first scene recounts Pierce’s meeting with the knights, which only matters because it will inspire Pierce to leave on his journey, whereas his prior history only matters in as much as it relates to that choice. The novel then speeds ahead an unspecified number of days until the next plot-relevant action happens. Thus time only manifests in the story so long as it relates to plot, and the rest is truncated, such as the time Pierce is driving (with the exception of a later conversation he has with his father and brother inside of a limousine).

Helpful to tracking time’s flow in a novel is how the primary plot correlates to other major events happening at the same time. Referred to as “historical time” by Bakhtin, this is the temporal mega-text of the novel. It is the major festival or other significant event mentioned above by Jones. In mimetic fiction, this could be the

¹ “The Rules are clearly stated in every case and the OFFICIAL MANAGEMENT TERMS (OMTs) have been thoughtfully included in *italics* and marked (OMT) where necessary” (*Tough Guide to Fantasyland* “How to Use this Book” page iii).

historical time period, such as World War II or the space race. Such historical connections are more difficult for fantasy set in an alternative world, such as *Kingfisher*. However, many fantasies, including many by McKillip, can build a sense of history within themselves, usually by drawing upon history already familiar to the audience.

As discussed above, *Kingfisher* attempts to recontextualize Arthurian figures and events within a milieu highly reminiscent but also distinct from the reader's own primary world. Character names harken to those in *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Thomas Mallory, such as protagonist Pierce Oliver, a twenty-first century teenage version of Sir Percival. King Arden and his wife Genevra obviously signify Arthur and Guinevere, while the doting Merle stands in for Merlin, and so forth. However, McKillip also makes it clear that these characters do not fully incarnate their Mallorian counterparts: near the novel's end, Dame Scotia mentions "Tavis Malory...the depraved knight who could not stay out of trouble and was in jail when he wrote the history of the first Wyvernhold king" (292). While the deeper metafictional implications of this passage deserve examination, here I use it to establish that McKillip's characters stand in place of recognizable figures, but are not bound by their narratives. This does link them across time, and I will examine that later herein.

McKillip's loose amalgam of Grail tales blended together in a setting so much like twenty-first century America invokes Taylor's notion of active time. For Taylor, active time means deliberately altering the past "either in memory or in reality to allow healing" (12). Active time differs from other alternative history tales, where the history has proceeded pretty much as we know it, until a specific moment of divergence. Philip

K. Dick's *Man in the High Castle*, wherein the Axis Powers won World War II and now Japan controls the western third of the United States, exemplifies the more typical notion of alternate history. Taylor clarifies her distinction as follows:

In active time, what we (or the characters) know as the present is altered, and there is a moment of difference where the story is changed, but it can be done without an obvious difference in the past or perhaps with just an alteration of memory. This allows for books without typical alternate-history characteristics to be examined in some of the same ways as an alternate history proper. (53-4)

Kingfisher lacks a clear sense of history, save those few events that instigate the plot proper. The world of the novel is never deeply fleshed out, instead depending upon a combination of familiar visual cues (cars, blue jeans, etc.) and the reader's personal knowledge of different Grail stories. The plot pulls details not only from Mallory, but also from Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Richard Wagner. Active time manifests in McKillip's strange alchemy of these writers, creating a recognizable world and familiar characters, but the story unfolds in a less recognizable manner, which reorients the concept of healing. By refusing to embody any single version of Percival's story, McKillip gives herself license to alter the plot as she desires, which in turn allows a different perspective on healing characters.

Semantic Significance

Time is woven into a novel's structure and a work is built out of language, so linguistics will naturally play a role in how time and space are marked in a given text. At

their most basic level, time and space are expressed through nouns—minutes, hours, seasons; paces, miles, national borders—as well as modifiers—“very large”, “rapidly sped by”, etc. These transmit both literal and poetic meaning to the reader to express events and create the sensation of the story.

In fantasy, the game changes a bit because language that would be figurative in a realist novel may not always be symbolic, but literal. Here is an example taken from the fourth chapter of *Kingfisher*, when Carrie vents to herself about the stagnation of life in Chimera Bay: “Rituals with letters, rituals with cauldrons, a bloody gaff, a missing knife, *everyone in a time warp*, looking back at the past, wishing for the good old days, hinting of portents, speaking in riddles, knowing things but never saying, never explaining” (58, emphasis added). In a realist novel, this description would highlight the mundanity of Carrie’s world, one anachronistically littered with strange artifacts like cauldrons, while her accusations about people “speaking in riddles” would seem hyperbole. However, thanks to fantasy’s power **for** double-entendre, Carrie actually highlights important symbols of plot, and also time and space within the novel. Unwittingly, she has identified that the Fisher family is literally locked in time and space, unable to live progress and incapable of communicating their circumstance.

Other terms and phrases throughout the novel help construct the fantastical landscape of the story and create the experience of travel in the labyrinth-polder. In fact, *labyrinthine* and *maze* are two words sprinkled throughout the novel, hinting at McKillip’s game. The coast alongside the Kingfisher Inn is described as “the labyrinthine sea” (22), while King Arden mentions “the maze of Sylvester’s mind” (97). Used once,

these words might suggest a bewildering walk through the town or intricate thoughts, but their frequent appearances and the novel's magical roots indicate to us a more structurally significant purpose within the narrative, rooted in McKillip's basic uses of language to create her world, her characters, and their story.

Narrative and Plot Significance

To my understanding, chronotopes have plot-generating narrative significance because a given chronotope can only sustain certain types of structures, plot events, and characters. I will discuss each of these in turn in an effort to highlight how they combine to form the specific chronotope under examination. I will base my exploration around the structures, specifically the labyrinth and polder of the story, and will discuss characters and plot events as necessary.

Labyrinths and polders are two distinct story elements in fantasy literature, and so it makes sense to first discuss them separately. The former refers to a maze, that complex image that has provided the basis for games, riddles, puzzles, and other mental exercises for thousands of years. To provide a compelling story, a labyrinth unfolds itself as the traveler sallies forth, each bend providing a wholly new scene of events and discoveries. They serve various purposes according to the needs of a given story.

As mentioned above, a labyrinth is a contained space and a road that winds about within those borders. Typical labyrinths, like the one Daedalus built in Crete, manifest as a cave or dungeon or some other physical structure, and for the purposes of my argument they usually are the polder, meaning the space sequestered from the story's general reality. However, I am beginning with McKillip's novel, where polder and labyrinth are

fused together, but they do not perfectly overlap. I do this because it allows a clean delineation between the two structures, which will help me clarify their distinctive properties and purposes within both the novel and the chronotope.

The labyrinth in *Kingfisher* does not manifest as a series of tunnels or hallways, but rather in constant back-and-forth travel, moving towards and around a center point. Penelope Reed Doob argues that labyrinth stories most frequently are described using the word *ambages*, which comes from the root *ambi-*, meaning “around” and “roundabout” (53). In other words, we can identify a labyrinthine pathway as one that constantly folds in and doubles upon itself, winding back and forth until eventually ending at the center.

Pierce wanders about and his journey is the labyrinth, in place of an enchanted video game-styled dungeon with winding hallways and deceptive corridors. Invoking the image of ancient Israel in the desert, Northrop Frye describes this type of quest as “the labyrinth or maze, the image of lost direction” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 150). Although Pierce lacks a set destination when he leaves home, beyond going to King Arden’s court at Wyvernhold, his path is open in any direction he chooses and does not take on labyrinthine dimensions until he crosses into the polder, called the Kingfisher Inn. While staying there, Pierce finds himself lured to an enchanted kitchen knife, and by stealing it he embarks on his quest, as the knife anchors him to the Inn, drawing him back each time he leaves.

The knife, then, functions as a totem of sorts, an object of magic and destiny. Bakhtin asserts that adventure stories (and certainly *Kingfisher* is told using the rhetoric

of an adventure story) are ruled by chance, which accounts for “miraculously” or “sudden” events happening” to the specific characters concerned (*Dialogic Imagination* 94). Once Pierce has the knife his story changes in two significant ways: first, he is suddenly a significant figure who finds himself in certain places at important times where he can either influence the story or be guided to important encounters; second, he finds himself unable to travel beyond Wyvernhold, just a bit south of Chimera Bay, where the Kingfisher Inn is located, and he is always drawn back to the latter.

The knife’s subtle guidance in Pierce’s life provides the crucial ingredient for creating the labyrinth. His initial departure from the Inn is thwarted when his car has trouble and he must tow back to Chimera Bay, which allows him to meet Sage Stillwater, with whom he becomes mildly infatuated. Later we learn that releasing Sage from her own magical imprisonment will shatter the polder around the Kingfisher Inn, which liberation is the unwitting objective of Pierce’s quest. Between his feelings for her and the knife’s influence, Pierce feels “the pull of her, even across the distance, and his impulse to step once more onto that convoluted, obsessive path to her door” (185). Later, in Wyvernhold, the knife guides Pierce to connect with his estranged father and brother, and eventually leads them back to the Kingfisher Inn.

Throughout the novel, between the time Pierce picks up the knife until the conclusion, his wanderings are often described in terms such as “a labyrinthine path through the streets” (69). *Kingfisher*’s labyrinth locates Chimera Bay and the titular inn as its center, with Pierce’s home at Cape Mistbegotten to the north and King Arden’s Wyvernhold to the south. Pierce’s journey is defined by movement towards and away

from that center. The inn is his first, second, and final stop, constantly pulling him closer, each time with a different narrative purpose.

“Narrative purpose” suggest another facet of the labyrinth that features in this novel and those discussed in future chapters. I speak of narrative labyrinths, which functions as a spiritual layer over the physical path the characters walk. When Pierce explains to his father that he is on a quest, the response comes that “we go where they lead” (226). In that spirit, I suggest that part of a fantasy labyrinth, charged with magic and serving as the primary limits of the narrative setting, guide characters to assume traditional, even mythic roles.

Fantasy has a strong tendency towards this type of metafictional reimagining. Much of the genre draws upon myths—Arthurian lore and Nordic sagas are particularly popular thanks to Tolkien, though other mythologies have been mined in more recent decades. Often these stories feature very loose callbacks to iconic moments in a given myth. As one example, the third book in Robert Jordan’s massive *Wheel of Time* series climaxes when protagonist Rand al’Thor (i.e. Arthur) takes hold of a magical sword that has been guarded in a fortress called the Stone of Tear in an obvious reference to drawing Excalibur from the stone. In his introduction to *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*, Brian Attebery argues that “Most myths come down to use stripped of context. The voices, gestures, rituals, and social interactions that once guided interpretation are gone. Fantasy provides new contexts, and thus inevitably new meanings, for myth” (3). *Kingfisher*’s story is a journey with iconic checkpoints from previous myths, most especially the Fisher King legends. The Friday night fish fry ritual

he observes echoes the procession that Sir Percival witnesses, and his actions there instigate his quest. By the novels end, Pierce does not merely mature into an adult, but he assumes his role as a modern version of Sir Percival.

While the labyrinth provides a structure of Pierce's quest, the focus of the novel and anchor for that labyrinth is its center point, the polder called the Kingfisher Inn. As stated in the previous chapter, a polder is a physical space that has been deliberately and definitely demarcated from the larger world. The Encyclopedia of Fantasy article on polders defines them, at the most basic level, as

enclaves of toughened reality, demarcated by boundaries [. . .] from the surrounding world. It is central to our definition of the polder that these boundaries are *maintained*; some significant figure within the tale almost certainly comprehends and has acted upon (in the backstory, or during the course of the ongoing plot) the need to maintain them. A polder, in other words, is an *active* microcosm, armed against the potential wrongness of that which surrounds it, an anachronism *consciously* opposed to wrong time. (Original emphasis)

These criteria will be addressed individually in this and the succeeding chapters to establish the spatial and temporal qualities of each polder.

The notion of a "toughened reality" parallels Bakhtin's comments that in a chronotope time "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (*Dialogic Imagination* 84). We understand reality by virtue of our perceptions of and experiences

with time and space, and a polder is a designated realm where these two forces function differently than anywhere else in the story's primary world. They also serve an important function of introducing a fantastical element to the novel. The labyrinth Pierce walks is, ultimately, metaphorical and such a maze could serve as the setting for a realist novel, but a polder can only appear in speculative fiction. The region covered by the polder distorts time, and in so doing must also alter space:

The chronotope of the miraculous world, which is characterized by this subjective playing with time, this violation of elementary temporal relationships and perspectives, has a corresponding subjective playing with space, in which elementary spatial relationships and perspectives are violated (*Dialogic Imagination* 155).

By operating under different laws of time and space, a polder can sustain events and inhabitants otherwise foreign to the world of the given novel. Specific character types, creatures, plots, and backstories create and thicken the reality of the story, intensifying the reader's immersion into the world of the novel and allowing the artist more advanced options for play and creation.

First I will establish the boundaries of the polder within *Kingfisher*. The two central components, according to Clute's definition, are that the polder must be somehow severed from the general reality the characters and audience accept as normal for the story, and it must somehow be anachronistic. Whereas many polders (as will be seen in later chapters) demarcate between a world almost identical to our own, *Kingfisher* gives us a world that is just as foreign as it is familiar, where sorcery and other violations of

what we would term “reality” are the norm. Pierce travels from Desolation Point and twice finds himself in spaces where he is the fish out of water: the Kingfisher Inn and Wyverhold. To the latter he is an outsider by virtue of customs, unfamiliar with the etiquette of the Court. He quickly oversteps these hurdles and ingratiates himself to the courtiers. Furthermore, he can leave Wyvernhold without any significant trouble nor any promise of return.

In contrast, the Kingfisher Inn wields power over Pierce. At the start of chapter three, he sees the sign advertising the weekly fish fry and “His sudden, overwhelming hunger drove the car to a halt beneath it” (34). In the context of a polder, the fact that Pierce did not consciously drive himself to the restaurant takes on significance, and the novel’s fantastical elements elevate that statement above metaphorical writing. Polders often exhibit a natural allure, gravity-like and overwhelming. Even more bizarrely, the Kingfisher Inn is not very densely populated. Instead it sits off the road in Chimera Bay—a name that suggests illusion and mystery—seemingly fallen into ill-repair thanks to little patronage. That Pierce finds himself there, almost against his will (with subtlety that borders on ambiguity) adds to our expectation that the building is somehow mystical. Throughout the novel, Pierce demonstrates a tendency to sense and pursue magical people, objects, and experiences. In the novel’s opening scene, when he first meets the three knights, Pierce noticed magical auras surrounding them. By the end of chapter three he has stolen a kitchen knife that will magically aid him on his journey. Near the close of the novel’s second act he will help his father and brother survive a dangerous witch’s house thanks to this same ability. Being a place Pierce finds himself by virtue of instinct

not only facilitates the plot, but also signals to us that the Kingfisher Inn stands as a distinct corner of the world.

In another display of metaphor that we might question, McKillip adds to the unearthly tones of the inn as our hero takes in the sights, as the “size of the place shifted by greater lengths and depths” (35). Once again, while the language is played as a metaphor, Pierce’s intuition for magic tells us that the fabric of the inn’s reality seems more plastic. At the very least, McKillip has established that the Kingfisher Inn is more than an ordinary building, and hints that it can exceed the limits of its external physical parameters.

Even more overt is the Kingfisher Inn’s anachronistic properties. The building and its inhabitants do experience time, but very differently than people in the outside world. Authors create time within their stories by linking events in progression. If an event was established as happening and another event is aligned before or afterwards to create a sequence and characters mark that sequence, then we have temporal progression. We learn that Carrie, who is tied to the Kingfisher Inn, was born sometime after the spell that created the polder was cast. However, Carrie has managed to age and is now in her mid-twenties, establishing a sequence of events. Being at least partially an outsider from the Fisher family and the spell, Carrie can age, but she does not notice any slowness of time at the Inn. She does, however, note some peculiarities there. While watching Ella Fisher work in the kitchen, the narrator muses that Ella “was, everyone swore, Hal and Tye’s mother. Carrie didn’t believe it. Nobody could be that old and move the way Ella did,” (26). Marjorie Fisher “had worked in restaurants for a quarter of a century” (30),

again establishing that time seems to flow. Just the same, at the novel's climax, Todd Stillwater, the one responsible for first trapping the Fishers, will admit that he's been hiding for centuries, during which time it seems the Fishers have not truly aged to any noticeable degree. Time at the Kingfisher Inn, then, does not flow at any normal rate, but it does have some movement, an important marker of a polder.

Another device for expressing the passage of time in a novel is character memory. Memory establishes the sequence of events, including those that precede the narrative proper. We note the passage of time for the Inn in chapter two, when Carrie informs the Fishers that the truck, which had broken down sometimes before the novel began, has been fixed. The fact that Lilith Fisher knows to ask about the truck indicates memory and therefore the passage of time. At the same time, disruptions to memory establish the isolation of the Kingfisher Inn. Carrie finds it disturbing that no one connected to the Inn before her birth can tell her anything about how things were: "For all the vagueness in everyone's eyes when she asked, the good fortune might have vanished a century before" (24). Only when Merle returns from his lycanthropic sojourn and brings back the name of the Fisher's deceased daughter Miranda are memories restored. As the narrator explains, the force that holds the Kingfisher Inn in stasis trapped "those Carrie loved within all their memories" (270). Memories move at different rates, and can always reset their temporal counters, and this provides the skeleton for the temporal anomaly that is the Kingfisher Inn.

Because a polder is defined by its "toughened reality," not all people will fall victim to its allure. In fact, proportionately few people actually enter a polder because the

borders often repel visitors who do not have either the knowledge or the power to enter. In future chapters we will see how the labyrinth can play a role in barring visitors; for now, *Kingfisher* indicates for us that sometimes one need merely be the “right” person to enter a polder. Those who are lured cannot escape unless consciously allowed, and those who remain must somehow survive on their own. As Clute notes, a polder functions as an “*active* microcosm,” which I take to mean that those contained continue to live and experience life, but on a different scale of space and time. Throughout most of the novel, the Kingfisher Inn sees zero clientele except for Pierce, who finds his way there thanks to apparently magical means. Additionally, members of the Fisher family, who own the Inn, never seem to leave the property, though they can step outside the physical building. By the same token, they do not seem to notice their containment, never mentioning a desire to get out and see the world or even just the town. Occasionally they mention that they’re trying to prepare the inn to reopen, but they do not seem to actively pursue that course, while at the same time Carrie observes how Bek Fisher “was waiting on tables while he made up his mind what do to with his life” (30). Apparently there’s a perpetual performance of managing the inn, but never actually doing it. Possibly the patrons occasionally alluded to are just memories of past visitors rather than current customers. What we do know is that the Fishers are imprisoned by the toughness of the Kingfisher Inn’s borders, which loops time and concretizes memory to hold them captive.

The exceptions to the toughness of the Inn’s threshold are Pierce, as well as old Merle, his daughter Carrie, and the flamboyant jailer, Stillwater. Merle (a stand-in for Merlin) appears half-deranged; our first detail about him comes from Carrie, who saw

him “lying on his back in a broken rowboat talking to a crow about fearsome porpentines” (28). In his more lucid moments, Merle brusquely dispenses advice, such as recommending Pierce keep the enchanted kitchen knife he’s stolen and travel to Wyvernhold. Merle’s containment seems to manifest in the fact that he is neither wholly mad nor sane. Eventually he disappears for a large portion of the novel by transforming into a wolf, which transformation allows him to escape by temporarily becoming fully something other than he’s been.

Carrie can leave the Kingfisher Inn, but not the larger town, as revealed when she declares “I have got to get out of Chimera Bay” (24) with all the exasperated yearning of a Disney Princess. Born after the events that have removed the Kingfisher Inn from time and space, she is still tethered because her father is. Carrie seems the only person aware of the Inn’s stasis, having pored over the pictures and newspaper reviews “framed and hanging behind glass along the walls” (24). In contrast to the Fishers who seem oblivious to the Inn’s isolation, Carrie notices that when she asks about that bygone era no one answers, whether because they choose not to or because they cannot remember. Carrie’s capacity for dissatisfaction with a semi-imprisoned life sets her on her own quest that eventually intertwines with Pierce’s and helps break the Kingfisher Inn and its proprietary family free from the polder and restore them to the more natural time and space of the world at large.

Finally, Clute’s definition requires that a polder’s “boundaries are *maintained*”; some significant figure within the tale almost certainly comprehends and has acted upon (in the back-story, or during the course of the ongoing plot) the need to maintain

them” (original emphasis). Near the end of *Kingfisher* we learn that Todd Stillwater comes from a fairyland that we barely glimpse in the story and it is he who has magically removed the Kingfisher Inn and Fisher family from that more natural time and space of experience. He’s done this to create a hiding space for himself, so that the Fishers cannot reveal the past by virtue of being in an alternative flow of time and unable to leave the Kingfisher Inn, which is similarly nearly inaccessible. When Stillwater is apprehended and taken back to his native realm, his jailers demand to know what has happened to the cauldron that stands in for this novel’s Holy Grail. Tellingly, he insists that he has lost it some time ago: “decades, maybe centuries—I don’t remember!” (320). Although Stillwater is both architect and janitor of the Kingfisher Inn polder, he is also linked to it himself and confesses that time has been hindered from its normal progression within that space.

Because the labyrinth-polder chronotope is characterized by a journey through winding pathways towards a specific end, only certain character types can function within that time and space. To check the point, we might ask ourselves what a comic figure like Elizabeth Bennett might do in such a setting. We have already identified that characters with a connection to mythology can have a place in the labyrinth-polder, but it is not required. Also, we should not only consider the narrative influence of the setting’s chronotopic powers upon the characters, but also what sort of affect certain character types might have to shape the narrative.

There are two character types I believe absolutely necessary in a labyrinth-polder chronotope, and the first is the Traveler. The reason should be obvious: the labyrinth-

polder needs someone to walk its paths or else the setting is invalid. I suppose the exception would be in absurdist literature, where Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon spend their time at the labyrinth's entrance and never enter, but even that exception proves the point: the labyrinth only exists and matters so long as someone accepts the quest. Taking our initial cues from *Kingfisher*, the Traveler functions best as someone to whom the audience relates. Normally this connection between reader and Traveler stems from spending some time together before actually beginning the journey, such as Pierce's frustrations with his mother and hunger to enter the broader world. Coming from this vantage point, Pierce, as Traveler, shapes the the labyrinth's narrative purpose to be that of helping Pierce prepare for the world of adulthood. As an archetype, "to enter and to emerge from the maze might be the symbol of death and resurrection" ("Maze"), or in Pierce's case, the end of youth and induction into adulthood. The labyrinth-polder provides Pierce a liminal zone to prepare for his future where he will find an open trail that he will create on his own.

The other character type I consider necessary for this chronotope I will refer to as the Architect, meaning the entity who has created and maintains the polder, in this case, Stillwater. In this novel the Architect is malicious, but I do not believe that aspect is required. Individual character motives will influence the purpose for the polder portion of the chronotope, and in this novel that was to imprison the Fisher family and hide from the fey queens. We might suggest that the Architect's own backstory of creating the polder influences the current novel's own course, since those motives must be satisfied or overcome.

One final character archetype that I wish to comment upon before I close this analysis, and which will become more important in future chapters: the Family. In *Kingfisher*, family bonds provide a central source of motivation, conflict, and directly connects to the labyrinth-polder. Pierce begins his journey and travels to Wyvernhold out of contempt for his mother and to connect with his father and brother; the Fisher family is freed from their magical prison by knowledge of their lost daughter; and so forth.

Obviously author and audience have a right to expect variation in purpose and meaning, but the first item necessary for the chronotope of the labyrinth-polder is that the story takes the form of a quest. The quest can be symbolic or literal, intended or incidental, desired or reluctant, but only as a quest can the story move from the start of the labyrinth to the endpoint. The fusion of labyrinth and polder into a single entity allows the labyrinth to surpass the limits of an episode within a larger story and provide its own story. From a chronotopic perspective, we realize that these stories have their own internal logic for setting, story, and character, and those stories can accommodate while also subverting the thrill of a tradition as foreign as a chivalric romance.

Chapter 3: Going In and Moving Back: The Labyrinth in the Mythago Cycle

The previous chapter emphasized how the chronotope of the road provides the basis for the chronotope of the labyrinth-polder. Time and space fuse into an image that exceeds metaphor, encapsulating a portion of a character's life and populating it with encounters. I identified certain outstanding elements that may provide some insight into the chronotope of the labyrinth-polder, including routes that turn back on themselves, regions where "time is out of joint" (*Hamlet* I.v.188), a toughening of reality at the polder's borders, and some entity to maintain the polder. Character types that populated the labyrinth-polder in *Kingfisher* included the Traveler, Architect, and the Family. Additionally, *Kingfisher*'s narrative incorporated metafiction as a significant part of the world building, both using traditional stories as part of the narrative code for the current story to create shortcuts, and also turning stories within the novel into a narrative labyrinth itself.

In *Kingfisher*, labyrinth and polder were distinct entities connected to one another by magic and characters, so that undoing one meant resolving the other. Each novel in this study is a quest story, but that does not mean they are the same. W.A. Senior asserts that the quest, rather than working as a rigid formula, instead "is characterized by its protean quality, its ability to subsume and reflect varied purposes and narratives through the medium of Story," ("Quest fantasies" 199). He then ranks our next author, Robert Holdstock, alongside such masters as Ursula K. Le Guin and Patricia McKillip, saying that for these and other authors "the quest fantasy is an ever-changing portal that leads us into the heart of the human condition" (199). Like in music, a story works its way into a

generic mode by being similar to another. How an author manages to create variety while still holding true to the form of their chosen chronotope is where their distinct art begins.

Going forward, I will examine how labyrinth and polder overlap and fuse into a singular entity within each given story. In other words, time and physical space will be more fluid, sometimes blending into each other and making both more plastic than previously experienced. With that in mind, I turn now to the most complex labyrinth-polder within my thesis, and possibly within the broader reaches of current fantasy literature.

Whether in a book blurb or critical essay, Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Cycle* cannot escape the adjective "labyrinthine"; in his review for *Gate of Ivory, Gate of Horn*, John Clute opens by warning readers that, like previous volumes in the series, "this current installment is an arduous tale which leads its protagonist through many labyrinthine meanders" (*Scores* 178). The series focuses on a small patch of forest in Herefordshire, about six miles in circumference, though the forest seems perpetually bigger and wider the deeper in a Traveler ventures. It is also nearly impenetrable. Our first glimpse into the novel is a letter by George Huxley celebrating that he's found a new pathway in and the tense tone of his writing indicates how difficult entry is. Ryhope Wood's defenses manifest as thick foliage, magical disorientation, and its ability to spawn breathing manifestations of myth it has culled from the collective consciousness of the people who live nearby. I know of no other woodland that so perfectly matches Northrop Frye's suggestion that a labyrinth can manifest "as a sinister forest" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 150). A journey into Ryhope Wood twists and winds about, rebounding upon

itself, and the trek is quite perilous, not only for the mortal dangers it poses, but also for what it will reveal to the Traveler; the journey is always transformative, but not necessarily in a desirable manner.

The Mythago Cycle represents a much truer labyrinth-polder than seen in *Kingfisher*, because the forest's twisting paths have become one with the denser reality within the tree's edges. The most thorough study of this forest belongs to Stefan Ekman, who uses Ryhope Wood as one of many polders to interrogate the role of boundaries in fantasy narrative¹. For Ekman, Ryhope Wood "is a locus of change. Each of the five novels in the series describes a place where space and time are fluid and mutable; and the polder also evolves over the novels into increasingly complex settings for the characters' journeys" (109). However, Ekman's analysis is primarily toponymic in an effort to describe the forest's physical properties and describe it in the terms of a polder. This chapter aims to examine specific questions of narrative space and time and how those interact with forces of memory and imagination to create the metamorphosis Ekman suggests, as well as to help identify chronotopic elements for labyrinth-polders. I will examine evidences primarily from the first two novels, *Mythago Wood* (1984) and *Lavondyss* (1988), while drawing details relevant to the forest's physical qualities and dimensions from the rest of the series— *The Hollowing* (1993), *Gate of Ivory*, *Gate of Horn* (1997), and *Avilion* (2009)—as needed.

Having absorbed the psychic energy of memories, dreams, and stories from those humans who reside just outside, the wood houses an endless supply of mythic figures in

¹ See "The Forest of Twisting Paths: Holdstock's Mythago Wood" in *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings*.

multiple forms, stretching all the way back to the Ice Age and the original events and desires that, given time, morphed into the increasingly fantastical stories we today call mythology. Holdstock calls these proto-myths *myth imagos*, contracted together into *mythagos*. In each novel we witness someone drawn from their personal world of experience by the forest to move deeper inside. Once the journey begins, they find themselves in a desperate struggle to move towards the center while also locked within the wood, both physically by tangled paths and emotionally by some sort of primal desire that the mythagos appear capable of delivering. Within Ryhope Wood the forces of time and space not only thicken—they become frighteningly malleable and tactile, to the point characters can actually violate these known metaphysical limits, which transfer to the diegetic level. Here, time and space interact with the powers of memory and imagination to both recreate and contact the past.

The labyrinth-polder's generic significance finds its roots in Ryhope Wood's mystical abilities to provoke and dictate the characters' journeys. As I argued in the previous chapter, the labyrinth-polder evolves from and twists the chronotope of the road. However, whereas the road causes commingling between social strata, a labyrinth emphasizes encounters with trials as part of self-actualization. The space is contained and indicates design, and so the labyrinth is populated by the permitted. Ryhope Wood, as Farah Mendlesohn has argued, holds the power (154) and freely admits and repels according to its needs and prejudices. In place of creating unity and empathy among characters who meet seemingly at random, the forest manufactures encounters, steering characters where they need to go in order to instigate transformations that are most

desirable to the forest, though not necessarily for the Traveler. Also, whereas the road may include a return journey, the toughness of the labyrinth's polder retains the characters once they reach the center and metamorphose.

In *Kingfisher* the labyrinth-polder embodies the *bildungsroman*, maturing Pierce into a man. Ryhope Wood instigates a more intense transformation, regardless of the adventurer's age or life stage. The labyrinth changes according to the traveller's mission, resources, and abilities. In each instance, the forest responds to cataclysmic events in the characters' lives and becomes an Otherworld where they can rapidly overcome certain life trials. The Ryhope Wood labyrinth attracts characters who have already ceased to interact with time in the world of experience and so the more elastic time of Ryhope Wood provides a more natural reality for their current life stage.

In the Mythago Cycle, perhaps more intensely than anywhere else in my thesis, we notice similarities to Joseph Campbell's monomyth. Like *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Holdstock's series is an exercise in comparative mythology. Campbell's system proves overly rigid and excludes too much in its search to explain Savior tales. In contrast, Holdstock describes his efforts as an investigation of where myths come from: "I'm not interested in legend and myth as we know it, but in what went before! What events, what terrifying and wonderful tales, now forgotten, were remembered sufficiently in darker ages to create what we think of as legend now" (qtd. in Matolsky 352). That said, we should take note that the first novel, especially, has close affinities with Campbell's model; Carroll Brown goes so far as to suggest that "Had it not been written some 40 years prior to *Mythago Wood*, *Hero* might easily be misconstrued as a

particularly cogent analysis of that singular work” (161). However, later stories increasingly stray from the more specific parts of Campbell’s framework, and from the beginning Holdstock shows his willingness to go off on his own, whether inverting or simply ignoring whichever components he desires.

Another chronotope identified by Bakhtin that helps compose the labyrinth-polder is the threshold. It is the exact borderline where realms change. In a video game, as the player’s avatar enters a dungeon the game’s perspective often changes, at least for a moment, the music changes, lighting alters, etc. Like the road, the threshold might involve an encounter, “but its most fundamental instance is as the chronotope of crisis and *break* in a life” (248, original emphasis). By its nature as an enclosed structure, a labyrinth must have a threshold, and Ryhope Wood’s is distinctively powerful. Generally speaking, entry into Ryhope Wood is completely restricted by the forest’s whims. Steven and Christian spend half of *Mythago Wood* trying to enter, only for the forest to rebuff their every effort with dense trees and disorientation until a mythago composed of their father’s psychic remains rips a hole in the threshold. Each can only cross the threshold once their infatuation with Guiwenneth draws them inward, outweighing the value of their past lives. Tallis’ entry is more heart-wrenching as her father rushes towards her and calls her back and she promises to return shortly. A powerful mythago—a stag named Broken Boy’s Fancy—creates a portal for her to pass through, only to close and lock her father out. Whereas Steven and Christian have deliberated and weighed their options and chosen to wager their old lives in exchange for entrance, Tallis’s entry seems like a tragic mistake made in the rush of youth and without full understanding of what her choice has

yielded. Regardless, she verifies Bakhtin's assertion that the threshold embodies "the decision that changes a life" (248). The other novels in the series further demonstrate that crossing the threshold into Ryhope Wood means a break with the old life, entering into a new phase of rapid growth and development.

An author's success for creating variety with and defamiliarizing an otherwise formulaic chronotope depends on what raw materials are used to make the structure. Building the labyrinth in a forest adds generic signals according to the implications of a forest and how that setting is used. Tracing the tradition back to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Weronika Łaszkiewicz identifies generic markers "of testing, survival, and sacrifice" (40) attached to stories that venture into the woods. These provide one part of the foundation of the genre of the Mythago Cycle, specifically as they are influenced by the unique spatiotemporal qualities of the setting.

The forest's dangers and defenses make it equal parts trial, survival, and sacrifice to reach the end. In *Mythago Wood* we glimpse "a nebulous presence in the forest rather than a clearly identifiable entity" (Ekman 109) that maintains the polder's borders. One theory suggests that the wood has spent millennia surviving by virtue of aggressive defense against intrusion, which "suggests a virtuous circle, where successful defense leads to an increased concentration of time and spirit [...] which in turn results in greater sentience and thus better defenses" (110). Other physical defenses include disorientation and a raw density of impassable foliage, as the forest wills. The paths into Ryhope Wood either turn a would-be interloper around and away from the forest or pushes an admitted adventurer farther inward. Ryhope Wood sustains its magical properties by feeding

vampirically upon the energy of human dreams and desires, and so “No character strays into this forest by mistake; all are led by a guide, brought against their will, or consciously force their way in” (111). The wood’s savage boundaries, capable of both attraction and repulsion, ensure a stable diet of human stories, and as Mendlesohn so aptly observes, “all power is with the wood” (154). Unlike the other polders within this thesis, Ryhope Wood maintains and defends itself, and its complete indifference to human concerns makes the story far less comfortable than in *Kingfisher*. Pierce’s journey was one that transitioned him from boy to man; the forest’s only concern for humans is how it can feed off of them. The forest’s abilities and darker nature provides a gothic quality to the series, a flourish that adds to the chronotope’s general feel.

Impenetrability characterizes the forest and creates the obstacles that will require trial and survival. The forest toughens the borders of its physical space by creating an increasingly complex system of trees, caves, buildings, and inhabitants to the point that the relatively small forest (again, six miles in circumference) provides a regularly changed and massive inside. Furthermore, the forest is adaptable to each intruder. Every time the reader journeys inside Ryhope Wood they find it has altered according to the character who is their guide. This is partially because of the many pathways into the wood, which might draw a person to a specific region. Also, it seems that the wood changes according to the intruder’s storage of stories and capacity for imagination.

Mythago Wood mostly features small Bronze Age villages, whereas *Lavondyss* features Ice Age nomads and pre-historical armies. In a later novel, *The Hollowing*, the forest feeds upon a young boy who inadvertently populates the polder with Arthurian knights,

Jack (of the giant-slaying variety), Jason with his proto-Argonauts, and dinosaurs. The Mythago books suggest the forest as a psychoscape, a realm influenced by, if not wholly embodying the unconscious mind and its desires (“Forest”). However, it is important to remember that Ryhope Wood exists unto itself, imbued with its own will and power.

The toughening of Ryhope Wood’s borders is also an act of self-preservation against both people and time. The rejection of humans, save those it lures in to provide a psychic feast, is key to the forest’s powers. The forest has remained “untouched, essentially unmanaged, for eight thousand or so years, a tiny stand of primordial wildwood that Huxley believed had survived by *defending* itself against destructive behavior...of the human population” (*The Hollowing* 78, original emphasis). Those few that do win entrance do so by shedding their humanity and thus “inhabit it [the forest] fully” (“Science Fiction”). Turning humans into its own native inhabitants has allowed the forest to build up a “concentration of time and spirit” to grant it sentience and power.

The forest’s battle against time is, oddly enough, perhaps its most human quality. The mythagos, Holdstock explains, endow the forest with “time, perspective, and fascination” (*The Hollowing* 79). By absorbing our legends and turning them against us, the forest has actually gained insight into the ravages of time, and while it is unclear if the forest fears aging into extinction, it does provide an odd service in rejection of time. In defining polders, John Clute insists they exist and act “against the potential wrongness of that which surrounds it, an anachronism *consciously* opposed to wrong time” (“Polder”, original emphasis). Adding from Łaskiewicz, forests “are frequently presented as the last vestige of myth and faerie in the modern world” (41). The accrual of mythagos, then

makes the Ryhope Wood a custodian of the past and a space where memory reasserts itself, meaning the past constantly vies against the present.

Narrative trajectory is one last major generic signifier I will discuss in relation to this chronotope. In Aristotelean terms, a comedy ends happily and a tragedy closes with the death of the protagonist. The chronotope of the labyrinth-polder is defined by events between fixed temporal points, including entry and completion of the quest. The latter might mean exiting the labyrinth, as Pierce does when he returns the knife and is free to pursue whatever course he so desires. In the Mythago Cycle, characters never fully escape the labyrinth. Steven, infatuated with the mythago Guiwenneth, remains in the forest to stay with her, eventually becoming a part of the forest itself. In *Lavondyss*, Tallis reaches the center, transforms into a tree, and later, following her resurrection, dies of old age. Even in *Gate of Ivory*, *Gate of Horn* (a prequel to *Mythago Wood*), Christian's exit from the forest is undercut by the audience's knowledge that in a few days he will return and die at the fiery wall.

The series' ultimate genre, stemming from Holdstock's use of the labyrinth-polder chronotope, is the Underworld journey. Death awaits each character, whether they perish within the confines of the novel's pages, like Tallis and Christian, or by the assurance that the forest will not prolong anyone's life. The quest can and should matter to the character, because "a journey into the wild woods becomes a symbolic representation of a journey into one's self, which can uncover the secrets and desires locked in a person's mind" (Łaszkiewicz 41). The journey is a private one, as all labyrinth journeys are, as the

Traveler learns most about themselves. However, any quest to know the self can only culminate in death.

Rather than belabor Holdstock's striking use of language to semantically convey the cycle's fascination with death or unique flow of time and the impossibility of his space, I wish to discuss how metafiction, a key of this chronotope, is subtly conveyed in the series. *Kingfisher* both reflected and updated Arthurian figures. Arthur is of particular interest to Holdstock, alongside other myths present. Speaking specifically of *Lavondyss*, he described it as "a story about the origins of story, and the discovery of forgotten realms of fantasy" (Dalkin). Cú Chulainn and Jason each appear in the Cycle, and even a young Odysseus. Holdstock reinvents these figures as ordinary mortals at different stages of their mythic development, and so become commentaries on how legends develop. *Lavondyss* reaches its apex when Tallis witnesses an Ice Age father murder and devour his son, a story that later evolves into Arthur and Mordred; "the memory of which, as told through story after story over the millennia, is the foundation of the Arthurian myth. To untangle the connections is a tease and a test to the reader" ("*Avilion* and *Mytahgo Wood*"). These commentaries on the origins of stories pack in around the books' bigger generic elements and prove just as central to each novel, even though they are only part of the texture that help Holdstock make this chronotope his own.

Holdstock also uses language to invokes stories as a means of world building and generic identification. I only mention one example, and that is *Hamlet*. The full title of the second book in the series is *Lavondyss: Journey to an Unknown Region*, invoking the Danish prince's "undiscovered country" (III.i.80). Without having to say as much,

Holdstock hints to the reader that the Other World of his novels is the land of the dead, not some enchanted and desirable fey-world. Because polders tend to be obsessed with stories, they are frequently riddled with centralizing allusions which are too many to catalog, but carry significant meaning on a very basic semantic level.

The narrative powers of fantasy allow for powerful and distinctive representations of time and space which are crucial to the chronotope achieving its generic goals. The unified image of the labyrinth-polder in the Mythago Cycle both capitulates to and challenges how the quest narrative (supposedly) functions. Senior claims “[t]he quest journey continues across a massive, wild landscape of forests, rivers mountains, valleys, small villages and occasional cities” (190). Senior’s comments resonate with Bakhtin’s description of the chronotope of the Greek Romance, where space is extensive but time ignored, allowing a hero to remain young even while embarking on a journey that should take years. In contrast, the labyrinth-polder presents a small setting that, nevertheless, has flexibility of time and space and can always facilitate a journey of any size and any breadth of time. However, unlike in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, exiting the labyrinth does not restore spent youth. In *Lavondyss*, Tallis’s resurrection leaves her doubled in age. In fact, each character in the Mythago Cycle reaches the center and spends the remainder of their days in the center; despite weathering the wood’s savage tests, each protagonist must sacrifice their entire self in the heartwood.

Spatially, like any polder, Ryhope Wood is a paradox because once a character crosses to the inside, the internal space far exceeds any expectation that might come from an outside perspective. However, we should not mistake the interior as either another

world nor as infinite. If the forest edge were the portal to another world, like the wardrobe to Narnia, then we would expect Ryhope Wood to have a bountiful variety of climates and terrains, with continents, mountains, beaches, deserts, and so forth. The notion of a secondary world suggests a new but somehow equal terra firma. Instead, the explorer of Ryhope Wood will find terrain copied from the British Isles, meaning hill country and small mountains, hardwood forests (now a thing of the past but certainly a permanent fixture in the British memory) inhabited by wild boar and harts, and old castles, all contained within a very definite boundary. The presence of mythagos such as Jason and Orpheus in *Gate of Ivory*, *Gate of Horn* only enhances the forest's anachronism. However, while the forest edge indicates a portal, it is to another realm, but not another world; otherwise it would not be a polder.

Similarly, we should not consider the inside of the Ryhope polder to be infinite in size, though it does seem potentially capable of such a feat. However, there is a definite center to the wood and it is the focus and endpoint of the journey for each novel in the cycle². This space, called Lavondyss—a name made up by combining *Lyonnesse*, *Avalon*, and *Dis*—is where time and space are densest. As Steven and Tallis each approach Lavondyss they experience rapid temporal shifts: “‘The seasons are in flight.’ ... They rode through spring—it took two hours or so—and entered summer. And by dusk were back in autumn;” (*Lavondyss* 342). Like a wheel divided into quarters, the climate of Ryhope Wood rotates around Lavondyss, and the nearer one draws to that center the more

² Ekman asserts that “*The Hollowing* contains no quest for Lavondyss at the center of the wood” (114). I disagree. While neither Alex nor Richard is pursuing Lavondyss like Steven, Tallis, Christian, or Yssobel, I believe that the Cathedral where Alex is imprisoned during the novel *is* the same building where Tallis finds herself transformed into a tree.

rapidly they'll experience seasonal change. One character describes it like a hurricane with an eye—which is Lavondyss—and the seasons swirl around. While pushing towards the eye, reality toughens so thoroughly that “Tallis could feel the flow of time” (*Lavondyss* 343). The reality of a physical center in the polder means the space is not infinite. Still, it is extremely elastic thanks to the labyrinthine qualities of the forest that can twist around and prolong the journey of any traveler.

The complex geography of Ryhope Wood, with its geistzones and hollowings, means a journey inwards will require adventurers to pass through viscous and fluctuating time and space. Directly in contrast to typical stories about journeys into faery, within this polder time always accelerates and characters age faster while echoing and thus becoming mythic figures. Kálmán Matolcsy (drawing upon Mircea Eliade's examination of religious history) describes this as “the archaic individual...reenacts these myths to escape historical time and enter a cyclical, mythical time, the sacred place and time of hierophany” (352). While Holdstock has little, if any, interest in mainstream religion or conventional spirituality³, his deployment of the sacred takes the form of myths in their own times of origin. Each geistzone provides a space where time flows in such a way to allow myths to reenact themselves cyclically, but also individually. A traveler into Ryhope Wood may encounter multiple versions of a given myth, each one older than the last and the details adapted to its specific era. As Ekman summarizes, the wood “does not seek to protect a specific old time—it offers access to all old times” (117). I add that the

³ In a blogpost about his short story “Scarrowfell”, Holdstock recounted that “When it was published there [the *Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*], I received several very angry comments by people of a nervously religious disposition. You'll see what upset them when you get to the end of the tale. I was astonished at the objections; but then... I worship at the roots of trees!” (“An Introduction to ‘Scarrowfell’”).

forest's polder qualities not only grant access to old times, but they actively create dialogue between past and present, not only to see each other but to interact in real time. Such a visceral contact between temporal realms is crucial to the transformations each character experiences, as they exceed their mundane origins and become figures of myth. The reader thus witnesses how ordinary people and experiences evolve to transcend their rational limits and achieve the status of living archetypes.

Finally, I turn to the chronotope's ability to generate plot and narrative. In the previous chapter I claimed that labyrinth stories are naturally quest tales, since the labyrinth is an elaborate road, which emphasizes journey and encounters with others. The *Mythago Cycle* thoroughly embodies this model, each book telling a character's journey from the outside world inward to the center of the forest. Although Mendlesohn argues that the series better fits her intrusive fantasy category rather than quest, this dispute originates in our differing perspectives. Genres are most useful as different lenses for examining a text, and so different approaches emphasize specific qualities. Mendlesohn's rhetorical approach refers to how the author helps the reader to experience and embody the story, whereas my narratological approach concerns itself with the plot of the story. Examination of Holdstock's series augments the image of a character's redoubling path by applying it to a specific physical space, merging the labyrinth (this time more literally realized) to the temporal and spatial warp of the polder into a single image.

The labyrinth-polder provides a space that can facilitate and embody significant and symbolic journeys. The quest is specifically one from outside to inside. *Mythago Wood* tracks Steven Huxley, recently home from action in World War II, into the forest in

a desperate quest to reunite with Guiwenneth, the mythago Celtic princess whose story will someday evolve into the Guinevere of Camelot. Steven's story pursues a tried and true plot, entering a tangled "dungeon" to save the princess, in this case from his brother who has been warped by the wood into a fratricidal rapist. The final confrontation surprises us with reconciliation and tragic deaths for Christian and Guiwenneth, and Steven chooses to remain in Ryhope Wood and wait for Guiwenneth to regenerate. In an appended coda (to say nothing of the final novel, *Avilion*) we see that Steven's time in Ryhope Wood has made him a denizen of the forest, supplanting his humanity. The forest's atypical space and anachronistic time intensify his isolation, and in future novels Steven has become a rumor, mentioned by people who know and care, but not really certain what happened to him. The labyrinth's spiral shape creates a narrative that moves perpetually inward until arriving at the structure's center, which is also the novel's end.

It is also worth noticing that the outer edge is not the only threshold connected to Ryhope Wood. Steven's journey takes the form of concentric rings, called zones, and they serve different magical purposes. The first he terms "defensive zones" (217), which is where the foliage is most dense and disorientation repels intruders with both misdirection and fearful images. However, having dedicated himself to the quest, Steven finds the pathway possible: "If we persisted, the illusions passed" (217). Eventually they reach deeper defenses, and as the polder's reality grows tougher, its dangers prove more tactile, changing from illusions to a devastating gale of wind, thickets of thorn and bramble, and earth tremors. However, like a test of heroic mettle, once the defensive zone is endured and passed, the forces of overt repulsion ebb.

Next Steven passes through the “zones of habitation” (223) where more popular cultural myths, such as the Jack-in-the-Greens (i.e. giant-slayer) reside. Here Steven encounters a tribe called the *shamiga*, whom his father described as holding “many keys. They are the traveller’s friend” (210). The keys are the stories the *shamiga* tell to guide Steven through the labyrinth. In Ryhope Wood, stories are map, prophecy, and pathway. Steven has been coopted by the wood to resolve the problem of Christian’s violent invasion, and his pathway is locked.

Each zone represents a new threshold, not only because they change the narrative from trials of repulsion to those of mythic root, but because each one signals a departure deeper into the past. Every few days, Steven encounters a village that essentially repeats that found in the previous zone, but older. At each village he hears an increasingly primitive version of the Outsider and the Kinsman, until he reaches a people who remind him of ancient tombs in Ireland he saw as a child. Confronted with these prehistorical settlers, he asks “Were these people associated with the earliest memories of the tombs?” (302). The repetition of settlements suggests that every few days Steven’s journey has—metaphorically, at least—turned a corner to reveal a new stretch of journey that looks similar to where he has just walked. The final threshold within Ryhope Wood is a wall of—and trial by—fire that Steven traverses in the hope that Guiwenneth will resurrect and they can be together. In that moment he completely forsakes his past in the world of experience and awaits resurrection, another motif Bakhtin asserts with thresholds.

Tallis also passes through enfolded layers of space and time, though her improvised path requires a less tidy structure by the forest. Rather than concentric rings, she passes through regions called *geistzones* that are entered through portals called hollowings, which she eventually learns to create on her own. Each hollowing represents abandoning her current situation in order to move closer to Lavondyss. That most elusive of center points ultimately represents the ultimate threshold, as it contains both death and resurrection. Upon entering the castle at the center of the wood, Tallis finds herself transformed into a tree, only to have a portion of her body carved off to create a burial totem. She lives a second life as a guardian icon for an Ice Age family, eventually absorbed by a daurog (the Ryhope version of a Green (Wo)Man), and is reborn again as a middle-aged version of herself.

So far we have identified how the labyrinth-polder chronotope distorts the narrative of the traditional road journey by reducing and controlling encounters to those that serve the labyrinth's purposes. The journey is marked by a series of thresholds, represented by the turns a maze necessitates. These thresholds indicate breaks with the old self and instigate change into a new identity, achieved through temporal progression, learning through choice and consequence, and fusion with mythic roles. To help establish generic designation, I turn to two specific character types invoked by this chronotope.

Because it is a quest, the labyrinth-polder chronotope needs a traveler. They need not willingly journey through the maze, but walk its corridors they must. The quest belongs to and emerges from the protagonist's own desires. The world's fate does not hinge upon their quest, nor can anyone else go in their place—the journey and traveler

are inextricable for each other. These travelers tend to leave their world of experience and enter the liminal space where they must learn to live a life of verisimilitude to what they once knew. Prophecy, destiny, and other markers of a grandiose existence that we find in Campbell's taxonomy are shunned in the Mythago Cycle—and other labyrinth-polders, I would add. Yes, the traveler must be chosen, but they are not chosen by Fate but by the polder or its keeper (they are the same in Ryhope Wood). In Holdstock's stories, the intensity of the characters' motive is enough, and according to Kámalá Matolsky that motive is love: for a woman, a brother, a child, or a mother. The forest feeds upon these intense passions, though clearly Tallis and, in *The Hollowing*, young Alex provide the most protean feast for Ryhope Wood, brimming as they do with youthful imagination. The labyrinth walker thus has a destination, but not necessarily a destiny.

Another character type is the guardian of the gate. In the Mythago Cycle this is the forest itself, which brings the full brunt of its powers to bear in trying to repel unwanted interlopers. However, once the guardian is passed, the journey eases and the labyrinth becomes more accepting; perhaps those with passion enough to endure rejection can provide rich nourishment for the wood.

Guides also populate these stories. The various incarnations of the *shamiga* provide Steven with valuable insight, council, and direction. Similarly, Tallis is guided to and develops shamanistic powers throughout the novel, first by naming zones and inventing stories, then augmenting her abilities by creating ten masks which, according to Holdstock, "reflect all of the primordial mind with which we are still engaged" ("*Avilion* and *Mythago Wood*"). The masks bestow various abilities, including guidance in the

labyrinth, substituting for Ariadne's thread: "The masks spoke to her with the voice of the past. ... She felt each one unlock her mind" (339). The masks permit Tallis to transgress and transcend the typical labyrinthine structure, both by guiding her and also by creating portals that nullify the rigid guidance demanded by walls. Tallis alone receives this power to forge alternative pathways on her own, and so her association with time and space is the most fluid of the series.

Armed with the masks and her own creative impulses, Tallis can manipulate space and time through force of imagination, and so the labyrinth cannot force her into a mythic role. In the novel's climactic scene she enters a castle—formed from her dreams—at Lavondyss and there the forest transforms her into a tree.

The Companion is another common figure in the labyrinth-polder. Sometimes they double as Guide, but in the Mythago Cycle and other such stories, the Companion is just as much a stranger in the new realm as the hero-Traveler. Tallis's older brother, Harry Keaton, joins Steven in his quest to save Guiwenneth, but he splinters off to pursue his own path (though with hints of a projected endpoint at Lavondyss). Tallis travels with the mythago of an ancient Celtic warrior named Scathach, whose own story eventually overwhelms his yearning for Tallis and he departs to fulfill his required narrative. In both cases, the companion provides not only support, but actually serves as a second half to the incomplete psyche of the given protagonist: Harry's physical injuries from the War are the other side of Steven's psychologically-scarred coin. Scathach becomes Tallis's lover during her years in Ryhope Wood, creating the classical image of man and woman

joined together into a single whole. Each Traveler eventually makes the final steps on their own after their companion is drawn away from the quest to pursue their own.

The Traveler's isolation accentuates the Cycle's focus on metamorphosis. Stripped of human companions, Steven and Tallis each adopt the essence of the forest to help cope with loss, Steven for Guiwenneth and Tallis for Scathach. In *Gate of Ivory*, *Gate of Horn*, Christian needs the forest to help mitigate his mother's death, while in *The Hollowing* Alex is cloistered in the Cathedral until he can heal an identity split by absorbing a mythago of Jack the Giant Killer. *Avilion* uniquely begins with isolated Travelers who move towards companionship, though we should note that these Travelers are each half human and half mythago. Only in solitude, then, can people learn about the forest and achieve the forest's center.

Within the Mythago Cycle, traveling through the labyrinth-polder means an encounter with some manifestation of the self. The forest provides a foreign landscape of adventure that doubles as a projection of the memory and imagination of the Traveler. After her transformation, Tallis reflects that she "went through the first forest. I *became* the forest. I suppose I entered my unconscious mind" (*Lavondyss* 398, original emphasis). Such externalization of a character's inner workings frequently appears in fantasy, as Stephen R. Donaldson asserts: "characters confer reality on their surroundings" (4). The Mythago books, more than the other texts in this thesis, embodies a psychospace that changes in response to the needs of characters for individual transformation. While Pierce's labyrinth provided experiences for him to confront his personal demons—abandonment, stagnation, an personal destiny—Ryhope Wood

projects the memories and fears of those walking its sylvan pathways. The latter is certainly much more perilous, but also significantly more powerful for creating a new identity.

Labyrinth-polders are powerful narrative tools for creating stories about the creation of the self. *Kingfisher* demonstrated how the labyrinth provides a symbolic journey into adulthood contained within the polder's liminal space. The Mythago Cycle demonstrates how the labyrinth-polder, as a magical zone, can provide opportunities for personal psychological development by externalizing and confronting the deeper recesses of the self. While weighed down with tragedy, the forest is also a sublime space, one where the hidden chambers of the self are both inward and outward. As Yssobel ponders near the Cycle's end, "Does it feel strange that we sought the edge of the world and have ended up in one small part of its heart?" (*Avilion* 280).

Chapter 4: A Vision of Time: *Little, Big* and Apotheosis

So far we have considered labyrinth and polder as overlapping but separate entities, as seen in *Kingfisher*, as well as a fusion of the two in the Mythago Cycle. For this final chapter, I will examine John Crowley's *Little, Big* for a labyrinth-polder that also functions as a portal. In this novel, the labyrinth-polder takes the form of an elaborate house called Edgewood. Although less mechanically intricate when compared to Ryhope Wood, Edgewood is more numinous than either the forest or the Kingfisher Inn. Until now I have discussed novels where the labyrinth-polder was an isolated pocket of time and space, a central structure that was easily identifiable. Crowley's subtlety nests labyrinths and polders within other labyrinths and polders. Once again I will consider how chronotopic elements are organized into a specific structure that creates form and function within the narrative. However, the unique complexities of the novel change how elements of time, space, and characterization are used while remaining within the schematics already discussed in previous chapters.

One of the most crucial distinctions of *Little, Big* (alongside its unparalleled prose) is the plot's trajectory, which turns back upon and informs the purpose of the labyrinth-polder. Whereas other mazes might conclude with an exit back to the place of origin, and others end in the center, Edgewood's unnatural space transforms into a portal to a completely different realm. From this perspective, the labyrinth-polder serves as a liminal space between worlds. Northrop Frye contends that all literature contains some sort of transition from one world to another, with four specific archetypal journeys: 1) descent from a higher world; 2) descent to a lower world; 3) ascent from a lower world;

and 4) ascent to a higher world (*Secular Scripture* 97). Because Pierce's journey concludes in an open-ended fashion with his future fully available to him, I would classify it as category three, ascending from his own angst to a sphere where he enjoys agency. The Mythago books' fixation on death and retrograding into old proto-myths seems to best suit categories two and three. Crowley, however, directly aims for his characters' apotheosis.

Little, Big is a family saga spanning seven generations of the Drinkwater-Mouse-Barnable family; wise readers regularly find themselves checking the family tree at the front of the book. The family passes nearly a century in a house with five sides, each in a different architectural style, built by patriarch John Drinkwater. The house, called Edgewood, provides the current chapter's most overt labyrinth-polder, as it serves as the center point for an ancient conflict between humans and fairies, referred to as the Tale. As the story moves down the generations, different stages of the Tale play out until finally the Drinkwater and Mouse families escape their dying world (which resembles our own) by crossing into a new reality. Once they cross over we learn the conflict with the fairies has metamorphosed the cast into fairies themselves.

I have already argued that the chronotope of the labyrinth-polder locates the protagonist within a liminal space where time proceeds at a rate different from the world outside the maze. The significant challenge *Little, Big* seems to pose to this apparatus stems from Crowley's stretching the limits of the spatiotemporal worlds outside and beyond the labyrinth-polder. Because the spatial concepts that underpin the polder permeate the novel's entire structure, I must give a brief introduction here and will

elaborate later in the chapter. As the novel's title suggests, *Little, Big* is built upon a principle of paradoxes, that the farther we travel inward to the center of the polder space, the larger it actually becomes. Crowley provides a useful explanation of the polder via an academic presentation by Reverend Theodore Burne Bramble, who is also the first link in the elaborate generational chain of the saga. In a paper about the existence of fairies and the world they occupy, Bramble's argument reaches its apex with:

The explanation is that the world inhabited by these beings is not the world we inhabit. It is another world entirely, and it is encoded within this one; it is in a sense a universal retreating mirror image of this one, with a peculiar geography I can only describe as *infundibular*. [...] I mean by this that the other world is composed of a series of concentric rings, which as one penetrates deeper into the other world, grow larger. The further in you go, the bigger it gets. Each perimeter of this series of concentricities encloses a larger world within, until, at the center point, it is infinite. Or at least very very large. [...] We men, you see, inhabit what is in fact the vastest outermost circle of the converse infundibulum which is the other world. Paracelsus is right: our every movement is accompanied by these beings, but we fail to perceive them not because they are intangible but because, out here, they are too small to be seen! (43, original emphasis).

By novel's end we know that fairies inhabit the next circle inward, but the novel also suggests that Faery is actually that innermost and possibly infinitely-sized world. Each world appears smaller from the outside and bigger inside than the previous one, and time

is less immediate, if it is experienced at all. For reasons not explained, the fairies need to move in to the next world, and so they need the Drinkwaters to take their place. To achieve this, they subtly prod generations of the family into various actions that will eventually cause the needed metamorphosis, and at the center of these acts we find the novel's primary setting, the multi-form house called Edgewood.

The metaphysics of Crowley's world and the fairies' unusual relationship with time further challenges our previous understanding of the labyrinth-polder chronotope. Because Crowley builds the novel as a family chronicle, instead of following a single Traveler to the center of the maze, an entire family is involved in the journey, and events happen at a rate commensurate with the historical time outside of Edgewood. Suddenly the labyrinth seems to function within the general time stream of the surrounding world. However, I will demonstrate that the novel retains the hallmarks of the labyrinth-polder chronotope I have highlighted, merely in a variation on the theme. Edgewood does partition characters into a distinct temporal zone, though the difference is more conceptual than literal.

Despite a lack of armed combat or giant monsters, *Little, Big* still manages to be a quest story, albeit one with very unusual pacing, and this portrayal of time—atypical in a quest fantasy—provides the key to understanding the novel's internal logic. Frye suggests there are three primary conceptions of time, and each one lends a unique course to a labyrinth-polder. *Kingfisher* contrasts the linear time of Pierce and his quest against the locked time of the Fisher family, where they do not age nor realize their captivity. Frye would classify the experience in the Kingfisher Inn as “demonic time,” which lacks

direction and might as well hold still, similar to the experience of Satan in Dante's *Inferno*. In the Mythago Cycle, time compresses and moves at variable speeds in different regions of the polder, creating an anxiety about time as a devourer (*Myth and Metaphor* 158). These two models of time accentuate the heroic qualities of characters who act because they function in opposition to natural forces¹. The conflict here is one of linear versus mythic (or cyclical) time. Outside the labyrinth-polder, characters can live however they wish, but once they embark on their quest they begin taking on qualities of mythic figures who preceded them. Even those who exit the labyrinth are so changed that they cannot return to life exactly as it once was.

Time in *Little, Big* is best understood through Frye's third model, described as "A higher awareness of time" linked to the "renewal in the cycles of nature" (*Myth and Metaphor* 158). This sort of time manifests almost as fatalism, only the characters can still act willfully and enjoy their daily lives. In *Little, Big*, characters pursue their own agendas and their experiences appear fairly mundane, excepting the occasional supernatural intrusions, but because these are always kept on the periphery of vision, little is distorted. However, even as the cast go about their lives, they are always moving in concert with the grander clock of their inevitable crossing into the fey realm, as fixed as the coming of summer or the waxing and waning of the moon.

Because time in *Little, Big* moves on such a cosmic level it does not inspire the same urgency for immediate action as seen in other labyrinth-polders. Remember that a

¹ Diana Wynn Jones suggests much the same in her essay, "The Shape of the Narrative in *Lord of the Rings*", arguing that the River Anduin represents the flow of history. "It is worth pointing out that when Aragorn later uses the same river, he comes *up* it, against the current, changing a course of events that seems inevitable" (98, original emphasis).

chronotope argues for the spatiotemporal dimensions of a story as the defining generic component of a novel. Our previous protagonists were individual Travelers venturing into the labyrinth to complete their given tasks. Pierce, Steven, and Tallis each enjoy a world on hiatus during their quests in the labyrinth; two of them never allow their worlds to return to normal. In contrast, here, the entire family engages in the quest, but each member performs a different task within the intricate journey, dispersing one grand pilgrimage shared amongst many. However, their relationship to the polder contains them and the labyrinth is still transformative, just on a less dramatic scale. In this respect, the labyrinth-polder resembles the mazes etched into cathedral floors and functions like the temple to a fairy religion. The pilgrimage takes generations to complete, and significant life events which tie into the quest are contrasted against the everyday living of the characters. The religion completely encircles their lives, but does not invalidate everyday living and agency; rather, it provides a roadmap through the limited time and space available.

While religion permeates the novel, it is not as propaganda nor allegory, in the vein of C.S. Lewis. Rather, Crowley uses the rhetoric of religion to structure and emphasize certain elements of world building. The Drinkwaters, specifically the women, refer to the Tale, which directs the efforts of the entire family and their relationship with the fairies. The Tale requires specific actions performed in a certain order by designated actors within the drama. Alice frets over whether or not Smoky will be an acceptable husband in the eye of the fairies (18), while her grandfather, August, refers to his reneging on a deal with the fairies as a sin (75). This adherence to revealed word and

prescriptive ritual manifests as the labyrinths that populate the novel, guiding character actions through specific life stages.

Because rituals have actual designs and attached metaphors, they require an architect who is not only sentient, but also intelligent. In *Little, Big*, the Tale's purpose is to fashion the Drinkwater clan to ascend to a higher world and to replace the fairies. In fact, the entire war with the fairies provides the framework for the ritual Tale. This war does not play out, like in so many epic fantasies, on a battlefield that delineates the forces of Good and Evil wielding swords and spears, resolved at the last minute by a Tolkienian eucatastrophe. It is not a war in any conventional sense; rather, it is a pageant that provokes and lures the humans deeper into the portal as a means of transforming both parties to each occupy the next realm inward.

In the chronotope of the labyrinth-polder, the sacred space functions as a dialectical realm, one that engineers experiences for development in pursuit of a transition to the new world. I add that these journeys are also temporal in nature. Pierce's kitchen knife positioned him in the necessary places for encountering crucial life experiences, and each kept him in the present, preparatory for going into his future, whatever that amounts to. Ryhope Wood imposed routes that moved backwards in time through memories to permanently make intruders a part of the forest. The ritual war with the fairies is future-oriented, since "they know the future, but the past is dark to them" (*Little, Big* 323). The fairies know what will happen, but not exactly how, so prophecy frustrates them just as much as the humans, though from the reverse direction,

and so they reveal the Tale but not how it will unfold. The Tale, then, is a macro-labyrinth-polder, one that contains all action and engineers encounters.

The ritual of transformation into fairies is the device Crowley uses to wed unorthodox conceptions of time and space into a coherent whole. The fairies' knowledge of the future provides the dance steps, but Edgewood and the City (an obvious stand-in for New York) provide space for the performers to stand. The journey is just as twisted and winding as any previously discussed, but it is more deliberate. Other Travelers discussed previously—perhaps with exception to Tallis—have entered their respective labyrinths and wandered until they found themselves compelled to act and progress. The Drinkwater's religion, divined through a special Tarot deck the women of the family can read, dictates actions that must then be deliberately accomplished. Just as Pierce stealing the knife, Steven's pursuit of Guiwenneth, and Tallis's yearning to save her brother lured each of those Travelers, the Drinkwaters were not chosen until their own actions set them upon their course. Now engaged in the ritual, they have a set time to complete the tasks within the space of their home, each one a maze that leads them closer to the portal at the end.

The novel's first labyrinth introduces the reader to Edgewood and the novel at large. Smoky must follow very specific instructions to reach Edgewood, which makes his journey a preparatory experience for his wedding. These conditions mandate that he walk, he must prepare his own food, and it is implied that he must complete the journey in a single day. In fact, while this particular labyrinth does not distort time, the fact that the wedding is set for Midsummer's Day and Smoky's journey seems linked to the rise

and fall of the sun, we might say this labyrinth is partially made up of time itself. As the sun sets and Smoky is inducted into the home, the narrator tells us that “the road stitched up” (19), as if to suggest Smoky will never leave this densest point of the polder, at least not in mortality, which proves true.

Because the instructions provide structure, this labyrinth is both narrative, like Pierce’s, and physically contained, similar to Steven in *Mythago Wood*. However, unlike Pierce’s journey, Smoky has a fixed endpoint that he works towards from the outset, rather than aimlessly meandering through the trees according to the forest’s whim. In contrast to Pierce or Steven, Smoky’s course is chosen, but his journey is not locked. It traverses through the City and rural reaches, crossing numerous thresholds, such as a bridge in the City, his exit from the City, passing by “guardian trees” (19), and crossing into the Drinkwaters’ land. Each threshold more fully severs Smoky from his past life in preparation for his future in Edgewood.

Narrative labyrinths are the most frequently recurring type throughout the novel. Midway through the novel, Sylvie, lover of Smoky and Alice’s son, Auberon, is given a mysterious package and told to deliver it. Sylvie’s own journey through the city makes another narrative labyrinth, this one orchestrated by the fairies to ensure Auberon performs his role in the Tale. Ariel Haksquill, a cousin to the Drinkwaters and a powerful wizard, does not have a labyrinthine path dictated to her, but rather operates from the outside, trying to navigate the conflict that threatens to plunge the world into eternal winter. In the process, she begins trying to understand the Tale and though she does not walk its corridors, she attempts to trace it like a child in a coloring book. At the novel’s

climax, Alice instinctively leads those in her family with faith in the Tale through the thick woods until they emerge into the next world inward. In each case it is not a physical structure that prods, cuts off, and in other ways directs the Travelers, but rather a pursuit and understanding of a narrative.

Once again we see that metafictional narrative functions as a labyrinthine layer to these stories. However, the metafiction of *Little, Big* exists on the diegetic level of story, not just above the story for the reader alone to see. Pierce, King Arden, and others in *Kingfisher* serve as reflections of traditional characters, but that's a means of guiding the reader, nothing more. In the Mythago Cycle, metafiction takes the form of interrogation, trying to understand the legends that we repeat and alter across generations. Holdstock's protagonists know that they interact with mythic figures, but they experience defamiliarization as they discover Holdstock's notions of where those legends come from. In *Little, Big* the characters know they are part of some narrative and must live according to the dictates thereof, but this knowledge never achieves the absurd ironies of realizing they are fictional characters, like in, for example, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Acting within the Tale means obedience to prophecy, not existential crisis nor a loss of agency.

Other labyrinths more literally manifest throughout the novel. The most obvious is Edgewood. Though not designed to confuse wanderers, the house still exudes a surreal air. When Violet first moves into the house she describes it as "Houses made of houses within houses made of time" (41). Whereas the Kingfisher Inn polder was made up of memories that disguised cyclical time to hide the fact that it was a prison, Edgewood was

built by the family that it enthralls. Designed with five faces, each in a different architectural style, the house is an anachronism by not belonging to any one aesthetic epoch. At first this seems eccentric, but as the novel unfolds we learn that the house has been designed to tap into occult magics. Brian Attebery has already highlighted the parallels between John Drinkwater and a mixture of Victorian era architects, including spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis, who was “obsessed with the possibility of communion with the Other World” (*Strategies* 43). We can then read John Drinkwater’s actions as a traditional pact with fey folk, a more chaotic version of the Faustian deal, since fairies do not value human souls as a means of striking back against the Judeo-Christian God. The Drinkwaters were not chosen because they were inordinately special, but rather John’s relentless efforts to contact the fairies made him and his bloodline a viable route for achieving the fairies’ own ends.

Some reviews of *Little, Big* (e.g. Lauren Oliver) have attempted to classify it as magical realism in an effort to dodge the old (and not entirely expired) academic contempt for fantasy literature. While that specific debate is irrelevant here, comparison to writers like Borges and Garcia Marquez bears merit. Like Asterion’s house or the isolated village of Macondo, Edgewood seems banal in form but magical in spirit, which manifests most fully after any event has unfolded and recontextualizes what went before. Part of the mystique comes from how people experience and describe it, such as Smoky staying in “the imaginary bedroom” (*Little, Big* 29) before the wedding. Later that day he sits with his fiancé, Alice Dale Drinkwater (nicknamed Daily Alice), as she explains that the garden is located in “the back front” (30), so called because the house once had no

specific front face until a wall was erected around the garden. This combination of mundane and surreal descriptors reads like a more grounded version of the narrative play by canonical magical realists: Borges describes the minotaur's house-prison in such a way that the mystical could be a construct of his madness from being contained by the spiral pathways; Macondo's magic is overtly realized as flying carpets function exactly as what their name implies. Crowley provides both experiences in *Little, Big*. Described in terms simultaneously metaphorical and literal, Edgewood's mysteries can just as easily be explained by Smoky's newness and the eccentric designs of John Drinkwater as by the fact that the house is a portal into Faery.

The Drinkwaters' religion and the rhetoric of the Tale also provides the semantic representation of the labyrinth-polder within *Little, Big*. From the opening page, Crowley hints at his world's ethereal qualities through linguistic clues, such as Smoky noting that "people could catch buses from Somewhere to Elsewhere" (3) This capitalization indicates that these nebulous non-places actually do exist, and since this is a fantasy novel, they need not just be metaphors for unnamed cities. In his discussion of a similarly American Other World, Attebery says that the presence of "homely, familiar, Kansas-type things" gives presence to the land of Oz (*Fantasy Tradition* 85). Similarly, Crowley gives linguistic anchors that link Somewhere and Elsewhere to the actual world of the story by suggesting you can reach them by an everyday bus. Like Oz or, more fittingly, Wonderland (the most relevant inspiration on *Little, Big*), Somewhere and Elsewhere may only be dreamscapes, but that does not make them less real.

Similar cues help flesh out the mechanics of the labyrinth-polder. Perhaps the most telling example is located in closing scenes, when the Drinkwaters complete their pilgrimage and arrive at “the land called the Tale” (532). In this moment, Crowley merges story and text and “he places his characters at the same level of narrative reality with time itself” (*Strategies of Fantasy* 64). Crowley not only creates a new reality, but he makes it sufficiently similar to our own, then uses language to warp world and stretch the limits of our imagination to understand his own uncanny valley.

Other physical labyrinths include the Wild Wood round about Edgewood, where Smoky finds himself wandering the night of his wedding; Old Law Farm, an enterprise by Alice’s cousin, George Mouse; and a park built in the City by John Drinkwater, complete with statues of goddesses for the four seasons. According to Pami Beveridge, these elaborate structures result in an experience where “the marvelous appears next to the real in infinite parallels on a hyperbolic plane, both converging to one concentrated point, which opens up conversely to the vast infinity of Faerie” (1). In each case, the labyrinth provides a space for instruction, such as a conversation Auberon has with Ariel Hawksquill in the park that helps him determine his next course of action. Also, each labyrinth is a zone of protection against the thinning of the outside world. Whenever a character enters one of these labyrinths, the novel’s tone allows time to slow and meditation to happen. Also, they serve as memory palaces, places where the past can be stored and reevaluated later on. Bolstered by memory and at least the perception of altered time, Crowley’s labyrinth-polders fend off the thinning of the world and eventually prepare the Drinkwater clan to take their next step through the portal.

Each labyrinth is ultimately an extension of the Edgewood portal, which is itself the nexus of the fairies' Tale. Successful travel through the Tale is particularly tricky, since the conclusion is unknown to the characters, who do not even have a notion to what end they journey. Pierce was guided by the knife and Steven cared only for regaining Guiwenneth; even Tallis has her faith in Lavondyss to work toward. The Tale, then, is most fully a journey of faith, which is why Smoky, who never can believe, dies rather than make the trek. Oddly, Farah Mendlesohn argues that the ability to leave Edgewood and navigate the polder stems from unbelief (223). I am skeptical about this claim because Auberon, who has spent so much of his life outside of Edgewood, has no qualm speaking to Grandfather Trout, while Smoky never leaves Edgewood yet never believes. If we readjust the supposition to belief in one's own role in the Tale, then perhaps it can bear itself out.

The labyrinth-polders of *Little, Big* are sacred spaces, demarcated from the world at large, sanctuaries against the dying world outside. The ultimate protection they offer comes as transformation in preparation for inhabiting a new world. Passage through these labyrinths is contingent on faith, whether that faith is in a woman waiting for marriage, as with Smoky, or faith in another world awaiting its new rulers, such as Alice and Auberon find in the conclusion. Through it all, the journey is the elaborate pageant of the struggle between humans and fairies, actors upon a stage that grows in size the deeper in one goes. The labyrinth's genre, stemming from its chronotope, continues to be one of journey.

And so I turn now to the role of characterization and its influence on the plot within the labyrinth-polder. First and foremost, the Traveler is present. This role is filled

by certain members of the Drinkwater family and their kin. Obviously a protagonist is essential to any novel, and once again the Traveler is the essential protagonist of the labyrinth-polder story. Crowley's innovation is how he uses ritual to disperse the mantle of Traveler across multiple generations of a single family. Most importantly, they must move from the general world of their experience in to the labyrinth, such as Smoky's initial quest to Edgewood and Auberon's return home after Sylvie disappears. The quest, and by extension the labyrinth, does not, indeed cannot exist without the Traveler. Crowley affirms this, as the final chapter, which serves more as a coda for the novel, describes Edgewood, and it is worth quoting at length:

Then there was a dark house made once of time, made now of weather,
and harder still to find; impossible to find and not even as easy to dream of
when it was alight. Stories last longer: but only by becoming only stories.
It was anyway all a long time ago; the world we know now, is as it is and
not different; if there was ever a time when there were passages, doors, the
borders open and many crossing, that time is not now. The world is older
than it was. Even the weather isn't as we remember it clearly once being;
never clouds as white as that, never grass as odorous or shade as deep and
full of promise as we remember they can be, as once upon a time they
were. (538)

The house fades into inactivity and nearly into obscurity once the Drinkwaters leave our world. Crowley has commented that someone must come and take up residence in Edgewood and their dependents (maybe six generations down the line?) will someday

participate in a War-that-really-is-not-a-War, and their invasion will push the Drinkwaters in one realm further. Time, then, is cyclical, not because of malicious human foibles, but rather as part of a grand cosmological dance, equal to the turning of the seasons.. Some Traveler must move into Edgewood—it is a polder, after all—and their presence and the resulting journey will once again make it a labyrinth.

Other labyrinth-polders I have discussed need someone or something to maintain the space. Stillwater fashioned the Kingfisher Inn into a time-locked prison and his defeat breaks the spell, while some unidentified but very present sentence maintained Ryhope Wood. In both cases we recognize Frye's claim that a protagonist necessitates an antagonist (*Anatomy of Criticism* 187). In *Little, Big*, however, the roles of antagonist and polder-worker are divided. The latter certainly refers to the fairies who have chosen the Drinkwaters and are striving to usher in the next turn of the cycle. When Auberon's bohemian life with Sylvie threatens to derail his and her participation in the Tale, the fairies' leader, Mrs. Underhill, holds a council with her folk and notes that "Somewhere here a slip's been made, a turning missed", but fortunately she knows that "A dropped stitch could be fixed, if it could be found" (323). While the ethics of fey intervention in Auberon's love-life could be debated, their goal is to maintain the Tale's integrity.

The role of antagonist, then, belongs to the cyclical force referred to as Brother North-Wind, bringer of winter and death. Similarly, the turning of the seasons provides the backdrop and the City finds itself rapidly inching closer towards apocalypse. In the children's story we learn that Brother North-Wind has a secret, though it is kept secret from the audience until cryptically revealed by Grandfather Trout to an inconsolable

Auberon: “In winter, summer is a myth. A report, a rumor, not to be believed in. Get it? Love is a myth. So is summer” (411). The implication, then, is that a family's transition into the next world parallels some sort of armageddon event. Crowley adds to this, explaining that “the fairies know the future very well but have a hard time imagining the past” (“Exclusive John Crowley Interview”). The fairies’ sure knowledge of future events dovetails with the certainty of Grandfather Trout’s aphorism: the turning of the seasons is inevitable, as is the Drinkwaters’ transformation and the fairies’ progression further inward. The driving power of the mega-narrative comes from Brother North-Wind, personified as Russel Eigenblick, who is actually Frederick Barbarossa returned from under the mountain where he has awaited his chance to rule again. However, powerful though he is, he will always retreat and spring will inevitably come.

This splitting of forces that oppose our heroes is also significant for showing a means of creating narrative variety while remaining within the strictures of the chronotope. The fairies and their War provide an overt force that accosts the family, even if their intervention is actually aimed at pushing the family forward rather than holding them back. Rather than actually oppose the family, they provide the illusion of opposition, the dragon that must be overcome. According to Frye, “The central form of quest-romance is the dragon-killing theme exemplified in the stories of St. George and Perseus, already referred to” (*Anatomy of Criticism* 189). However, the modern labyrinth-polder story is not interested in an epic battle against a monster, but rather discovering self-knowledge at the center. *Little, Big* both comes closer and holds farther away than *Kingfisher* or the Mythago Cycle to having a minotaur at the center in the form of the

War. However, Crowley subverts that task by revealing that the war is an illusion to bring the humans inside. The severity of battle with a monster is usurped by the last epigram of the final chapter, quoting *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: “‘I want a clean cup,’ the Hatter interrupted. ‘Everyone move one place’” (511). In the world of postmodern fantasy, replacing violence with new forms of conflict allows a story to retain its traditional appearances while reflecting the desires of a new age.

The role of the Guide is filled by Daily Alice Drinkwater, marking the two central points of the novel, namely Smoky's arrival at Edgewood and then the pilgrimage toward Faery. While she cannot attend Smoky for his initial quest, he makes the journey in her name and follows a map provided by her. Even though Alice herself meets a dog to serve as an animal guide into the next world inward, along with George Mouse, it is Alice who rallies the rest of the family together, and Smoky's inability to follow is a direct rejection of Alice's faith.

It is also worth noting that the first night of Smoky and Alice's marriage, as they walk through the Wild Woods, Smoky finds himself adrift the moment he separates from Alice. Not much later he finds himself in an illusion, and only escapes when he reconnects with Alice. By the same token, Auberon is his most lost when he is away from Edgewood and, by extension, Alice, only to reorient himself when Ariel Hawksquill directs him home.

Surprisingly, the role of Prophetess repeats itself once again, this time in *Little, Big*. Women with foresight continually assert themselves in stories focused within labyrinth-polders. In Crowley's novel, the tradition begins with Violet Drinkwater, who is

referred to as “A mystic, a seer of sorts” (355) and carries down through the line of Drinkwater women. Specifically, they can read the Tarot (a custom deck invented by Crowley for convenience in writing the novel) and divine the Tale. This makes them much closer to Tallis and her masks than to the fey women of *Kingfisher*, who are powerful but less concerned with actually discerning a pathway through the labyrinth. Arguably, these women also serve as Guardians of the Gate because they oversee the ritual of the Tale, such as Sophie fearing Smoky will “step in the wrong place” (37) and so ruin the ritual of arrival. At the same time that Smoky travels toward Edgewood, Great-aunt Cloud reads the cards to check on his progress and confirm that he follows the proper pathway. Whereas Holdstock uses foresight to create puzzles for the reader trying to piece together the intricate and warped memories revealed to Tallis by her masks, Crowley uses prophecy to establish the novel’s endpoint from the beginning. In fact, that the family will cross over is the one fact never in question; the mysteries include how and why.

The final character type I wish to comment upon in *Little, Big*, and one that has asserted itself through this thesis, is that of Family. In *Kingfisher*, both the Oliver and the Fisher families are healed by the journey through the labyrinth-polder. In the Mythago Cycle family provides a source of conflict, of strength, and motivation, depending on the novel. In *Little, Big*, the Family collectively provide the heroism needed to move into Faery and help the elder fey graduate to their next realm, which in turn sends Barbarossa back to his cave and allows the entire world to begin healing. Additionally, every major figure—save for the fairies and Russell Eigenblick—of the story connects to the

Drinkwater clan, whether by blood or marriage. Even Ariel Hawksquill descends from the illegitimate child Violet Drinkwater had in an affair with one Oliver Hawksquill. This suggests that in Crowley's world, family is a source of power, perhaps because the family is the ideal vehicle for transmitting and maintaining traditions. Parents tell stories to their children, and sometimes those children grow up believing in those tales. That belief, then, keeps the stories and the people at their heart alive. Alice's belief in the Tale, related by parents, helps her to love Smoky despite all his flaws. Early in his marriage, Smoky teaches Auberon's generation the story of Brother North-Wind's secret that winter always passes, which wisdom strengthens an adult Auberon in the face of perpetual winter, both literal and emotional. In the end, by becoming entities of story, guided by a roadmap of story, the Family transcends the limits of their world, their reality, and even their own text.

The labyrinth-polder's purpose is transformation. The story is fixed between the points of entrance and center. Sometimes the center leads outward and other times further inward, but the center is the ending. While some labyrinths are measured only in distance, it is also possible, through ritual and tradition, to make a labyrinth out of time, one where the center is only reached by living forward, like the Drinkwaters living out the Tale.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

When I began this project I knew I would be able to say that there are fantasy stories that are primarily set in labyrinths imbued with magical qualities. I had not anticipated the number of archetypes that the labyrinth has accrued over the centuries on its own and helps invoke in other iconic figures. Nor did I expect that there would be any significant overlap in characterization beyond the presence of a Traveler, since that is the one absolute requirement of the labyrinth. However, the echoes between the stories is startling.

First, a quick review:

- 1) A labyrinth-polder means the story is a quest. The story of journey from Point A down to Point Z takes on new complexities when the path is engineered by a force, whether Fate, Providence, or something else entirely. However, whereas so many journeys emphasize encounter, the labyrinth isolates the Traveler, or at least powerfully reduces their connection to the larger world. There may not be a stated goal, but the center is the endpoint.
- 2) A story set within a labyrinth-polder needs to have a Traveler, who enters and makes choices. They may not choose the consequences of their actions, but agency is important. Even in a unicursal labyrinth, where success can only come from persistence, that persistence is still a choice.
- 3) The labyrinth-polder needs some figure or force who maintains the polder, which is itself a compressed region of time and space. The polder can act as a prison, a manifestation of the psychoscape, a pathway to the Underworld, a portal into Faery,

and probably other purposes as well. However, the toughening of reality makes the polder a space that can withstand the existence of anachronism, impossible creatures, and gallant quests.

- 4) Guides and Companions tend to play some role in the labyrinth-polder. Continuing Ariadne's work, the Guide is someone who wants to see the Traveler succeed, though they rarely make it to the end of the maze.
- 5) Metafiction seems to be an intrinsic element of the labyrinth-polder. Perhaps it is because we cannot hear the word labyrinth without thinking of Theseus (or David Bowie, as my own conversations with others have indicated). The setting is so iconic that imagining a story subsumed in such winding paths instantly calls it up for us. However, accomplished authors do not need to instantly go to Theseus, and can instead redirect the story to invoke other myths. Sometimes these myths literally manifest, such as Holdstock's mythagos, and others are merely referential, like McKillip's use of Arthurian lore. Others, like Crowley, can elevate a children's story like Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books to the level of mythology.
- 6) Family seems to be extremely important to labyrinth-polder stories. I suspect it relates to the role stories play in families. Families are their own unique cultural zones, with specific mythologies and traditions—myths, we might say—and those equip us to walk the labyrinthine pathways of our lives. When life is difficult, we often return home as we wait for winter to pass and summer to come. Labyrinths are also interested in where we come from and where we are going, and the family is the one entity we can all accept as a place of origin.

- 7) Labyrinth-polders lead to transformation. That may take the form of a change from one world to another, or a shift in life stages, or maybe a complete ontological metamorphosis.

In a past time, these would have been viewed as archetypes, inescapable pieces of story absolutely required for the narrative to work. Such an approach grows banal much too fast. However, viewed as a grammar, these become options for punctuation and word choice that can be scattered and arranged according to the writer's own artistic impulses. Knowing the grammar simply helps the reader to understand how to read the story, and to recognize the options for variety available.

I do not believe in a collective unconscious, at least not in the sense for which Jung argued. However, the number of narrative "rhymes" between McKillip, Holdstock, and Crowley suggests a titanic source of influence—maybe Ovid, maybe Borges, or someone else—or else some other cause for why the image of the labyrinth, specifically one that functions as a world unto itself, seems so persistent. I suspect that a wider study would probably affirm many of the above findings, and help refine more of them.

But perhaps the persistence of the labyrinth is because it is the symbol we have created that best summarizes our own lives. In literary studies, the labyrinth embodies the quest through a difficult text, while my graduate studies have kept me anchored to a specific location, one with corridors and pathways (and certainly writing this thesis has felt like a fight against a dragon). The modern metropolis certainly bewilders and enthralls us with endless streets and enough attractions to make us want to never leave. My own religion has sacred temples that symbolically embody ritual for reasons of

spiritual transformation. Some of these experiences are unique and sublime, while others vex us with their redundancy. However, we can impose meaning upon them as we seek out opportunities for growth and development.

Fantasy, as a distinctively playful and subversive breed of literature, will most likely never have a satisfactory definition that can contain the entire genre. However, even if life remains an unsolvable riddle, we can still make meaning out of it in parts, often facilitated by how we understand the journey through time and situated in space. Similarly, fantasy can be apprehended in clusters, which can form distinctive pathways to guide us through such a labyrinthine genre.

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