

HANG ON TO YOURSELF: BOWIE, BURKE, AND THE RHETORIC OF STAGE  
PERSONA

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, whose unwavering support helped me persevere in all my academic endeavors; to Dr. Sandi Reynolds, who set me on this path all those years ago; and to David Bowie, who changed the game for freaks and weirdos like me.

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## ABSTRACT

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### HANG ON TO YOURSELF: BOWIE, BURKE, AND THE RHETORIC OF STAGE PERSONA

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This study uses Kenneth Burke's concepts and theories to examine the rhetorical implications of David Bowie's use of the stage persona Ziggy Stardust in order to better understand how stage personae affect performers and their audiences. Employing Burke's dramatistic pentad as a theoretical framework, I explore the scene, act, agent, agency, and purpose of the creation of the Ziggy Stardust character and consider how this persona influenced fans' identification with Ziggy and with Bowie himself.

Bowie created the Ziggy persona by drastically altering his physical appearance, changing his musical style, and combining elements of disparate influences like Japanese kabuki theater, pop art, and queer culture. By performing as the androgynous Ziggy Stardust both on and off stage, Bowie forced audiences to reassess their assumptions about identity and sexuality and challenged the pervasiveness of the white, heterosexual male perspective in rock music. However, his use of the Ziggy persona had a negative psychological effect on Bowie, who was haunted by a family history of schizophrenia,

depression, and suicide. This ultimately led him to discard the Ziggy persona before it consumed him.

Even after his “retirement,” Ziggy Stardust had a lasting effect on Bowie’s fans. Using Kenneth Burke’s three forms of identification, this study explores how the Ziggy persona led audiences to identify strongly with him and therefore with Bowie. The persona’s extraterrestrial origins served as a metaphor for alienation, which British youth struggled with as the counterculture of the 1960s dissipated; Burke would call this identification by sympathy. Ziggy’s androgyny and sexual ambiguity reflected a rejection of cultural norms that Bowie and his fans saw as outdated and oppressive; Burke would call this identification by antithesis. The Ziggy persona also inspired fans to recreate themselves in his image, but more importantly Ziggy taught them that identity is malleable and that being different can have its advantages; Burke would call this identification by inaccuracy.

The study concludes by examining the nuances of terms like *identity*, *persona*, and *ethos*, calling for further research into disambiguating these terms and exploring their interrelationship, especially as it relates to composition pedagogy.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, French economist Jacques Attali observes that “[m]usic is prophecy... It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible” (11). Rock music has always been an arena for experimentation and the unbridled expression of taboo ideas and beliefs, whether sincerely experienced or devised to create publicity. That iconic image of Elvis Presley gyrating on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956 and the controversy that followed is part of our cultural consciousness, as are a handful of other artists and incidents in rock that have altered the cultural landscape in some form or fashion. The “rock star” is supposed to embody the idea of youthful rebellion, make people question established mores, and present himself or herself as a force to be reckoned with. There are very few exceptions to this formula among the echelons of rock royalty, but sometimes performers find these expectations at odds with their personalities, which is one reason why so many musicians create stage personae: to bridge the gap between who they are as individuals and who our culture wants (or needs) them to be. But the stage persona is more than a mask or character used to enhance performance; it can also function as a rhetorical tool.

The concept of persona does not have a very strong presence in rhetorical history. As Robert E. Brooke points out in the brief entry on persona in *The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, “[It] appears most often in the work of contemporary literary critics and poets” (569). Despite its absence in recent rhetoric scholarship, persona has become an increasingly important concept as mass media and social media cause people to become more aware of the need to adopt appropriate personae for various situations, and this is especially true for public figures like musicians. However, some musicians have been playing with persona since long before the development of TMZ and Twitter.

Adopting personae, whether onstage or in recordings, has become a time-honored tradition in rock music, especially among performers who aim to push boundaries and force audiences to question the validity of social mores. This practice can be traced back to Ray Davies of the Kinks, who played with shifting personae in several of his songs in the early 1960s -- from the homosexual overtones of “See My Friend” to the more overt sexual confusion of “Lola” -- in order to challenge listeners’ natural tendency to conflate a song’s protagonist with its singer or composer.<sup>1</sup> In the years that followed, performers like Alice Cooper and David Bowie perfected and embellished this process, bringing their theatrical personae to life on stage and through media outlets like promotional videos, much to the delight of their fans and to the horror of those fans’ parents. Today, this custom can be seen in performers like Marilyn Manson, Lady Gaga,

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<sup>1</sup> See Gelbart.

Beyonce, Nicki Minaj, and The Weeknd, though as the line between the personal and private lives of celebrities is blurred by the relentless presence of mass and social media, so too is the line between stage persona and personal identity.

Of the musicians who have adopted stage personae, perhaps the most influential is David Bowie. During a career spanning over five decades and a number of musical genres, Bowie continually transformed himself in an industry where fans and record companies generally expect musicians to remain stagnant in both their craft and their self-presentation. The widespread influence of his music aside, Bowie's transformative practices and over-the-top stage performances -- from the androgynous Ziggy Stardust to the cold-blooded Thin White Duke and beyond -- inspired a number of musicians, including Lady Gaga and Marilyn Manson; even pop chameleon Madonna, who accepted Bowie's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction award on his behalf in 1996, says that Bowie "truly changed [her] life" (qtd. in "David Bowie").

In this study, I wish to examine the reasons that performers adopt stage personae, how these personae are constructed, and the rhetorical effects of these personae on audiences. Since Bowie was one of the first and most influential musicians to use a stage persona as a conscious, artistic choice, to embody that persona on and off stage, and to discard the persona when it no longer suited his purposes, it seems natural that a study on stage personae as rhetorical tools should draw on his techniques as a frame of reference, though I will refer to other artists as needed to support and develop my claims.

## Terms and Questions

My primary theoretical basis will be Kenneth Burke's dramatism, a "technique of analysis of language and thought as basically modes of action rather than as means of conveying information" (*Language* 54). According to Burke, rhetoric is grounded in the notion of identification, the act of allying oneself with people or things that share one's activities, beliefs, and values: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your way with his" (*Rhetoric* 55). Burke calls this uniting of entities through shared ideas or attitudes *consubstantiality*. I believe Burke's theories redefine these performers as rhetors because identification allows for the possibility of unconscious persuasion; even though they may not be setting out "to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (*Rhetoric* 41) – to create rhetoric as Burke defines it – certainly their acts can have rhetorical effects on their audiences. In a business in which the audience's perception of authenticity seems to lie at the heart of an artist's potential for success, the remarkable achievements of performers who adopt stage personae clearly indicate that the relationship between performer and audience is more complex than most people would assume.

Burke's theories will provide a valuable framework for the rhetorical analysis of musicians' use of stage personae, particularly David Bowie's. I will use this framework to address the following questions:

- What are the (rhetorical) functions and effects of stage personae as adopted a musician?
- What strategies are used by performers who adopt stage personae to (rhetorically) construct their personae?
- How does adopting a stage persona affect an artist's relationship with his or her audience and how the audience perceives the artist?
- Do stage performers' adoptions of stage personae affect or contribute to their audiences' sense of community?
- What, if any, are the implications for these ideas in rhetoric and composition studies?

## Methodology

I will analyze a variety of artifacts from Bowie's career, focusing on those produced around the time of the 1972 album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. During the production and promotion of this album, Bowie assumed the persona of Ziggy Stardust, a messianic figure who tries to save the world through rock and roll before ultimately being destroyed by his own stardom. In creating this persona, Bowie completely reinvented himself as a performer. His music shifted from the quirky amalgamation of folk, blues, and pop found on 1971's *Hunky Dory* to more straightforward, guitar-oriented rock and roll. He cropped his long blond hair into a spiky, Japanese-inspired style and dyed it a fiery orange, and although he had already turned heads by lounging in a

dress on the cover of his 1970 album *The Man Who Sold the World*, his wardrobe choices became more extravagant, futuristic, and provocative. Bowie's stage shows during this time were equally shocking and theatrical, with onstage antics that ranged from stripping down to a loincloth to simulating oral sex with guitarist Mick Ronson. These exploits and this persona earned Bowie a very devoted following of young fans who often emulated his garb and mannerisms. Then, on July 3, 1973, while touring in support of the *Ziggy* follow-up *Aladdin Sane*, Bowie announced onstage during a concert at London's Hammersmith Odeon that he was retiring the Ziggy Stardust character, much to the shock and dismay of the audience. Though Ziggy Stardust's existence was relatively brief, this alter-ego helped establish Bowie as a force to be reckoned with in rock music. But what were the rhetorical functions of the Ziggy Stardust persona?

Using Kenneth Burke's dramatism as a framework, this study will analyze the elements of Bowie's transformation into Ziggy Stardust and explore the roles of constitution and identification in his relationship with his audience. The constituents of Burke's dramastistic pentad (act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose) will be used to examine the means (agency) by which Bowie (agent) brought to life the Ziggy Stardust persona (act), as well as the musical, artistic, and political environment (scene) that inspired him to do so (purpose). Identification, the guiding force behind Burke's dramatism, will offer insight into Bowie's relationship with his audience at this time and how his use of the Ziggy Stardust persona affected this relationship.

## **Summation**

This study has a few noteworthy outcomes. First, it legitimizes the use of a stage persona by demonstrating that this device, which is often seen as a bid for publicity, can have genuine rhetorical purposes. Second, it explores the complex relationship between a rhetor's persona and the perception and response of the audience. Third, and most importantly, this study constitutes a starting point from which to understand the use of constructed personae as rhetorical tools, which will increase awareness of the rhetorical effects of personae that are not so clearly constructed by the individual but are nonetheless existent.

## CHAPTER II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Persona

The concept of the character that a writer or speaker constructs has basically always existed in the study of rhetoric, but the words used to denote this concept have varied widely, from *ethos* as defined in classical rhetoric to more contemporary terms like *role*, *voice*, or *identity*. The term *persona* (taken from the Latin word for “mask”) seems to have fallen out of favor among rhetoric scholars and has been mostly relegated to literary criticism. However, regardless of terminology, the notion of persona lies at the heart of rhetoric.

Mark Sadoski offers a fairly inclusive definition of persona as “a particular self-image, part of a multitude of personae, or self-images, that can be construed from our overall personality, or mental life” and therefore “the particular persona that we assume in a given act of composing is that aspect of our personality, either actual or imagined, that we choose to project to an audience in hope of achieving desired effects” (272-73). He maintains that authors must assume a persona in order to communicate, stating that this persona may be a facet of their own personalities or “an identity synthesized in imagination,” but regardless it is responsible for mediating “the conversion of both nonverbal and verbal mental representations into rhetoric” (273). Sadoski says that part of projecting a



persona is "projecting a particular 'tone of voice'" (273), adding that persona "is also related to the attitude we take toward the subject of the discourse" (273). He claims that persona is a necessary part of communication:

Assuming the intention of verbal communication with others (or even of articulation to themselves), authors must perforce assume an identity, a persona, with both appropriate tone toward the audience and attitude toward the subject... Specifically, the persona is a temporary aspect of the author's cognition that serves as a governor to regulate and manipulate the images, affects, and language that mentally represent the subject to the author into rhetorical forms that seem to best succeed in evoking appropriate images, affects, and language in another aspect of the author's cognition, the generalized other, or imagined audience. (273)

Anyone who studies rhetoric understands that the "I" in a rhetorical artifact is always constructed by the rhetor, although opinions about the degree of this construction can vary widely. At one end of the spectrum, Ken Macrorie asserts that one should choose the voice that allows for the most direct expression of oneself; at the other end, Wayne C. Booth argues that "the 'implied author' of a text should always be treated as a constructed character" because he or she "is never the same as the actual flesh-and-blood author" (Brooke 569). Somewhere in between, Aristotle insists that a speaker's *ethos* is selected from his or her own real attributes based on the possibilities of persuasion in a given situation (Brooke 569). Furthermore, as Sadoski explains, in addition to constructing a

persona, an author must also be able to construct an imagined audience while composing to approximate their possible responses: "Persona is the vehicle by which mental acts are carried out in the minds of both authors and audiences through authors' imaginings of themselves as both authors and as audiences, and the consequent feedback loop of rhetorical decisions necessitated to effect the most desirable verbal encodings" (273). While speakers can use feedback from listeners to adjust their rhetoric and persona, in the stages before their composition is presented to an audience, they "must regularly step out of the persona to examine the effect of the language on imagined readers. That is, the writer must regularly read from the perspective of the generalized other and make revisions as necessary to 'home in' on the predicted effect" (273). For authors to imagine how they might appear to an audience, they must view themselves from the audience's perspective and adjust their work accordingly; without some understanding of their persona, this would not be possible.

The need for a persona that fits a given situation is not limited to rhetors and authors, either. In "Personality and Persona: Developing the Self," Walter S. Minot discusses works in psychology by Kenneth J. Gergen and his collaborators that "have demonstrated in experiments what traditional rhetoricians are aware of: People tend to adjust their personalities (or characters or personae) to fit various elements in their social and rhetorical situations. Moreover, the self-esteem or self-evaluation of experimental subjects is affected by various social influences" (qtd. in Minot 354). Given the pervasive nature of this rhetorical tool in

everyday communication, there is much to be gained by examining the ways in which one adjusts one's own persona based upon the situation and desired response.

Stage personae (at least in the sense being discussed herein) are clearly constructed by their respective performers and, due to the nature of musical performance, are expressed in a variety of ways, including vocal inflection, musical style, and physical presentation. In *The Composer's Voice*, music theorist Edward T. Cone asks, "If music is a language, who is speaking?" (qtd. In Gelbart 202). As Matthew Gelbart explains, Cone claims that in accompanied song and opera there are three "personae" presented simultaneously. The first is the vocal persona, the protagonist or "I" in the song. The second is the "virtual persona," or the musical accompaniment, which, like a narrator in a work of poetry or fiction, frames the speaking characters. The third is the "implicit" or "complete" musical persona, a combination of the first two personae that in turn becomes the persona of the composer, or "a persona of the composer," since "the persona of each composition is uniquely created by and for that composition" (qtd. in Gelbart 202). While Cone's theory has been criticized for ignoring the significance of the performer, it serves as a useful starting point for applying the concept of persona not only to musicians, but also to the music itself.

The relationship between performer, persona, and composition, like most other aspects of rock, has changed significantly over time. Early rock music was

rooted in the presentation of a protagonist sharing experiences considered universal to the audience, which was largely made up of young people in their teens and early twenties. Each performer cultivated an image “through dress, repertoire and delivery” and sang songs that were consistent with this image, suggesting that the performer was the protagonist of each song and lending these songs a sense of earnestness and authenticity (Gelbart 206). It was important that the performer’s image resonate with audiences so that the listener’s persona could be blurred with the protagonist’s, allowing the audience to identify with the performer (Gelbart 206). Band members, backup vocalists, and even instruments were often manipulated to ensure that all elements of any given song contributed to its central persona.

This model can still be found in contemporary rock and pop music, but by the late 1960s musicians were starting to play with (or against) the concept of the unified protagonist-composer: the Beatles constructed and portrayed members of a fictional band for 1967’s *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and Ray Davies of The Kinks often created protagonists in his songs whose personae were at odds with his own.<sup>1</sup> Davies and the musicians who would later follow his path “not only manifested discomfort with the values they saw embraced by older generations, but also expressed a lack of belonging... to a united ‘youth’ identity, or to a single group within their own generation... or even to a single class identity” (Gelbart 213), and “this friction became an essential part of rock’s

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<sup>1</sup> See Gelbart for a closer examination of Davies’ play with persona.

communicative and even subversive potential" (Gelbart 214). As rock music has grown more theatrical -- with more elaborate stage shows, the creation of rock opera and punk, and the rise of the music video -- artists like David Bowie, Madonna, and Elvis Costello thrived on playing with persona (Gelbart 213).

Some might say that David Bowie assumed his first stage persona in 1967, when he stopped performing under the name Davy Jones to avoid being confused with Davy Jones of The Monkees, taking his surname from American frontiersman Jim Bowie and his eponymous knife. However, there is more to Bowie's later personae than a new name. Many performers use pseudonyms, including Ray Charles, Sting, Drake, Freddie Mercury of Queen, and Aerosmith's Steven Tyler. While adopting a stage name is not uncommon in the entertainment industry, adopting a stage persona involves much more than changing one's moniker. In many cases, it calls for alterations in physical appearance - wardrobe, hair, and makeup - as well as mannerisms and style of artistic expression. Usually, a stage persona is created by an artist to help him or her present an image that is in keeping with the music being performed, which helps emphasize the artist's message. In the modern music industry, these personae are often carefully crafted by entire teams of managers, publicists, stylists, songwriters, producers, and social media consultants. However, the contemporary concept of creating a "brand" did not really exist at the height of Bowie's career; it could be argued that he was one of the first artists to realize

and embrace that idea, and his understanding of persona was a key component of his success in doing so.

### **The Rhetoric of Style**

Bowie was also one of the first artists to recognize and emphasize the potential importance of visual elements in popular music, and he often used his personal style to make assertions about how he wished to be perceived by others. In an increasingly visual culture, style is an important lens through which to examine the construction of persona. Barry Brummett contrasts the traditional sense of style as “window dressing for logic and more substantive modes of invention” with the more modern sense of style as “the major way in which we think about presenting ourselves to others,” claiming that the two “have merged into a new form: the rhetoric of style” (1). He further asserts that “style has become a major if not the major rhetorical system at work in the world today” (1). He provides a review of scholarly literature in the fields of psychology and identity studies, exploring the ways in which one’s style affects one’s rhetorical effectiveness (i.e., teaching styles being influenced by student preferences or pastors’ styles influencing their efficacy), as well as how style acts as an identity marker representative of class, race, gender, and sexuality (4). A similar literature review focused on the fields of history, culture, and social structure provides additional insights about style as it relates to capitalism, visual culture,

and culture in general (5). Brummet then defines the five characteristics upon which this “amalgamation” of these two senses of style depend:

1. Distinctive Systems of Style: “certain styles composed of language choice but also patterns of decoration, gesture, grooming, and so forth are widely recognized as distinct because there is a unity in each style” (6).

Brummett points out that a style, such as “hippie style,” is “an enduring cohesion of language, gesture, grooming, and so forth,” as separate from fashion, which is more grounded in popularity and commodification.

Knowledge of various styles and which elements do or do not belong to them is culturally ingrained and “perpetuated through film, television, and other means of disseminating popular culture” (6).

2. Style as Language: “styles in this unified sense function as a language that people may appropriate to communicate and to read the meanings of others” (6). Brummett examines the ways in which styles function as languages, in that they are coherent, have grammars (or “logics of order”), serve as means of communication, and “are central to social and political identity” (6). Just as one may recognize snippets of a foreign language as belonging to a particular language group, one may also recognize a specific style as being particular to, although not exclusive to or required of, a particular social group: “[S]tyles are like languages in their systematicity, their ability to communicate, and their connections to specific human communities” (7).

3. Style as a Social and Cultural Marker: “styles powerfully mark social and political groupings and allegiances” (6). The political power of styles stems from their respective cultural and social associations. Significantly, even if the presentation of a certain style has detrimental effects, members of certain communities feel drawn to specific styles; conversely, those who are not part of a community associated with a particular style are frequently repelled by it and may be deemed “posers” if they choose to exhibit it, even experimentally (7). As Brummett puts it, “Styles ‘wear’ people as much as people ‘wear’ styles, and this is so because of the powerful connections among styles and communities” (7).
4. Style as an Ascendant System of Global Rhetoric: “style in the unified sense is becoming one, if not the main, system of rhetoric in an increasingly globalized world” (6). The importance of this struggle is that “the languages formed by different styles are increasingly becoming the main modes of communication shared in our world, whether locally or in a global context” (Brummett 8). As the emphasis on previously dominant forms of communication, like argument and public speaking, decreases, the emphasis on visual communication, like magazines and television, increases, and these ascending forms of communication constantly implore us to “alter our styles through aestheticization” (8).
5. Style and Global Capitalism: “late capitalism is the engine that is making style so preeminent a form of communication” (6). This excessive focus on



style and aesthetics serves to “induce hyperconsumption among the public” in the developed world (Brummett 9), which must consume beyond its needs to sustain the global economy.

Although there is no systematic method for teaching the rhetoric of style, as the Greeks had for teaching classical rhetoric, “knowledge of style and how it works to influence others is likely more widespread than was any kind of advanced knowledge of traditional rhetorical knowledge such as the ability to give speeches or write essays” (Brummett 10). Practitioners of the rhetoric of style often operate with little or no focused intention, unaware that they are supporting capitalism (and “often at the expense, literally, of their own financial well-being”) (Brummett 10).

Brummett places the rhetoric of style into a wider category he calls “vernacular rhetorics”: “rhetorics that are picked up by experience and through socialization and that are also taught, but not in any formal curriculum or institutional plan of study” (11). Since rhetoric is currently spread by popular culture, and since “[c]apitalism is unlikely to go away,” it is important that we learn how to use the rhetoric of style as a means of social, political, and civic participation (Brummett 11).

Since, as Brummett explains, style can function as a language, then style also constitutes what Kenneth Burke calls symbolic action, which, put simply, is motion driven by motive (more on this later). Making deliberate choices about one’s self-presentation, as one does when constructing a stage persona, serves

as a means to depict visually one's social and political affiliations; one can judge fairly accurately whether one's worldview might align with that of someone like David Bowie in the early 1970s or Marilyn Manson in the late 1990s based simply on a glance at a magazine cover or television performance. If someone identifies with such a performer, then the performer's action (style) has persuaded in at least one way that Burke describes: by pointing out shared interests between the audience and the rhetor. This connection between style and rhetoric is further supported by Burke's assertion that "[w]herever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is 'persuasion'" (Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* 172). If style connotes meaning, then it is persuasive and is therefore rhetorical.

### **Burke's Pentad**

The key schema I will be using to examine Bowie's use of persona is Burke's pentad, which is rooted in dramatism, the use of terms from the study of drama to analyze human motivation. The dramatistic pentad has its origins in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Talcott Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action*, but its use in rhetorical criticism is associated with Burke (Foss 355). Dramatism assumes that humans "use rhetoric to constitute and present a particular view of our situation, just as a play creates and presents a certain world or situation inhabited by characters in the play," and therefore our language "provides clues to our motives" (Foss 356). Burke views dramatism as a system

not only for discovering motives, but also for understanding how “[l]anguage and thought act on us as well as through us” (Blakesly 22).

Burke claims that language use constitutes action, which stems from motives that are derived from our “symbolicity” — our ability to acquire language or a symbol system—as opposed to motion, which has biological motives (Foss 355). According to Burke, in order to describe any symbolic act fully, rhetors must begin with the five basic elements of a drama, which he calls the pentad: “You must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (*agency*) and the *purpose*” (*A Grammar of Motives* xv). Burke also occasionally includes *attitude*, the manner in which particular means are employed, as an element for consideration in an analysis of motivation (Foss 357). By examining an artifact’s ratios, or relationships between pairs of pentadic elements, one can better understand the rhetor’s motive by determining which element exerts the most control over the others. Reframing an artifact by focusing on different pentadic elements allows critics to discover alternative perspectives as well as detect and correct for bias in interpretation (Foss, Foss and Trapp 204).

## Identification and Consubstantiality

For Burke, the key to understanding people's motivation for communicating is the concept of identification, which he considers the most essential element of persuasion. Individuals form identities through properties or substances such as beliefs, values, relationships, activities, and physical objects; they are consubstantial with those who share the same substances while remaining separate from them as separate people. Burke often uses *identification* and *consubstantiality* as synonyms and stresses the importance of identification in persuasion: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, *identifying* your ways with his" (*A Rhetoric of Motives* 55). Because human beings are inevitably separate from one another due to their individual physical bodies (a division sometimes referred to by Burke as *alienation* or *dissociation*), a basic motive for rhetoric is simply to overcome this division (Foss, Foss and Trapp 193). This idea is key to understanding what makes a given persona effective. As Sadoski explains, in the absence of an audience to provide feedback, authors turn to a "generalized other," an internal sense of how others would react to the authors' actions, and effective authors reach us "because they have successfully imagined themselves to be us. This is no fantasy: a part of them *is* us and a part of us *is* them, by virtue of our common language and shared experiences... This is the entire basis of persona, if not all of rhetoric" (276).

Identification can be used for persuasion in three different ways. First, it can point out shared interests between the audience and the rhetor, as when a politician appeals to farmers by telling them she was raised on a farm or when actors in a car company's commercials are portrayed as representations of the product's targeted audience (Foss, Foss and Trapp 192). Second, it can unite opposing entities against a common enemy, such as when the United States and Russia worked together against Germany in World War II (Foss, Foss and Trapp 192). Third, and perhaps most powerfully, it can be used to persuade at an unconscious level, such as a political party presenting African American and Hispanic speakers in order to "create unconscious identification with white voters who do not want to perceive themselves as racist" (Foss, Foss and Trapp 193). This unconscious need to identify with others is based upon our desire for consubstantiality, or shared substance: "[S]ubstance, in the old philosophies, was an *act*; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, [people] have common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*... To identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B" (Burke, *Rhetoric* 21).

### **The Rhetoric of Identity**

Drawing from Burke's philosophies in *Identity's Strategy: Rhetorical Selves in Conversion*, Dana Anderson examines identity itself as a persuasive strategy, defining the rhetorical strategy of identity as "the influencing of others

through the articulation of our sense of *who we are*... [I]dentity matters as something that one does to an audience through the expression of who or what one is" (4). She posits a "Burkean way of looking at identity" (21), explaining that while Kenneth Burke never finished *A Symbolic of Motives*, which was supposed to be a "study of individual identity" (Burke, "Addendum" 222), he actually discusses the concept of identity frequently throughout his other work. Anderson connects "our namings, changings, and expressions of identity" to symbolic action because, like all language, they "are a form of action upon the world" and are therefore appropriate subjects for Burke's analysis of symbolic action (21-22). She claims that, for Burke, identity is a process that is created and expressed through the use of language and is produced by our converging and diverging identifications, which are constantly changing (27-29). She also infers from statements in Burke's work about the unfinished *A Symbolic of Motives* that, for Burke, not only are art and identity both made, but they are made of the same materials, thus "allowing for the 'identities' of each to be discussed in terms of the other" (30). Therefore, "one would approach 'identity' as a function of the language that the thing [the work] embodies -- as a function of the terms that 'conspire' and 'mutually adjust' to 'round out' a characterization of its 'substance'" (31).

Using these inferences from Burke's work and drawing from "The Dialectic of Constitutions" in his *Grammar of Motives* in particular, Anderson examines conversion narratives -- autobiographical accounts of people's transformations --

in order to explore two key questions: “what conceptual equipment can rhetoric employ toward analyzing identity as strategic self-constitution, and how can it do so without implying a self that is free to constitute and strategize as it pleases?” (38). Burke’s explanation of how constitution relates to his pentad is explained in terms of the law: “A legal constitution is an *act* or body of acts (or enactments), done by *agents* (such as rulers, magistrates, or other representative persons), and designed (*purpose*) to serve as a motivational ground (*scene*) of subsequent actions, it being thus an instrument (*agency*) for the shaping of human relations” (*Grammar* 341). He does clarify, however, that constitutionality is not limited to legislation, mentioning geographical, physiological, and cultural constitutions as a few possibilities (*Grammar* 342). His most straightforward definition of constitution states that “what a Constitution would do primarily is to *substantiate an ought* (to base a statement as to *what should be* upon a statement as to *what is*)” (*Grammar* 358).

Anderson explains that “The Dialectic of Constitutions” “provocatively underscores that the same substance-defining, motivating, and audience-transforming functions -- *rhetorical* functions -- equally animate the national constitution of a ‘we the people’ and the self-constitution of an ‘I the person’” (38). Indeed, in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke himself describes identities as “unique ‘constitutions’” (21). Furthermore, “[a] constitution is a *substance* -- and as such, it is a set of *motives*... And we may, within limits, arbitrarily set up new constitutions, legal substances designed to serve as motives for the shaping and

transforming of behavior” (*Grammar* 342). As Anderson elaborates, “To constitute something, then, is to define its substance in a certain way, to proclaim it of one particular nature or another” and “this act of substantiation is not an end in and of itself, for it seeks to change the motivations of those within its constitutive reach: in short, the constitutive act is meaningless unless it effectively motivates people to behave differently -- to behave in accordance with the substance that the constitution declares they embody” (40, 42). Anderson identifies three analytical tools that may help explore the substantiating and motivating functions of “first-person constitution” (43): circumference, or the scope of the scene; voluntaristic constitutional principles (“wishes”) and necessitarian constitutional principles (“the interrelationship among those wishes”) (51); and constitutions as addressed -- the idea that, since constitutions are arguments about substance, they are directed toward an audience and aim to shape that audience’s behavior (54-55). The transformation of David Bowie into Ziggy Stardust could easily be understood in terms of a conversion narrative: an alteration of a person’s “substance” in such a way as to inspire change in and shape the behavior of that person’s audience.

### **Bowie and Persona: A Brief History**

I have chosen to focus on David Bowie because he presents one of the most extreme examples of an artist creating disparate personae, each with a distinctive physical, musical, and vocal performance style. Bowie’s work indicates



a belief in identity as a social construct that can be toyed with and changed: “David Bowie is the name given to the performance of self by the real person David Jones. As Bowie, Jones has long performed himself performing an alter ego who himself frequently performs as someone else -- Ziggy Stardust, Halloween Jack, the Thin White Duke, et al.” (Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia* 1). By changing his own “identity” time and again, he essentially argued that people could be whomever they choose, and his audience has always found this message very empowering. In the decades since Bowie unveiled Ziggy Stardust, many musicians have followed in his footsteps by adopting their own outlandish stage personae and using them to amplify their artistic messages in order to more effectively connect with their audiences. In 2000, Bowie topped British magazine *NME*'s list of most influential musicians, which was based on input from hundreds of recording artists (ABC News), and the massive outpouring of grief and tributes following his death in 2016 offers even more evidence of his cultural significance. My hope is that, in examining how he created Ziggy Stardust and how that persona in particular impacted his audience, a better understanding of the rhetorical effects of persona in popular music might be achieved.

Part of what makes Bowie unique among performers who use stage personae is that he did not limit himself to one persona. While other artists lucky enough to have long careers in the music industry have either been associated with one fairly consistent persona (Stevie Nicks, Celine Dion, Ozzy Osbourne) or

merely tweaked their existing persona to reflect changing cultural trends or personal interests (Madonna, Marilyn Manson, Lady Gaga), Bowie's personae were, to a greater or lesser degree, distinct from each other and from Bowie himself.

Bowie's interest in persona is evident from the beginning of his career. In fact, in an early promotional film called *Love You Till Tuesday*, Bowie performs a mime entitled *The Mask* that proved to be oddly prescient. Featuring a voice-over narration by Bowie, who performs the mime alone, it tells the story of a young man who buys a mask at a thrift shop. When he wears the mask, people laugh and comment on his exceptional sense of humor. Eventually he achieves a level of fame and prepares for an important performance in a grand theater, but when the show is over, he finds he cannot remove his mask and, either from shock or suffocation, he dies. The narrator says the headlines exclaim that he was "strangled on stage," but he notes that none of the press coverage mentions anything about a mask. This clip is significant because it establishes themes that Bowie returns to again and again over the course of his fifty-year career in music: the idea of hiding behind a mask, the possibility of being consumed by one's persona, and the constructed nature of celebrity.

While Bowie's interest in persona seems to have waxed and waned periodically, he continued to examine and experiment with it throughout his career. Since much of Bowie's early career will be addressed in the next chapter, it seems logical to begin in earnest with his first fully formed stage persona: Ziggy

Stardust. 1972's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* presented the first of many personae that Bowie would inhabit during the 1970s, a character interpreted by fans and critics as any combination of alien, prophet, messiah, and rock star (even Bowie's thoughts on Ziggy were somewhat inconsistent). Ziggy was an amalgam of different people whose varying degrees of madness fascinated Bowie: Iggy Pop and Lou Reed, whom Bowie met while touring the US to promote *The Man Who Sold the World*; Vince Taylor, the dynamic but unpredictable singer of Playboys fame; the Legendary Stardust Cowboy, an eccentric psychobilly performer and Bowie's former labelmate; and Syd Barrett, the enigmatic original lead vocalist for Pink Floyd (Pegg 353-55). For this loosely narrative concept album, Bowie transformed himself from a long-haired, one-hit wonder who had previously dabbled in folk and cabaret into the titular character, complete with bright orange-red hair, shaved eyebrows, futuristic costumes, and a more aggressive, rock-oriented sound. Over time, Ziggy's identity began to merge with that of his creator; for fans, for the media, and, to an extent, for Bowie himself. The *Ziggy Stardust* album holds such significance in popular culture that *Rolling Stone* placed Bowie in Ziggy guise on the cover of their February 2, 2012 issue to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the album's release, even though at the time Bowie had not released an album in nine years.

The 1973 follow-up to *Ziggy Stardust*, *Aladdin Sane*, reflected the time Bowie spent touring the United States the previous year, so much so that Bowie

himself referred to the titular character as “Ziggy goes to America” and declared during recording sessions that “Ziggy was meant to be clearly cut and well defined with areas for interplay, whereas Aladdin is pretty ephemeral. He’s also a situation as opposed to being just an individual” (qtd. in Pegg 362, 363). The overlap between Ziggy and Aladdin, however, is undeniable; *Aladdin Sane* was released in April 1973, three months before Bowie “killed” Ziggy Stardust by unexpectedly announcing the retirement of the Spiders from Mars at the Hammersmith Odeon in London on July 3. Despite this overlap in personas, *Ziggy Stardust* and *Aladdin Sane* can be heard as quite distinct albums. The latter feels like a travelogue, with a location ascribed to each track, and all but three of them are US cities. Its lyrics, “riddled with images of urban decay, degenerate lives, drug addiction, violence and death” (Pegg 362), are noticeably darker than anything on *Ziggy Stardust*, though these rougher edges are smoothed a bit by the contributions of pianist Mike Garson, whose avant-jazz style elevates the sonic textures of tracks like “Aladdin Sane” and “Lady Grinning Soul.” With less polished production, Bowie’s more unrestrained vocal delivery, and Mick Ronson’s prevalent guitar work juxtaposing Garson’s piano playing and elements of 1950s nostalgia, *Aladdin Sane* reflects Bowie transcending glam rock into new territory and feels rather beautifully unhinged. This vibe is supported by the album artwork: that iconic image of Bowie’s face, eyes closed, red hair perfectly spiked, with a red and blue lightning bolt painted from his hairline to his jawline and over his right eye, is emblematic of the title character’s

(and perhaps Bowie's own) fractured personality. *Aladdin Sane* was followed by an exuberant covers album, *Pin Ups*, in October 1973. The following month, Bowie claimed to have written twenty new songs for a televised musical version of George Orwell's *1984*, one of his favorite books. When Orwell's widow refused him the rights to her husband's story, Bowie recycled many of these songs into a new concept album, *Diamond Dogs*.

In addition to borrowing themes from Orwell, Bowie's writing on *Diamond Dogs* was heavily influenced by legendary Beat poet William S. Burroughs, with whom Bowie had been co-interviewed by Craig Copetas in late 1973 for *Rolling Stone*. Bowie became a fan and frequent user of the "cut-up" technique frequently used by writers like Burroughs and Brion Gysin (Pegg 368), eventually developing a computer program that served the same purpose: breaking up parts of an existing text and randomly rearranging it into a new text. While this fascination certainly explains some of the more oblique lyrics found on the album, *Diamond Dogs* still contains a fairly easily discernible narrative. Set in the fictional Hunger City, it tells of life in a post-apocalyptic dystopia where people have formed tribes and live on rooftops to avoid the ruin and rubble in the streets below: "And in the death, as the last few corpses lay rotting on the slimy thoroughfare... fleas the size of rats sucked on rats the size of cats, and ten thousand peoploids split into small tribes, coveting the highest of the sterile skyscrapers, like packs of dogs assaulting the glass fronts of Love-Me Avenue" (Bowie, "Future Legend"). The opening lines of the titular track subvert Ziggy

Stardust's swansong "Rock'n'Roll Suicide" by declaring, "This ain't rock 'n roll -- this is *genocide!*" (Pegg 74) before introducing listeners to Bowie's newest persona, Halloween Jack, a "real cool cat" who "lives on top of Manhattan Chase" and serves as leader of a street gang who call themselves the Diamond Dogs. One of Bowie's darkest albums, *Diamond Dogs* is awash with "violent images of brutalized sex, bodily mutilation, and 'poisonous' journalists circling like vultures" and references to drugs, perhaps reflecting Bowie's recently developed affinity for cocaine (Pegg 371). A noteworthy aspect of *Diamond Dogs* is the extravagant stage show Bowie designed for the corresponding tour. The set, which Bowie based on the expressionist elements of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, "was more elaborate than any previously attempted for a rock tour... and cost an unprecedented \$250,000" (Pegg 557). As with Ziggy Stardust, Bowie portrayed Halloween Jack onstage, but this time with the aid of dancers and props to help him enact the story more dramatically.

Before Bowie had finished promoting *Diamond Dogs*, he had already moved on to a new sound and a new persona. In September of 1974, when the *Diamond Dogs* tour reconvened after a six-week break, during which Bowie had begun recording *Young Americans* in Philadelphia, the massive set and precisely timed stage show was quickly dismantled in favor of a "straightforward stand-and-deliver performance" and the incorporation of several new musicians from the *Young Americans* recording sessions (Pegg 563). This revamped show, sometimes referred to as the "Philly Dogs" tour or the Soul Tour (Pegg 562),

indicated a major shift in Bowie's musical style as he decided that, instead of infusing rock songs with American funk and soul elements as he had done on *Diamond Dogs*, he wanted to commit himself more fully to the "Philly sound." Audiences were shocked by Bowie's abrupt shift in musical style, as well as his physical transformation from Ziggy Stardust to this new iteration of Halloween Jack, who by this point was already morphing into a blue-eyed soul singer: "Devoid of war-paint, his auburn hair streaked strawberry blond and swept back James Dean-style, David wore a sharp blue two-piece suit... For American audiences packed with Ziggy clones who had been waiting a year to see their hero on stage, Bowie's transformation into Halloween Jack was their first taste of his propensity for change" (Pegg 558).

This transformation culminated in the creation of *Young Americans*, the album that finally allowed Bowie to break into the US market, largely thanks to the number-one single "Fame."<sup>2</sup> Recorded at Philadelphia's Sigma Sound Studios, *Young Americans* featured a band whose members had worked with major names in American soul, including Sly and the Family Stone, James Brown, Wilson Pickett, and the Isley Brothers (Pegg 575). Although the album has received mixed critical reviews over the years, *Young Americans* was "the first significant excursion into black soul by a mainstream white artist" and helped pave the way for the impending disco explosion (Pegg 379). Its influence would

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<sup>2</sup> "Fame" was written in collaboration with John Lennon in January 1975, in the middle of his infamous year-long "lost weekend."

be felt well into the 1980s: “Bowie’s white translation of soul and funk, and the accompanying pose of finger-snapping cool in a tailored suit, would provide a keynote for 1980s bands as diverse as ABC, Talking Heads, Spandau Ballet, and Japan” (Pegg 379).

Bowie’s final and most disturbing persona came to life on 1976’s *Station to Station*, whose titular track introduces listeners to the Thin White Duke, “throwing darts in lovers’ eyes.” Having acted in his first feature film, Nicholas Roeg’s *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the previous year, Bowie infused the Duke with elements of his character, Thomas Jerome Newton, an alien who comes to Earth seeking water to take back to his drought-ridden planet in order to save his family, but is ultimately corrupted by human weaknesses (sex, alcohol, television) and exploited by the American government. The character’s sense of isolation and despair resonated with Bowie, who later admitted to “being Newton for six months” after the film had wrapped (qtd. in Pegg 658). Adapting Newton’s clothing and hairstyle to suit his new persona, Bowie set about recording *Station to Station* during the height of his drug addiction and the nadir of his personal life. The Thin White Duke pushed Bowie into dangerous territory, both psychologically and physically. Recording sessions sometimes went on for over twenty-four hours uninterrupted, fueled by Bowie’s use of cocaine and amphetamines. In fact, Bowie himself claimed that his use of drugs during this time was so prodigious that he had no real memory of even making this album. Drug-induced paranoia led to bizarre behavior and fears of being sought out by



witches and attacked by demons, and an infamous diet of green and red peppers and milk brought Bowie's weight down to nearly eighty pounds (Pegg 381).

Bowie's interest in problematic topics like Aleister Crowley, Kabbalah, numerology, the Tarot, and Nazi iconography often bleeds through in *Station to Station* and certainly colors its main character, "an emotionless Aryan superman called The Thin White Duke" who sang songs of romance while feeling nothing and whom Bowie famously described as "ice masquerading as fire" (Pegg 382). In this embodiment, Bowie wore black trousers, a black waistcoat, and a white dress shirt, with his blond-streaked hair slicked back. The Duke occasionally carried in his pocket a pack of Gitanes cigarettes, the brand favored by Jacques Brel and Serge Gainsbourg. The tour that accompanied *Station to Station* featured stark lighting and a monochromatic aesthetic inspired by German expressionist cinema, Brechtian theatre, and the cabarets of Weimar Berlin.

The Thin White Duke offers an interesting juxtaposition to Ziggy Stardust, and not just because of their stylistic differences. Whereas Ziggy seemed like a healthier means of exploring persona and connecting with his audience, the Duke was more of a reflection of Bowie's unhealthy interests (cocaine) and attraction to dark philosophies (witchcraft, Nazi iconography). There is no clear sense of an effort to identify with an audience in the Duke; if anything, despite being less extra-terrestrial than Ziggy, the Duke was certainly the less relatable of the two.

The end of the *Station to Station* tour signaled Bowie's separation from the Thin White Duke, as well as his departure from Los Angeles, where he had lived following the filming of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Los Angeles had proven to be a particularly toxic environment for Bowie: "In Los Angeles I was surrounded by people who indulged my ego, who treated me as Ziggy Stardust or one of my other characters, never realizing that David Jones might be behind it" (qtd. in Pegg 657). Once this tour was over, Bowie and close friend Iggy Pop decided together to move to Europe, recover physically from their drug use, and battle their respective demons.

After the Thin White Duke had driven him into very psychologically dark territory, Bowie abandoned the idea of a stage persona for quite some time. He lived in relative anonymity in Berlin and Switzerland while making the albums *Low*, "*Heroes*", and *Lodger*, which would become known as "the Berlin trilogy." Recorded with Brian Eno, formerly of Roxy Music, these albums once again show Bowie entering new sonic territory, this time incorporating the influence of German avant-garde groups like Kraftwerk and Neu!, of whom Bowie had been a longtime fan. While RCA executives were less than thrilled with *Low* in particular because the album features several instrumental tracks and lyrics dealing with rather dark themes, the album was commercially successful and "is now widely regarded as one of the most brilliant and influential albums ever recorded," informing the works of diverse talents in the following years, including Trevor Horn, Joy Division, Depeche Mode, Soft Cell, and Nine Inch Nails (Pegg 389). By

the release of *Lodger* in 1979, Bowie had mostly returned to the standard drum and guitar instrumentation while incorporating elements that would later be recognizable as components of new wave and world music.

Although the Berlin albums did not feature a specific persona, Bowie often used promotional videos to explore different aspects of his personality, occasionally poking fun at his reputation for gender-bending. Perhaps the best example from this period is the short for “Boys Keep Swinging,” a sarcastic song about the male ego from the 1979 album *Lodger*. Directed by David Mallet, who had become known for his innovative filming techniques on American shows like *Shindig* and *Hullabaloo* (Pegg 49), the video focuses mostly on Bowie lip-synching and dancing enthusiastically to the track in a dark mod-inspired suit. However, brief shots show a group of three backing vocalists who turn out to be Bowie in drag. For the last minute or so of the song, these three characters walk down a runway toward the camera in turn, with the first two ripping off their wigs and smearing their lipstick in the tradition of drag shows of the era. (The third character, wearing tweed and walking slowly with a cane, merely blows a kiss to the camera as the screen fades to white at the end of the video.) Reminiscent of The Village People’s “In the Navy” in its use of cartoonishly masculine lyrics and “barely hidden gay anthemic qualities” (O’Leary), “Boys Keep Swinging” could easily be seen as camp, especially in light of the video. However, as Shelton Waldrep points out, since other songs on *Lodger* address concerns about gender inequality and the patriarchal system’s violence against women (particularly

“Repetition,” with its straightforward portrayal of domestic abuse), the video uses a satire of drag “to make a point not only about male privilege but also about the assumptions behind men using systems of signification that code them as ‘female,’ no matter how ironizing the performance might be” and therefore allies itself with “feminist video work” (*Aesthetics* 125).

Other promotional videos for *Lodger* focused more explicitly on the relationship between the artist and his subject. “Look Back in Anger” features Bowie portraying a painter alone in a studio. As he strokes a self-portrait in which he appears as an angel, the resulting smudges on the portrait begin to appear on his face, making it look grotesque and diseased. This clear allusion to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* casts Bowie as both Dorian and Basil, “reinterpret[ing] the novel’s theme of duality in such a way as to combine the artist with his subject” (Waldrep, *Aesthetics* 123). Similarly, in the clip for “D.J.” Bowie plays a disc jockey who is seen vandalizing his studio and being swarmed by his “believers” on the street, a cynical depiction of the “vicarious celebrity and unreal lifestyle” of the late-seventies D.J. (Pegg 68). These videos were Bowie’s earliest attempt to use the medium “to expand or redefine the characters referenced in his songs” as well as to “[create] an image or character that was meant not only to complement his music but, in some instances, to provide a critique of it and a fuller autobiographical statement of what he was attempting to do in his work as a whole” (Waldrep, *Aesthetics* 122).

The early 1980s would prove to be an opportunity for Bowie to reassert himself as a major force in pop music. 1980's *Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)* is largely responsible for popularizing the then-underground New Romantic movement, in which musicians such as Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, and A Flock of Seagulls developed a synth-pop sound and adopted a style that mixed the flamboyance of glam rock with elements of historical fashion. *Scary Monsters* featured the hit single "Ashes to Ashes," in which Bowie returns to the Major Tom character and puts him, and the personal drama Bowie had faced during the past decade, to bed. The song details the descent of Major Tom, now floating in space for a decade, into paranoia and drug addiction as he struggles to "stay clean" despite being followed by "little green wheels." The lyrics can easily be understood as reflecting Bowie's own struggle with cocaine addiction and the paranoia associated with it. In leaving the Major Tom character to continue decaying in space, Bowie was leaving behind his addiction. As Bowie once explained, "I was wrapping up the seventies really for myself, and that ["Ashes to Ashes"] seemed a good enough epitaph for it -- that we've lost him [Major Tom], he's out there somewhere, we'll leave him be" (qtd. in Pegg 27).

This song is also noteworthy for its groundbreaking and highly influential promotional film that features Bowie in a Pierrot costume, a sad-faced clown wandering along a beach followed by a bulldozer and accompanied by a pack of unusual characters. Director David Mallet used a film technique for these scenes that turned the skies black and the sand pink, adding to the video's surreal and

dreamlike atmosphere. Interspersed among this footage are scenes featuring Bowie, who storyboarded the promo himself, as an asylum inmate and as Major Tom himself, strapped to a spaceship seat in a kitchen with exploding appliances and a maid cooking in the background. These three seemingly unrelated characters can be interpreted as acknowledgments of roles Bowie had played or themes he had dealt with in the past: the iconic Major Tom from “Space Oddity,” his breakthrough hit; the Pierrot from his days studying mime with Lindsay Kemp; and the asylum inmate from Bowie’s brushes with madness, both in his life and in his music. It was also, at that time, the most expensive music video ever made, costing \$500,000, which seems astronomical considering that MTV would not come into existence until the following year.

After laying Major Tom to rest (at least for the time being), Bowie seems to have lost interest in creating characters and personae for himself; David Jones was satisfied with only performing the persona of David Bowie. In 1983, Bowie released his most commercially successful album, *Let’s Dance*. Produced by Nile Rodgers of the disco group Chic, who shared Bowie’s love of blues and early R&B, *Let’s Dance* featured an entirely new group of musicians, including then-unknown guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn, and saw Bowie breaking from the stark electronic sounds of his previous albums in favor of what Rodgers called “modern big band rock” (qtd. in Pegg 402). Bowie told *Musician* magazine at the time, “I really wanted that same positive optimistic rock’n’roll big band sound that was very impressionistic for me back when” (qtd. in Pegg 402). With its

eponymous single in addition to other hit songs like “China Girl” and “Modern Love,” along with Bowie’s new self-presentation seemingly designed for MTV -- tan and fit with bleach-blond hair-- *Let’s Dance* “rocketed Bowie into the premier league of wealth and global superstardom” (Pegg 403). Instead of telling stories about Bowie’s personae, the videos for these songs show him using his position of power to raise awareness of political and social issues, such as the struggle of Aboriginal people against white capitalism in Australia (“Let’s Dance”) and the stereotyping and fetishization of Eastern cultures (“China Girl”).

The tremendous success of *Let’s Dance*, however, eventually took its toll. Suddenly under pressure to produce more commercially viable work and without a persona to give him a clearer sense of artistic direction, Bowie’s creativity seemed to wane, and his next albums, 1984’s *Tonight* and 1987’s *Never Let Me Down*, show him struggling to keep up with the times instead of blasting ahead of them. Unhappy with his new status as a pop superstar and all the stress that it entailed, Bowie sought solace by forming a band called Tin Machine with guitarist Reeves Gabrels, along with brothers Tony and Hunt Sales (sons of comedian Soupy Sales), who played bass and drums respectively. The two albums produced by this venture, *Tin Machine* and *Tin Machine II*, featured very minimal production and offered Bowie a respite from his previous albums’ overproduction and in the relative anonymity of being in a band. David Bowie had already abandoned his many alter-egos; now it seemed that David Jones had abandoned David Bowie.

Revived by this experience and by his new marriage to Somali-born supermodel Iman, Bowie resumed his solo career in 1993 with *Black Tie White Noise* and wrote new songs for the soundtrack of *Buddha of Suburbia*, based on the novel by Hanif Kureishi. Then, in 1995, he collaborated with Brian Eno once more on *1. Outside - The Nathan Adler Diaries: A Hyper Cycle*. The liner notes featured a humorous but very dark short story by Bowie titled “The Diary of Nathan Adler or the Art-ritual Murder of Baby Grace Blue: A Non-linear Gothic Drama Hyper-cycle,” set in a post-apocalyptic future (1999) in which murder and mutilation have become an underground movement known as Art Crime. The album, which many consider Bowie’s best of that decade, presents his most complex fictional narrative, with Bowie playing not one character, but seven: Detective Professor Nathan Adler; Baby Grace Blue, a missing fourteen-year-old girl whom police suspect to be a victim of Art Crime; Ramona A. Stone, a “no-future priestess of the Caucasian Suicide Temple”; septuagenarian Algeria Touchshriek, who deals in “art-drugs and DNA prints”; Leon Blank, who has been convicted of “plagiarism without license”; Paddy, one of Nathan Adler’s informants; and the Artist/Minotaur, a mysterious figure who may be responsible for the “art-ritual murder” being investigated. Although the album’s liner sleeves contained images of Bowie morphed into each character, he notably never played them onstage, perhaps “preferring instead to adopt the position of an author” (Broackes and Marsh). In a *Rolling Stone* interview published in 1993, Bowie had said, looking back on his previous performance personas, “It has



been gnawing at me, the idea of one more time developing a character. I do love the theatrical side of the thing -- not only do I enjoy it, I also think I'm quite good at it. But for the time being I'm *quite* happy being me" (qtd. in Auslander 149); maybe *1. Outside* was his way of experimenting with developing a character (or multiple characters) over the course of more than one song or video while keeping himself psychologically grounded.

Over the course of the next ten years, Bowie released four more albums in styles ranging from electronic drum and bass to straightforward rock to adult contemporary. 1997's *Earthling*, Bowie's first self-produced album since *Diamond Dogs* (Pegg 430), took the jungle vibe from *1. Outside* tracks like "I'm Deranged" and "We Prick You" and made it more upbeat and accessible, leading to even greater critical and commercial success (although some criticized Bowie for jumping on the latest musical bandwagon). The album's cover art is perhaps one of Bowie's most memorable from this time period, featuring Bowie in a tattered Union Jack coat (co-designed by Alexander McQueen) with his back to the camera, looking out over garishly colored rolling fields: "His Colossus-of-Rhodes stance suggests both the proud eighteenth-century landowner in a Gainsborough portrait and, simultaneously, the isolated visitor in an alien landscape evoked many years earlier by the *Ziggy Stardust* sleeve" (Pegg 432). A keen eye will also see that Bowie's hair is once again a spiky orange-red, further evoking the Ziggy character.

Bowie's interest in persona often overlapped with his cynicism about the fickle and constructed nature of celebrity. An excellent example of this is the Nat Tate hoax, in which Scottish writer William Boyd fabricated a fictional, dead American artist. Bowie and Boyd had met through connections at *Modern Painters*, an art quarterly for which they both wrote and served on the editorial board. According to Boyd, it was Bowie who suggested that the idea of inventing a celebrity would work more efficiently if published in a book, and Bowie's own small publishing company released Nat Tate's "biography," complete with fake paintings by Boyd, photographs of unknown people from Boyd's personal collection, a cover quote from Gore Vidal, and a blurb from Bowie inside the sleeve. Bowie also orchestrated a launch party in Manhattan on April Fool's Day, 1998, at which he gave a deadpan reading from the book (Boyd). A similar event had been scheduled for London, but the ruse was exposed before it took place. Karen Wright, a co-director at Bowie's 21 Publishing, explained at the time that the hoax was not meant to be malicious, stating that the conspirators were simply amused by people's refusal to admit that they had never heard of this invented artist. This incident plays to Bowie's continued interest in the constructed nature of persona and celebrity.

The cover art for 1999's *'hours...'* also portrays Bowie addressing issues of persona and the past. It depicts two versions of Bowie: an angelic-looking Bowie with long blond hair cradling in his lap the head of another Bowie with red hair and a goatee, Bowie's look from his previous album. The posing is reminiscent of

*La Pieta*, which, according to Bowie, was intentional: “I was inspired by *La Pieta*... but since I didn’t want to wear a dress any more, we made it a man. It can be visualized as life and death, past and present” (qtd. in Pegg 435). Addressing themes of time, memory, and dreams, ‘*hours...*’ may be one of Bowie’s most conventionally melodic and straightforward albums, reminiscent of *Hunky Dory*. While the album cover almost certainly represents putting away his previous persona in favor of a newer, perhaps more stoic version of himself, the image of Bowie with long blond hair (like the hairstyle featured on the cover of *Hunky Dory*) could also be seen as a return to form of sorts, both visually and musically.

In the years following the release of ‘*hours...*’, Bowie seemed to have abandoned his interest in personae and characters once again, content being David Jones at home with his and Iman’s young daughter (Alexandria Zahra Jones, whom they called Lexi) and being David Bowie on stage and in studio. 2002’s *Heathen* reunited Bowie with producer Tony Visconti for the first time in twenty years and received even better reviews than its predecessor, with many critics citing it as a return to form (although which form remains a bit unclear). 2003’s *Reality* featured a more muscular, rock-oriented style that was, as Bowie put it, “built to play live” (qtd. in Pegg 451). The album’s key concept, as indicated by its title, is the idea of “reality” in Western culture and the influence of the media:

I feel that reality has become an abstract for so many people over the last twenty years... Things that they regarded as truths seem to have just melted away, and it's almost as if we're thinking post-philosophically now. There's nothing to rely on any more. No knowledge, only interpretation of those facts that we seem to be inundated with on a daily basis... We live in a world where every headline is famous for 15 minutes. You know: 'At War With America', 'Britney Spears Wears A T-Shirt', 'Saddam Is Still On The Loose' -- they all get the same space, the same time. It creates a situation where all news seems equally important. (qtd. in Pegg 455)

Unlike *'hours...'* and *Heathen*, this album's songs are presented perspectives of diverse characters, creating "vignettes of stranded individuals, bewildered lives and disappointed dreams" (Pegg 455). However, unlike previous personae or characters, the nameless individuals in these vignettes are less fully developed and mostly serve to support the album's theme of the struggle to find meaning and purpose in life in times of conflict and disappointment.

While on tour in 2004, Bowie experienced chest pain and had emergency angioplasty in Hamburg, Germany. Although he performed live and collaborated with other artists occasionally over the next few years, he appeared to have quietly retired, happily living in relative anonymity in New York with Iman and Lexi. Then on January 8, 2013 -- his sixty-sixth birthday -- Bowie unexpectedly released a new single, "Where Are We Now?", and announced that his first new album in a decade, *The Next Day*, would be available that March. Bowie was the

first major artist to release a song online with no fanfare or, indeed, even rumors that he had been recording. Beyoncé would follow his lead a few months later, releasing a self-titled album in the same manner; she used the same tactic for the release of *Lemonade* in 2016. Recorded in secret over the course of two years -- the longest gestation of any Bowie album -- *The Next Day* was a critical and commercial success. The album reached number two on the US charts, a new record for Bowie (previously held by *Station to Station*, which had reached number three in 1976) (Pegg 467).

As with the artwork for *Earthling* and '*hours...*', Bowie chose an image that acknowledges his past but also indicates that he had moved on from it. Jonathan Barnbrook, who had previously designed the album artwork for *Heathen* and *Reality*, returned to the ideas of struck-out text and scrubbed out images used for *Heathen* and pushed them to a new extreme with the cover of *The Next Day*. Using the iconic cover image of "*Heroes*" as a starting point, he redacted the original album title with a crude black line and obscured Bowie's face with a white square, inside which the album's title is printed in "austere black Doctrine font" (Pegg 466). This artwork's simplicity sends a clear message: the presence of the original "*Heroes*" cover is certainly a nod to Bowie's inescapable past and tremendous legacy, but the defacement of that image combined with the forward-looking album title gives an impression that, rather than dwelling on that past, Bowie intends to use it as a catapult to launch himself into the future.

*The Next Day* also gave Bowie a chance to remake his image yet again: “His long years out of the spotlight had, in effect, forged Bowie a new media persona. The voluble, witty chat-show guest of ten years earlier had been eclipsed by the silent, enigmatic recluse: the Dietrich, the Garbo, the Salinger. It was a role which, just like its predecessors, Bowie now played to the hilt” (Pegg 468). Bowie refused to grant any interviews in support of the album; Tony Visconti explained shortly after the release of the first single that David had told him he would never do another interview, “a declaration which turned out to be true” (Pegg 468). Aside from music videos, a handful of promotional photographs, and a list of forty-two words relevant to the lexicon of the album, Bowie did no publicity for the album, preferring to let the music and accompanying accoutrements speak for themselves.

Like *Reality*, *The Next Day* features songs about various characters who do not appear to be connected: a seventeen-year-old soldier, a twenty-two-year-old would-be starlet, a schoolboy-turned-mass shooter, a juvenile street gang. A recurring theme on the album is the exploitation and corruption of young people by forces like politics, war, and religion. Bowie also continues to critique celebrity culture, perhaps most blatantly in the music video for “The Stars (Are Out Tonight),” which features Bowie and his doppelganger Tilda Swinton as a suburban couple intrigued by a rock band that lives next door. The couple, in turn, is stalked by two vampiric, androgynous celebrities, who follow them in a black limousine and prey on them while they sleep. By the end of the video, the

celebrity couple has traded places with the suburban couple: the androgynes, now in dowdy attire, sit calmly on a sofa watching television while Bowie and Swinton loom over them in matching glittery suits. The video turns the idea of celebrity stalking on its head; instead of being stalked, the celebrities follow the older suburban couple, envious of their simple lives -- perhaps a comment on the pervasiveness of celebrity culture and its infiltration into our everyday lives. Like the album cover of *The Next Day*, the video for "The Stars (Are Out Tonight)" references Bowie's past: the vocalist of the rock band that lives next door to the suburban couple is presented as a Thin-White-Duke-era Bowie, complete with two-tone hair and mismatched eyes, but this character is played by an androgynous woman (Norwegian model Iselin Steiro). The casting of Swinton as Bowie's wife humorously acknowledges the once-popular internet rumor that the two were actually the same person because of their androgyny, while the sleek and menacing celebrity couple evoke Bowie and Catherine Deneuve in the 80s vampire classic *The Hunger*. All these references make the video a pleasure for longtime Bowie fans anxious to spot Easter eggs, but they also may be Bowie's attempt to reconcile his past images and his position within popular culture with the man he had since become.

As another tribute to Bowie's place in pop culture, in March of 2013, the same month that *The Next Day* was released, the Victoria and Albert Museum of London organized and presented *David Bowie Is*, an exhibition of about five hundred Bowie-related artifacts. After becoming one of the most successful

exhibitions ever staged by the museum, *David Bowie Is* began a world tour spanning eleven countries and attracting more than two million visitors over the course of five years, ending in Brooklyn in July of 2018. Following the success of *The Next Day*, in February of 2014, Bowie won the Brit award for Best British Male Solo Artist, making him the oldest recipient of a Brit award in the history of the ceremony (“Brit Awards 2014”).

In December of 2015, Bowie made his last public appearance at the Broadway debut of *Lazarus*, a musical he co-wrote with Enda Walsh based on the character he had played in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. Taking place decades after the events of the film, the play centers on Thomas Jerome Newton, still stranded on Earth and wallowing in gin and depression, as he tries to make peace with his circumstances. Bowie had been interested in creating a musical as early as 1966, when he mentioned writing for the stage as an aspiration in a radio interview (Pegg 684). Years later in another interview, he would revisit this ambition: “When I was around seventeen or eighteen, what I wanted to do more than anything else was write something for Broadway. I wanted to write a musical. I had no idea of how you did it or how musicals were constructed, but the idea of writing something that was rock based for Broadway really intrigued me, I thought that would be a wonderful thing to do” (qtd. in *David Bowie: The Last Five Years* 01:00:14-01:00:37). Some forty years after his attempt to stage a musical based on Orwell’s *1984* and thirty-five years after making his Broadway debut playing the lead in *The Elephant Man*, Bowie finally saw his dream brought



to fruition. Director Ivo van Hove saw firsthand how closely Bowie connected, once again, to the lead character: “Outsiders, marginalized people, people that don’t belong, that feel displaced, not at home, even when they have a house, like Newton, rich, you know, on Earth, but lost on Earth. It resonated with him” (qtd. in *David Bowie: The Last Five Years* 01:01:15-01:01:32). Once again, Bowie had returned to his past, perhaps in an effort not only to achieve his dream of creating a musical, but also to give the character of Thomas Jerome Newton -- and therefore the Thin White Duke -- some semblance of peace.

A month later, on his sixty-ninth birthday, ★ (*Blackstar*) was released to critical acclaim. The album was produced by Tony Visconti and featured an entirely new group of musicians, a jazz quartet headed by flautist and saxophonist Donny McCaslin. Hiring a band that had already been playing together for some time was an unusual move for Bowie, who generally preferred to pick and choose individual musicians depending upon the direction in which he thought the music would go. Bowie decided to hire the band in toto after seeing them perform live and appreciating their “rapport and fluidity of style” (Pegg 472). Inspired by the eclectic sounds of Kendrick Lamar’s *To Pimp a Butterfly* and D’Angelo’s *Black Messiah* (Pegg 471), Bowie likely hoped that working with new musicians who worked in a different style would lend the album a similarly unique sonic texture. Although Bowie’s love of jazz dated back to his childhood and its influence can be found on tracks like “Bring Me the Disco King” on *Reality*, *Blackstar* is by no means a jazz album, but by having jazz musicians play rock

songs, most of which were recorded live in studio with Bowie's vocals re-recorded later on (even though keyboardist Jason Lindner insists his live vocals "astounded" the band), Bowie certainly achieved an extraordinary sound (Pegg 474).

Bowie also brought a fresh perspective to the album artwork, deciding to make *Blackstar* the first (and ultimately only) of his albums without his image on the cover. CD versions of the album feature a black five-pointed star over a series of fragmented stars that spell out "BOWIE" on a stark white background; the vinyl version has an all-black cover, the new Bowie logo glossy against a matte background and a five-pointed star cut out to reveal the grooves of the record within. "It wasn't until May 2016 that fans discovered that the black background behind the vinyl sleeve's die-cut star is translucent, and when a light is shown from behind, the background transforms into a field of glowing stars" (Pegg 475). In addition to the resurgence in vinyl's popularity, Bowie also took advantage of social media by allowing a creative team to create fifteen-second film shorts based on various songs on the album, which were serialized on Instagram (Pegg 475).

The two videos from *Blackstar* that feature Bowie are decidedly dark and somber. Significantly, both videos share two new Bowie personae: "Button Eyes," a blind, twitchy prophet with a shock of gray hair and a bandaged head with two black buttons over his eyes; and an unnamed trickster character who makes grotesque faces and strikes camp poses. Both videos also emphasize

connections to Bowie's past, with "Blackstar" including a bejeweled skull in an astronaut suit in a likely nod to Major Tom, and the trickster character in "Lazarus" wearing a copy of a diagonally striped outfit Bowie wore in a photo shoot during the Thin White Duke era. This is particularly intriguing when considering that, so close to the end of his life, Bowie chose to revisit past personae who both represent existential crisis and the longing for spiritual connection.

Two days after the release of *Blackstar*, Bowie passed away after a long, unpublicized battle with liver cancer. The album had already received tremendous critical praise, and in the wake of Bowie's death, there was a resurgence of interest in his music. By January 12, 2016, Bowie was the number one artist in the world on Spotify and iTunes; by the end of the month there were twelve Bowie albums in the UK top forty, with *Blackstar* at number one and four others in the top ten; and *Blackstar* debuted at number one in America, a career first that Bowie certainly would have appreciated (Pegg 477).

## **Conclusion**

While studying mime, dance, and acting under Lindsay Kemp in the 1960s, Bowie found himself drawn to the theories of Constantin Stanislavski, "who maintained that successful performance entailed authenticity on stage, not acting. By authenticity, Stanislavski meant the true emotional state of the actor: acting made these internal states external (James 94). According to Stanislavski,

great actors must appear to live their characters' experiences, and they do so by accessing personal memories and tapping into those emotions. They are not pretending to be someone else; they are simply reliving their past experiences in a different context: "While being aware that the events on stage are nothing other than fictional, they could act 'as if' they were real -- like the pretend of a playing child" (James 94). It should come as no surprise that Bowie was one of the few musicians to enjoy a successful acting career; the techniques that made him a captivating musical entertainer translated incredibly well onto the silver screen. As Bowie once explained, "I'm very much a character when I'm on the stage... I believe in my part all the way down the line... but I do play it for all it's worth because that's the way I do my station, that's part of what Bowie's supposedly about. I'm an actor" (Bowie qtd. in "David Bowie Hang on to Yourself" 00:09:49-00:10:09).

After his first feature film, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Bowie went on to play a number of outsider characters: John Merrick in *The Elephant Man* on Broadway; a dying vampire in *The Hunger*; Pontius Pilate in *The Last Temptation of Christ*; a hapless WWI veteran in *Just a Gigolo*; a British colonel in a WWII Japanese POW camp in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*; Andy Warhol in *Basquiat*; and Nicola Tesla in *The Prestige*. His now-iconic role as Jareth the Goblin King in Jim Henson's dark children's fantasy *Labyrinth* (1986) is a great example of the kinds of roles Bowie seemed to prefer: simultaneously fascinating and repugnant, dealt a bad hand which he begrudgingly accepts, seeking

compassion but finding too little too late, if he finds any at all. If Bowie continued to embrace Stanislavski's methods, then these were the emotional states he consistently relived through his acting.

What, then, of Ziggy Stardust? By channeling his feelings of alienation, contempt toward cultural anxieties about gender and sexuality, and longing to escape the drudgery and constricting social expectations of the suburbs, Bowie created a persona that not only helped him express and cope with his own emotions, but also allowed him to connect with a like-minded audience who, despite the trappings of sci-fi genderbending and messianic delusions, recognized the authenticity of those feelings. A better understanding of Bowie, Ziggy, their audience, and the rhetoric involved in those relationships can be achieved using Burke's pentad as a starting point for analysis.

### **CHAPTER III:**

#### **FROM BOWIE TO ZIGGY**

Thinking of constructing a persona as a rhetorical act requires an understanding of both the circumstances that produced that persona and the process of creating it. While not all stage personae are as detailed and fully developed as Ziggy Stardust, this persona offers tremendous insight into how complex and multidimensional such a character can become. This in turn supports the notion that, in many cases, these personae are created in a conscious effort to explore new ideas and communicate more effectively, even if that communication occurs within the artists themselves more so than with their audience.

#### **Scene**

Much has been written about the many events that triggered enormous cultural shifts in America in the late sixties and early seventies. With the 1960s came the counterculture movement with its values of peace and love, but for many people, those values did not lead to the social change they had hoped for, and they succumbed to a certain level of disillusionment. Bowie himself, in the lyrics to a song he wrote for fellow Brits Mott the Hoople, sums up these feelings

quite nicely: “And my brother’s back at home with his Beatles and his Stones/We never got it off on that revolution stuff/What a drag/Too many snags” (“All the Young Dudes”). Altamont; the Kent State University shootings; the dissolution of the Beatles; the deaths of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Brian Jones; the upheaval surrounding the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the trial of the Chicago Seven: all of these incidents signaled for many the death of the anti-war counterculture and led to the necessary transformation of rock music to address different social, political, economic, and cultural concerns. Significantly, by the early 1970s the same disappointment and disaffection for the hippie movement was also spreading in the United Kingdom, where government’s inability to deal with labor unions led to debilitating miners’ strikes, which in turn resulted in “power cuts and the infamous three-day week” (Jones 8).

Bowie’s generation was also one of the first to feel the effects of growing up in suburbia. Nearly four million new houses were built in the UK between 1918 and 1939, and over 600,000 of them were on the edge of London, “homes for over two million people escaping inner-city grime” (Marsh 27). This new form of British housing development, which has since become a worldwide phenomenon, “imposed a rigid code of social, moral and dress conformity” that “survived World War II and, arguably, reached its apogee in the late 1950s when, thanks to a booming economy, the consumer culture of America finally began to infiltrate” (Marsh 27). Echoes of this environment can clearly be heard in the opening track of *Ziggy Stardust*, “Five Years,” which describes an apocalyptic cityscape

filled with street violence (“A girl my age when off her head/Hit some tiny children/If the black hadn’t pulled her off/I think she would have killed them”), desperation (“I never thought I’d need so many people”), and apathy (“I felt like an actor”). Above all, someone as imaginative as Bowie no doubt felt out of place in the suburbs, frequently turning to film and music as a source of escape:

I was talking to a friend of mine not so long ago... who also came from suburbia, and you're given the impression that nothing culturally belongs to you, that you are sort of in this wasteland, and I think there's a passion for most people who have an iota of sort of curiosity about them to escape and get out and try and find who one is and find some kinds of roots, you know? And both of us got out for the same reasons, for exactly that desperation and exhaustion with the blindness of where we grew up. (“David Bowie Hang on to Yourself” 00:01:30-00:02:04)

In this context, it is easy to see the calculated theatricality of glam rock as a direct counteraction against psychedelic rock and folk rock, with their emphasis on authenticity, spontaneity, and community. The egalitarianism characteristic of the counterculture movement is evident in the self-presentation of its musical performers. Musicians of the 1960s were idolized for their virtuosity (as evidenced by popular London graffiti exclaiming that “Clapton is God”), but paradoxically, says American studies scholar George Lipsitz, “the prevailing aesthetic of amateurism... in the alternative music scene... asserted that everyone could be a star (qtd. in Auslander 13). These musicians did not wear



costumes, per se; they wore street clothes, presenting themselves as Everymen who were unified with their audience. Although there were exceptions (notably female performers like Grace Slick and Janis Joplin), and although costuming varied somewhat from jeans and tee shirts to slacks and blazers, often in accordance with musical style, “the standard onstage attire for psychedelic rock musicians was basically a version of what their audiences might be expected to wear—the informal attire and casual dress wear of the time... Even Jimi Hendrix’s flashy, Gypsy-inspired garb was only a slight exaggeration of then current Carnaby Street fashion” (Auslander 14-15).

The emphasis on musicianship and ordinariness was at the center of the counterculture’s antitheatricalism: “The ideology of authenticity mandated that musicians appear on stage as themselves, not as any other persona or character, and discouraged forms of overtly theatrical performance that would emphasize the differences between performers and spectators” (Auslander 13-14). Psychedelic rock musicians were generally introspective onstage, focusing mostly on each other and their instruments; they frequently performed with their eyes closed (as Grace Slick did during the Jefferson Airplane’s performance at Woodstock) or even with their backs turned to the audience (as Jim Morrison famously did during the Doors’ early shows at the Whisky A Go Go); and even artists like Joe Cocker and Janis Joplin, whose styles were intensely physical, seemed to be directing their energies inward (Auslander 17). These performers, in keeping with the counterculture’s valorization of virtuosity, aimed to create an

impression of concentration and seriousness; their musicianship was more important than acknowledging their audiences or creating visually interesting effects (Auslander 18). Jimi Hendrix, “who engaged his audiences directly with performances that were flamboyant, excessive, and overtly sexual” even though “he often performed with his eyes closed and seemed oblivious to the presence of his audience,” was the glaring exception to the rule of psychedelic rock’s low-key performance style (Auslander 18).

In the late 1960s, performances by American groups like Alice Cooper and Sha Na Na seemed to forecast a movement beyond the counterculture. Alice Cooper, fronted by Vincent Furnier (who would later take the band’s name as his own), had been around in one form or another since the early 1960s, but by 1969 they had adopted a misleadingly innocuous moniker and started presenting themselves onstage as tawdry transvestites. Although elements of androgyny have existed in rock since the early days of Little Richard, the genre’s consistent disdain for displays of anything other than heterosexual masculinity meant that behaviors like transvestism were either suppressed or only permitted as markers of iconoclasm and eccentricity (Auslander 33). Signed and produced by Frank Zappa, whose band The Mothers of Invention were also known to dress in drag, Alice Cooper were likely the first band in the 1960s to deliberately build their image around transvestism. Bearing in mind Brummett’s assertion that style is a powerful marker of social and political groupings and allegiances (7), dressing in drag effectively showed Alice Cooper’s general disdain for the counterculture by

“intentionally confronting the rock audience with a visual practice -- and intimations of a sexuality -- that preyed on its insecurities” (Auslander 33).

The band’s overtly theatrical performances were also an assault against the counterculture’s emphasis on authenticity; as early as 1969 Furnier, who was known to prowl the stage dressed in a ballerina costume topped with a leather jacket, referred to Alice Cooper stage shows as “theatrical piece[s]” (Auslander 34). By 1971, these shows featured a live boa constrictor, a straightjacket, and execution by electric chair (Pegg 539). Furnier always made it clear that he saw himself as an actor playing the role of a madman onstage and in the recording studio, a duality that seemed to confuse rock journalists at the time (Auslander 34-35).

In contrast, John Lennon’s performances of 1950s rock songs at the beginning of his solo career served as a means to reconnect to his own musical history, which played to the counterculture’s emphasis on authenticity. When he appeared at the Toronto Rock Festival with the Plastic Ono Band on September 13, 1969, less than a month after Woodstock, Lennon told the crowd that he and the band had never played together and would just be playing songs that they all knew -- appealing to the garage-band sensibility often favored by the counterculture (“John Lennon and Plastic Ono Band” 00:00:38-00:00:44). By suggesting to his audience that his performance of these songs -- Elvis Presley’s “Blue Suede Shoes,” Larry Williams’ “Dizzy Miss Lizzy,” Barrett Strong’s “Money (That’s What I Want)” -- was related to his own personal connection with early

rock music, “Lennon sought to close the gap between his performance persona and his real identity by suggesting that they were one and the same” (Auslander 22).

Sha Na Na, on the other hand, played rock and roll without claiming any personal connection to it, distancing themselves from it by using stage personas with personalities unrelated to those of the performers themselves. The group’s performance at Woodstock, which included covers of songs like Elvis Presley’s “Jailhouse Rock,” the Monotones’ “The Book of Love,” and Danny and the Juniors’ “At the Hop,” reflected a surge of interest in 1950s rock and roll that was apparent in both the US and the UK from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s and “prefigured glam’s celebration of artifice” (Auslander 20-21). With stylistic references to white southern rock and rollers like Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis and to East Coast doo-wop as practiced by working-class Italian-American singers, Sha Na Na appeared on stage in gold lame suits or in jeans, tee shirts, and black leather jackets (though neither look was typical of their audience or representative of the performance practices associated with the music they performed—doo-wop singers generally wore eveningwear); they performed choreographed dance routines and played up their stereotypical representation of Italian Americans by adopting Italianate stage names like Gino, Ronzoni, and Tony Santini, despite group members appearing to be from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including Irish and Jewish (Auslander 21-25). Unlike other performers like Lennon who revisited songs from the 1950s at this time, Sha Na

Na showed no interest in acknowledging this music as part of their musical foundation or using it to establish themselves as the heirs of that musical legacy; rather, their performance acts “as an anticipation of historical discontinuity between countercultural rock and what came after it” and marked “the beginning of the end for the rock counterculture of the 1960s” (Auslander 28). According to author and journalist Geoffrey Stokes, “Their success was real, but ... nonmusical. Theirs was, deliberately, a music of nonsignificance, a break from the moral and political freight that rock was bearing... [At Woodstock,] they planted the seeds of rock’s rejection at the site of its greatest triumph” (433).

Alice Cooper and Sha Na Na both emphasized visual presentation and incorporated self-conscious theatricality into their live performances, both key elements that challenged the counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s and foreshadowed the importance of spectacle to glam rock:

Both groups presented clearly staged spectacles and opened a gap between the figures on stage and the ‘real’ people portraying them, foregrounding constructed performance personae that denied the spontaneity, sincerity, and authenticity expected by rockers of their hippie audiences... Sha Na Na and Alice Cooper enthusiastically embraced theatricality and spectacle as the beginning of a new chapter in rock performance. (Auslander 38)

These significant differences in performance style between psychedelic rock and glam reveal much about the shifts in aesthetic, political, social, and cultural

values that occurred as the hippie counterculture gave way to what followed. While psychedelic rock emphasized seriousness, musical virtuosity, and no-frills performances, glam emphasized fun, accessibility, and embracing artifice and performativity. In coping with the hippies' failure to create real political change, the new wave of youth culture turned their focus inward: "If psychedelic rock addressed its audience as a collective whose actions could ultimately transform global politics, glam rock addressed its audience as individuals with the power to transform only themselves" (Auslander 6-7).

## **Agent**

The man the world came to know as David Bowie was born David Robert Jones in Brixton, London, on January 8, 1947, and grew up in the suburb of Bromley, hometown of H.G. Wells. At a young age, he was introduced to Beat writers and jazz music by his older half-brother, Terry Burns, who suffered from schizophrenia and spent much of Bowie's youth in and out of mental hospitals. Though he shared a birthday with Elvis Presley, young David was much more taken with the outlandish performances of Little Richard, whose music inspired him to ask for his first musical instrument, a saxophone. Among the artifacts included in the recent *David Bowie Is* exhibition curated by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is a framed promotional photograph of Little Richard that Bowie has kept since he was a teenager.

As Bowie came of age in 1960s London, he performed and recorded singles with several bands, including The King Bees, The Manish Boys, and The Lower Third, before embarking on a solo career. His self-titled first solo album was released in June of 1967 (the same day as the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, at least in the UK) and showcased Bowie's quirky songwriting skills in genres like pop, psychedelia, and music hall. Many songs that Bowie wrote during this time are narrated by fictional characters; "Please Mr. Gravedigger," for example, is narrated by a child murderer, while "When I'm Five" presents a four-year-old boy fantasizing about the mature things he will do after his next birthday, such as "jump in puddles, laugh in church, and marry [his] mum." When the album proved to be a commercial failure, he began studying mime, avant-garde theater, and dance under the tutelage of Lindsay Kemp. This training is evident in his vocal and physical performance styles and further solidified his interest in creating characters and stage personae.

After working with Kemp and briefly forming a performance art troupe called Feathers, Bowie returned his focus to music. His 1969 sophomore album, titled *David Bowie* in the UK and *Man of Words, Man of Music* in the US, featured his breakthrough single "Space Oddity," which benefited commercially from the 1969 moon landing. It remains one of Bowie's most recognizable songs, so much so that RCA reissued this album in 1972 under the title *Space Oddity*.

By 1972, Bowie had already discarded several personas, having transformed himself from a rhythm and blues saxophonist to a mod band leader

to a folk singer/songwriter. In 1970, in the midst of “Alice Cooper-mania” (Spitz 138), Bowie and a group of fellow musicians formed a short-lived band called The Hype. Picking up on Cooper’s theatricality, Bowie’s new wife Angela designed their flamboyant costumes, and each member was given a superhero-inspired name: Bowie, in “a multicolored, diaphanous concoction with many-hued scarves attached to a Lurex shirt” became Rainbowman; guitarist Mick Ronson was dubbed Gangsterman and outfitted in a “gangster suit” and fedora; bassist Tony Visconti, in a leotard with an “H” sewn on the chest, was Hypeman; and drummer John Cambridge, dressed in a cowboy hat and fringe, was for obvious reasons called Cowboy Man (Trynka 136; Spitz 138). The band debuted on the radio show *BBC In Concert* on February 5, 1970, followed by a live show at the Roundhouse in London on February 22. Although both performances were flawed -- missed endings, wrong chords, and the overpowering volume of Ronson’s amplifier -- the show at the Roundhouse is, according to Visconti, “the very first night of Glam Rock,” with T. Rex frontman Marc Bolan in attendance months before his band’s first hit, “Ride a White Swan” (qtd. in Spitz 139). Perhaps more importantly, though, Bowie found the shows exhilarating. At a later Hype show, a reviewer for *Disc and Music Echo* magazine observed that Bowie “had much more confidence and stage presence with this backing group” (qtd. in Spitz 139), and rather than being embarrassed or frustrated when the audience heckled them for their costumes, Bowie embraced it, seeming to relish being part of the spectacle (Trynka 137). He enjoyed being part of a band again: “His body



language had entirely changed: The costumes, the artifice, and the raw power of Ronson's guitar had unlocked the carefree joy of David's early R & B days" (Trynka 137). These elements would be significant in Bowie's development of the Ziggy Stardust character.

In 1971, in addition to welcoming his first child, Duncan (called by his middle name Zowie in the press), Bowie released *The Man Who Sold the World*, which presents Bowie moving away from the post-hippie, folk-inspired music of *Space Oddity* and experimenting with hard rock and lyrics focused on the theme of insanity. On the record sleeve, Bowie lounges on a chaise draped in shimmering blue silk and luscious purple velvet. He wears a cream velvet dress with a bold blue floral print, the top unbuttoned to show his pale chest. His pose accentuates the curve of his hip; his hair falls in blond curls over his shoulders. His black-booted legs are crossed, and one bangle-wristed hand adjusts the brim of his hat while the other casually holds a single playing card, the rest of the deck having been "strewn across the floor of a studio whose red curtains and exotic accessories mimic the fittings of a Victorian opium den, a bordello or one of the many bohemian squats that peppered Notting Hill, Kensington and Camden Town in the period" (Breward 194). While the designer of Bowie's dress, Mr. Fish, had been selling similar garments to "wayward aristocrats, fashion photographers, interior designers and pop stars since 1968" and Mick Jagger had previously worn a short Mr. Fish dress onstage in Hyde Park in 1969 (albeit with pants), "Bowie is flirting more determinedly with the dangerous territory of

sexual ambiguity” (Breward 194). His intent was clearly to draw attention to himself, whether through outrage or intrigue, and indeed, the image was considered too controversial for the American market, where it was replaced with a rather incongruous cartoon of a man in a cowboy hat carrying a rifle. Nevertheless, the original album cover, which creates an odd juxtaposition to the album’s proto-metal sound, is perhaps the first representation of Bowie as a self-consciously theatrical character.

While manager Tony Defries fought to extract Bowie from his contract with Mercury in order to secure a better record deal, Bowie was composing at a feverish pace but had no means to publish his music. Having recorded early versions of “Hang on to Yourself” and “Moonage Daydream,” Bowie decided to release them as a single, working under an assumed name to work around his issues with Mercury. The project was called Arnold Corns (supposedly after Bowie’s favorite Pink Floyd song “Arnold Layne”), and while not commercially successful, it did give Bowie a chance to devise a Warholian game of star manufacturing (Pegg 344). He gave the band members cumbersome stage names (Mark Carr-Pritchard, Timothy James Ralph St. Laurent Broadbent, and Polak de Somogyi) and chose friend and fashion designer Freddie Burretti, restyled as “Rudi Valentino,” to pretend to be the group’s lead singer, even though David had recorded the vocal tracks (Pegg 344-45). Although Arnold Corns only released a handful of songs, in hindsight, the band was a great vehicle through which Bowie could experiment with alter-egos, personas, and

“fabricated high-end pop stars” before eventually recasting himself as Ziggy Stardust (Spitz 167).

Seven months after the release of *The Man Who Sold the World*, in December of 1971, came *Hunky Dory*, which contains such seminal Bowie songs as “Changes” and “Life on Mars?”. Like its predecessor, *Hunky Dory* also featured a cover that highlighted Bowie’s androgyny: a tinted portrait of Bowie “living out his Bacall/Garbo fantasies, gazing wistfully into space as he pushes the flowing locks from his forehead” (Pegg 348). The use of a monochrome photograph that was later recolored “suggests a hand-tinted lobby-card from the days of the silent cinema and, simultaneously, Warhol’s famous *Marilyn Diptych* screen-prints” (Pegg 348). This image is more in keeping with the album’s music than was the cover of *The Man Who Sold the World*: Bowie had begun composing on piano rather than acoustic guitar, and a combination of piano-driven and guitar-oriented compositions makes for an eclectic but generally lighthearted collection. The album’s final track, the Velvet Underground pastiche “Queen Bitch,” provided listeners with a glimpse of the edgier persona Bowie was preparing to unleash.

## **Purpose**

While “purpose” and “motive” are generally considered synonymous, in Burkean analysis they represent very different things. Purpose is generally defined as the agent’s immediate reasons for performing a given act (in this

case, Bowie's reasons for creating the Ziggy Stardust persona), whereas motive involves explaining, justifying, or interpreting the act after it has occurred.

Purpose is forethought on the part of the agent; motive is hindsight on the part of the agent or others examining the act. This section will explore possible reasons that Bowie may have felt the need to create or become Ziggy Stardust, focusing mainly on the aesthetic and artistic, whereas the next chapter will examine some of the consequences of that action, focusing more on the socio-political.

As previously discussed, Bowie had always experimented with persona in his songwriting, composing songs whose protagonists range from four-year-old children to child-murdering gravediggers. His background in mime had taught him that he was more comfortable performing on stage when he could hide behind a character and, furthermore, that he was good at it. The Ziggy Stardust character provided Bowie an opportunity to create a more unified album with a narrative spanning several songs. Focusing on Ziggy's story gave him several viewpoints on which to base his songwriting, which enabled him to take advantage of his abilities as an actor and allowed him to use his preferred method of songwriting:

I'm a moderately good singer. I'm not a great singer, but I can interpret a song, which I don't think is quite the same as singing it. So I was never unaware of my strength as an interpretive performer, but writing a song for me... it never rang true. I had no problem writing something for Iggy Pop or working with Lou Reed or writing for Mott the Hoople. I can get into their

mood and what they want to do, but I find it extremely hard to write for me.

So I found it quite easy to write for the artists that I would create because I did find it much easier having created Ziggy to then write for him. (Bowie qtd. in Gerlach 00:02:04-00:02:43)

Although previous performers like Little Richard and Debbie Gore had used stage personae and made audiences self-conscious about the artificiality of pop music, Bowie's absorption into his character was much more theatrical (Waldrep, *Aesthetics* 110). This may have been in part because Bowie himself was not convinced of his own talent: "There was a real feeling of inadequacy in that era. I never really felt like a rock singer or a rock star or whatever, and I always felt a little bit out of my element" (Bowie qtd. in Gerlach 00:00:33-00:00:42). Playing the part of a rock star may have ultimately convinced Bowie that he could actually become one himself; as Minot emphasizes, "people come to believe what they say, even when they are asked to present views (whether by reading, improvising, or playing dramatic roles) with which they disagreed initially... In effect these are illustrations of the principle in persuasion theory that the most effective form of persuasion is self-persuasion" (355). As an added benefit, Ziggy could also protect Bowie from potential backlash should the experiment go awry: "Ziggy was David's homage to the outsider... a tribute to artifice, a play on identity, alter ego placed on alter ego, a vehicle for rock and roll that allowed David if everything failed to announce that this was all ironic, just a pose" (Trynka 182).

Ziggy was also a vehicle for Bowie to push the boundaries of rock performance, ushering it out of the realm of restraint and gravity favored by psychedelic rockers and into the domain of theatrical artificiality and performance art. According to Bowie scholar Nicholas Pegg, “Ziggy’s multi-referential appearance circumscribed its own superficiality, injecting a sense of exotic decadence and pantomimic ritual into a popular culture dominated by the T-shirt-and-jeans norm of ‘progressive’ rock” (352). Bowie’s (or Ziggy’s) shows were closer to performance art than the standard rock concert, and the extreme planning of lighting, costuming, choreography, and set design showed the audience that this was about more than entertainment. His background in mime and theater enabled Bowie to create extravagant performances unlike any seen before (Waldrep, *Aesthetics* 108).

Perhaps most importantly, Ziggy allowed Bowie to encourage his audience to overturn Victorian values and, as he had sung on *Hunky Dory*’s “Oh! You Pretty Things,” “make way for the *Homo superior*” the Nietzschean *Übermensch* who has evolved past *Homo sapiens* and will save the world from nihilism by creating new life-affirming social values based on reverence for life and the physical world. In conversations with friends at Haddon Hall, Bowie had developed his own manifesto: “This was a new era, factory jobs were obsolete, and so were the Victorian values that defined their parents’ lives. The coming generation would not be restricted by work or conventional sexuality. This bisexual, glittering generation was the *Homo superior* -- and David would be its

spokesperson” (Trynka 186). Pegg confirms that, although it would be a mistake to assume glam was some kind of “movement,” its “one consistent aim was the diversification of culture and the dismantling of tribal allegiances” (352-53).

Ziggy also served to complicate the notion of identity for Bowie’s audience, which emphasized the artificiality of rock music as well as the malleable nature of identity: “Just as Bowie did not appear ‘as himself’ on his early recordings but in a series of character roles, he did not appear ‘as himself’ on stage, either” (Auslander 120). Ziggy Stardust “was both a figure who mediated between sexualities and a third term that triangulated the characters delineated in the songs,” but he was also “a fictional entity enacted by Bowie. Revealed on stage, the ‘real person’ who portrayed the characters in the recordings turned out not to be a real person at all” (Auslander 120). To further complicate things, “Ziggy was himself a character from one of Bowie’s songs, meaning that Ziggy was sometimes singing about himself” (Auslander 120). Furthermore, “[b]y asserting the performativity of gender and sexuality through the queer Ziggy Stardust persona, Bowie challenged both the conventional sexuality of rock culture and the concept of a foundational sexual identity” (Auslander 106).

## **Act**

One of Bowie’s signature trademarks is his ability to create something new and different from an amalgamation of diverse influences, and Ziggy Stardust is

perhaps the first and certainly one of the most poignant examples. Bowie created a wholly new character in Ziggy by using a rock 'n roll attitude culled from newfound friends Lou Reed and Iggy Pop, along with the life stories of Syd Barrett, Vince Taylor, and the Legendary Stardust Cowboy.

As music critic and biographer Dave Thomas explains, “David Bowie was not the first person in the United Kingdom to hear the Velvet Underground, but he was certainly among the very earliest” (41). In 1966, nineteen-year-old Bowie was given an acetate of the unreleased *The Velvet Underground and Nico* album by then-manager Ken Pitt, who had just come back from New York City after meeting with Andy Warhol. This proved to be a life-changing moment for Bowie, who in 2002 wrote, “Everything I both felt and didn’t know about rock music was opened to me on one unreleased disc... The music was savagely indifferent to my feelings. It didn’t care if I liked it or not. It could give a fuck. It was completely preoccupied with a world as yet unseen by my suburban eyes... This was a degree of cool that I had no idea was humanly sustainable and it was ravishing” (qtd. in Spitz 75). By the time Bowie met the Velvet Underground’s enigmatic frontman Lou Reed in New York 1971, he had left the band and moved back to his parents’ home in Long Island, where he took a job as a typist at his father’s accounting firm. He had also released a commercially and critically unsuccessful self-titled solo album earlier that year.

Similarly, Iggy Pop, whom Bowie met on the same trip, had also fallen on hard times. By 1971, The Stooges had broken up, Iggy’s record label had



abandoned him, and he had suffered more than one heroin overdose (Trynka 179). Although Bowie was familiar with the Stooges before meeting Iggy -- it was he who had requested the meeting -- it was not until after meeting him that Bowie became obsessed with the singer: "He talked about Iggy for a full week -- it was definitely all-consuming," recalls Bob Grace, who had brokered Bowie's publishing contract with Chrysalis in 1970 and quickly became part of Bowie's inner circle (qtd. in Trynka 180). Biographer Paul Trynka asserts that "the main inspiration [for Ziggy Stardust] was undoubtedly Iggy, the singer with whom David was obsessed and whose doomed, Dionysian career path had already built its own mythology" (182).

These more recent acquaintances were, in Bowie's mind, akin to others he had met in the London music scene in the 1960s who had also lost their way, and in some cases a bit of their minds as well. Pink Floyd's original lead singer, Syd Barrett, whose intense stage presence and abstract lyrics fascinated Bowie, went through a period of psychological deterioration in late 1967 into 1968, which some attributed to overuse of LSD and others suspect was a result of schizophrenia. Vince Taylor, who had gained popularity with his band the Playboys in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was washed up by the time Bowie met him in 1966, his "eccentric and temperamental disposition... fuelled [sic] by an increasing intake of wine, amphetamines, and LSD" (Pegg 354). Bowie once said that one of his clearest memories of Taylor was him opening a map on the London street and pointing out to Bowie where UFOs would be landing over the

following few months (Pegg 354). Finally, the Legendary Stardust Cowboy, from whom Ziggy takes his surname, was a much-ridiculed performer who sang novelty songs about spacemen and rocket ships while incongruously dressed in buckskin jackets and ten-gallon hats. While certainly not a recipient of critical or commercial success, he is now considered one of the pioneers of the psychobilly genre, which combines elements of rockabilly and punk.

On the one hand, Bowie admired these artists for their innovations and dedication to their music, their unwillingness to compromise their visions for the sake of commercial or artistic success. On the other hand, having seen firsthand how this uncompromising attitude had negatively impacted these men, Bowie knew he did not want to suffer the same fate:

All those whom Bowie drew from seemed to have one foot in the grave and another in the future. Bowie knew he could never be like them without permanently damaging his body, his psyche and, more crucially, his hard-won career, but what if he wrote himself a part and acted it out? Then he could be them when he needed to be -- during performances -- and remain himself, a fabulous rock 'n' roll artiste, committed to his project but safe from any real harm. (Spitz 177)

Thus, the concept of Ziggy Stardust was born: a means to explore some of the darker elements of rock music without having to sacrifice his own wellbeing.

For Bowie, Ziggy was an homage of sorts to his favorite fallen performers, a pastiche of artists he admired but might not have dared to emulate otherwise.

This persona gave him permission to try to be something different, something better, something bolder than he had been in the past. Little did he know, Ziggy would do the same for countless other people in the months, years, and decades that followed.

## **Agency**

The idea of creating an alter ego of sorts worked well with the new music Bowie was creating, which was vastly different from the more piano-oriented, music-hall inspired songs of *Hunky Dory*. Indeed, before *Hunky Dory* had even been released, Bowie had already written eight or nine songs for his next album, rehearsing them with his touring band on a regular basis. These songs were less of a rock opera than “a collection of snapshots thrown together and later edited into a sequence that made sense” (Trynka 182); the idea that Bowie himself would embody the Ziggy Stardust character emerged at the last minute. While some songs still hearkened back to the *Hunky Dory* sound -- notably “Lady Stardust” and the narrative opener “Five Years” -- most were edgier and more aggressive. Although Bowie and his band were too accomplished as musicians to achieve the rougher, frenzied sounds of The Stooges, despite their system of rapid rehearsal and recording, songs like “Suffragette City” and “Hang On to Yourself” approximated a more polished version of The Stooges’ garage rock with heavy layers of guitar and driving energy. The Velvet Underground’s influence can be heard in Bowie’s aloof vocals in “Ziggy Stardust,” which are

vastly different from the emotional and dramatic vocal delivery found in songs like “Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide.” Thus, in addition to being an important part of Ziggy’s formation as a character, Lou Reed and Iggy Pop were also significant in defining the sound of his story.

As Waldrep points out, *Ziggy* does not follow a clear narrative storyline; its cohesion has less to do with a plot than with the recurring metaphors about alienness, sexual ambiguity, and the rock star as a god-like figure (*Future Nostalgia* 87). The album tells the story of a planet on the verge of annihilation. Despite popular belief, Ziggy is not an alien, but rather a human who inadvertently makes contact with extraterrestrial beings through his radio; he mistakes their messages for spiritual revelation, which he then spreads through music. This makes him a tremendously successful rock star whom his fans view as a messiah. Ultimately his fans lead to his demise, though it is unclear whether this is done intentionally or directly: the verse in “Ziggy Stardust” that mentions his death indicates that Ziggy is mentally unwell, so the line “When the kids had killed the man” could be taken literally or figuratively.

As far as musical arrangement, or Edward T. Cone’s “virtual persona,” *Ziggy Stardust* perfectly encapsulates glam rock’s signature combination of futurism and nostalgia. “Five Years” and “Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide” are written in a 12/8 time signature reminiscent of blues and soul songs like Jimi Hendrix’s “Red House” and Smokey Robinson’s “You Really Got a Hold on Me,” while piano-driven foot-stompers like “Star” and “Suffragette City” evoke memories of fifties rockers like

Jerry Lee Lewis and Bowie's childhood hero Little Richard. "Starman" features a one-octave jump between two consecutive notes in its chorus that is so similar to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" that Bowie was known to incorporate lines from the song into live performances of "Starman" (Pegg 263). These nostalgic sounds contrast sharply with futuristic lyrics that frequently allude to science fiction and casual sex. In "Moonage Daydream," for example, Ziggy proclaims himself a "space invader" and "rock'n'rollin' bitch," extols the joys of "the church of man, love" (or perhaps "the church of man-love"), and demands, "Put your raygun to my head."

In recording the songs for the album, Bowie "instructs the listener on how to interpret his songs as complex individual performances" (Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia* 108). Using multiple vocal personae and shifting perspectives, he makes different songs appear to be sung by different characters in the story. His inflections are often adjusted to enhance this idea: more open and resonant in songs during which he appears to be narrating events, such as "Five Years," more strained and nasal in songs that present him as the Ziggy character, such as "Suffragette City." The title song itself provides a useful example of how Bowie used his vocals to add to the story. The verses are sung in the same voice that narrates other songs on the album (again, more open and resonant), while the refrains, told from the perspective of Ziggy's band, are sung in a more strained, nasal voice that appears over multiple tracks so that it sounds like multiple people singing. These shifts in timbre never detract from the singular grain of

Bowie's voice, "a type of singing that almost oversignifies to remind listeners repeatedly that what they are hearing is a self-conscious performance of character and emotion (singing to make you think about singing) that yet connects to many people because it is closer to how they experience emotion than music that attempts to be 'naturalistic'" (Waldrep, *Aesthetics* 116).

Part of Bowie's significance in popular culture comes from the groundbreaking way he added visual elements to his music in the form of album artwork, costumes, and live performance, and much of this began with Ziggy Stardust. To complete his transformation into Ziggy, Bowie completely changed his physical appearance, starting with his clothes and hair. While other performers like Marc Bolan had started to "glam up" their looks with glitter on their faces and shiny fabrics on their bodies, their long hair and flared pants were still emblematic of the 1960s hippie aesthetic. Bowie very intentionally did away with the flowy fabrics and billowy silhouettes favored by that contingent, asking friend and clothing designer Freddie Burretti to replace them with skin-tight jumpsuits that, in homage to Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, were augmented by large Tudor-style codpieces. However, "to lessen the image of violence," Bowie explains that he "decided we should go for extremely colorful and exotic material in place of the droog white cotton" (qtd. in Trynka 184). Bowie then finished off the look with cheap, brightly colored wrestling boots, "complet[ing] the aesthetic of rock-and-roll danger and vaudeville camp" (Trynka 185). (Bowie's backing band, who would become known as the Spiders from

Mars, reluctantly wore similar outfits on stage, ultimately worn down by Bowie's excitement and persistence; they became much less resistant once they figured out that their female fans loved the look.)

Further breaking from the sixties, Bowie cut his flowing golden locks, opting for a short, spiky cut, and shortly thereafter hairstylist Suzanne Fussey (who would go on to marry Bowie's guitarist Mick Ronson) dyed it a bold coppery red. As Bowie once recalled, "...I spied the Kansai Yamamoto model on a fashion magazine cover. It was a slightly 'girlie' magazine like *Honey*, definitely not *Vogue*. In 1972, I duplicated not only the colour from this cover but the cut as well. A complete lift" (qtd. in Cullen 244). According to style journalist Dylan Jones, this part of the transformation made Ziggy feel more permanent for Bowie: "When he had long hair, he was one of a gang, with a generational agenda. With his red shag, he looked like no one on Earth, and its power was extraordinary. Not only did people respond to him differently, he felt different himself, almost as though he had dyed his skin. This wasn't a hat he could simply put on and take off, this was part of his body now" (93-94). While it may have made Bowie instantly recognizable at first, this signature hairstyle was soon widely copied by his fans. Jones insists that "clothes, though vital to the success of Ziggy, were nothing compared to the influence of the haircut... [it] epitomized the androgyny of glam rock and, copied by both boys and girls... [and] became the hit of 1973" (qtd. in Cullen 244).

Even before Ziggy's first appearance on television, many of these significant changes in style were made visible on the album's artwork. Unlike most Bowie album covers, which usually feature close-up studio photos, the *Ziggy* cover was shot on the empty streets of London on a rainy night, and Bowie is positioned quite far from the camera in the lower half of the image, illuminated by a streetlight and surrounded by cars, red brick buildings, and brown cardboard boxes (Pegg 357). Like the cover of *Hunky Dory*, this photo is re-tinted, emphasizing Bowie's blue droog jumpsuit and blond hair (cut short but not yet dyed red). Above his head and at the center of the image is a sign that reads "K. West" -- an *objet trouvé* that, in the context of the album's themes, can be seen as a play on the word "quest" (Pegg 357). He wears an electric guitar slung toward his right hip with the headstock pointing forward like a rifle, its black strap contrasted against his pale, exposed chest; this is oddly inconsistent with the lyrics that claim "[Ziggy] played it left hand," as this guitar is clearly made to be played with the right hand. This diminutive, isolated figure certainly looks alien in such drab urban surroundings, resembling an incongruously dressed character in a noir film. His *contrapposto* stance seems confident and dynamic, with one purple-booted foot propped up on a trash can, an arm casually draped across his leg. Even though the image's shading and his distance from the camera makes it unclear whether his eyes are open, one gets the sensation of a determined, piercing, slightly threatening gaze. The text imposed in the top left corner of the album cover, written in all capital letters, is also worth noting. While Bowie's



name comes above the album title, “David Bowie” and “Ziggy Stardust” are written in the same size font, giving equal attention to both creator and character. Moreover, “David Bowie” is written in yellow that fades to an orange-red color at the bottom, while “Ziggy Stardust” is written in orange-red and fades to yellow at the bottom. The mirroring of colors in these letters further reflects the connection between Bowie and his persona.

This confident, masculine image is juxtaposed by the one on the back of the album sleeve. Although Bowie is wearing the same clothes and appears to be, once again, on a cold, rainy London street at night, he is standing inside a red telephone booth, framed by its door, dissected by panes of glass. The stance is decidedly feminine, perhaps a bit camp: feet close together, right hip thrust outward, right hand on hip, left elbow resting on the telephone while his left hand lingers near his face, fingers relaxed. His expression is less confrontational, more inviting but rather aloof. The street hustler image being evoked is enhanced by the glass panels in the phone booth door, which frame his face, his pale chest, and his crotch in the center of the photo, similar to the way women’s bodies are often fragmented in advertisements. If the front cover photo has a slightly menacing quality with its *A Clockwork Orange* undertones, then the back cover photo hints at a more erotic, sexually ambiguous subversion.

Japanese designer Kansai Yamamoto, whose model inspired Ziggy’s trademark coiffure, would further influence Bowie’s style during the later parts of the Ziggy Stardust tour by designing some of Bowie’s most memorable costumes

from this time period. Bowie had come across Yamamoto's work while looking for spectacular and unusual outfits befitting his alien-appointed messiah character and thought Yamamoto's designs were a perfect choice: "I very much had the idea of Japanese culture as the alien culture because I couldn't conceive a Martian culture" (qtd. in Cullen 244). As Waldrep points out, "Like [Oscar] Wilde, Bowie associated the Oriental with an ability to present androgyny as a hyperstylization that draws on transgressive fantasies of bi- or unisexed beings" (111).

At first, Bowie struggled to get his hands on one of Yamamoto's designs, finally scoring a leotard, "red, with cutoff legs and a ludicrous bunny design that was so outre it had languished unsold" (Trynka 199). When the two finally met in New York on Valentine's Day 1973, Yamamoto presented Bowie with five custom garments; by the time the tour reached Japan that April, he had also created nine stage costumes for Bowie. Yamamoto said of Bowie at the time, "He has an unusual face... He's neither man nor woman... which suited me as a designer because most of my clothes are for either sex" (qtd. in Cullen 240). According to fashion historian Helene Thian, Bowie was "absolutely the first" Western artist to use the hayagawari technique from kabuki theater; the term hayagawari literally means "quick change" and refers to the dramatic tearing away of a cape onstage to reveal another costume beneath (qtd. in "David Bowie's Love Affair with Japanese Style").

On the same trip to Japan, Bowie received instruction in kabuki makeup techniques from Japanese kabuki star Tamasaburo Bando V (Broackes 122), who, as an onnagata, was a male actor who specialized in portraying women. Bowie previously had received training in stage makeup application during his time with Lindsay Kemp's mime company, but while he may have previously used makeup to play up his androgynous good looks, when he assumed the role of Ziggy Stardust, makeup became especially important in creating an otherworldly appearance. This set Ziggy apart not only from Bowie's earlier incarnations but also from the earlier tradition of male rock stars like Elvis Presley, who used makeup to enhance his masculine appearance. Makeup use in general fell out of favor with male performers in the 1960s, who perceived it as effeminate and inauthentic, and although other male artists in the early 1970s wore makeup as part of the glam rock trend, it was either relatively minimal (eyeshadow, glitter on the cheeks) or so exaggeratedly feminine as to emphasize the wearers' masculinity (as with bands like the New York Dolls) -- what Marjorie Garber refers to as a "marked transvestite" (354). Bowie's experience with mime makeup, and later with kabuki makeup, allowed him to elevate his use of stage makeup to do more than enhance or disguise his masculinity; it enabled him to play up his androgyny and, to a certain extent, camouflage his humanity.

## Conclusion

Although Ziggy Stardust technically made his television debut on June 15, 1972, on “a teatime children’s show” called *Lift Off With Ayshea* (Jones 89), his real introduction to the British public *en masse* was during his performance of “Starman” on BBC’s *Top of the Pops* on July 6, 1972. The song had been hastily written and recorded and was added to the album at the request of RCA, who felt that *Ziggy Stardust* lacked a radio-friendly single (Jones 70). Released in April of 1972, “Starman” made no commercial impact for two months, although it immediately gained critical praise; following Bowie’s appearance on *Top of the Pops*, “Starman” stormed into the top ten (Pegg 261-62). Many viewers at the time would have considered Bowie a one-hit wonder still trying to live up to the success of “Space Oddity,” and the opening acoustic chords of “Starman,” so similar to those of his first hit, likely led these viewers to believe that Bowie either only had one formula for songwriting or was desperately trying to recapture the achievements of “Space Oddity” by replicating the song itself, science-fiction-inspired title and all. They were, of course, proven wrong. Not only did “Starman” prove to be Bowie’s comeback hit, but it was also “the vessel by which he reveal[ed] himself as a reconstructed icon” (Pegg 262).

The impact of this performance may not be well understood by Americans, but it may not be entirely inaccurate to compare it to the Beatles first appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show* here in the States. Television was still “the quintessential communal experience... in which all members of the family were

forced to consume each other's culture" (Jones 103). And like the Beatles on *Sullivan*, Bowie's appearance on *Top of the Pops* exposed the generation gap with incredible clarity, with kids staring in awe at the beautiful androgyne on the screen -- wearing a multi-colored jumpsuit, red patent wrestling boots, and white fingernail varnish, although he hadn't yet started shaving his eyebrows -- while their fathers shouted homophobic epithets at the television (Jones 122).

The group's outlandish outfits may have been sufficient to elicit such a response, but people who saw the performance best remember Bowie casually draping his arm around guitarist Mick Ronson's shoulders not once, but twice:

The most radical thing about the gesture, within the confines of male sexual politics, is the embracing of another man not on a sports field... It was also an exotic gesture, as there was nothing brotherly about it. This wasn't Jagger and Richards embracing each other at the end of some sweaty gig, sharing a bottle of Jack Daniel's together. This wasn't a bunch of denim-clad long-hairs holding hands and communing as they tried to find a perfect harmony, and this wasn't the rugby team throwing soap at each other in the baths after the game. What it always wasn't was a coy piece of camp, a play-act for the camera. No, this was two good-looking, over-dressed young men embracing each other on national television, in an almost completely unselfconscious way." (Jones 117)

According to one critic, this was a "sweet moment of inclusion, the alien embracing the rocker, and, by proxy, all of the nation's misfits" (qtd. in Jones

122). The show was watched by an audience of over fifteen million, and while people do not often gush about the other artists who performed that night -- Dr. Hook, Sweet, Frederick Knight -- people often speak of Bowie's performance with reverence (Jones 130).

While there has been a long, futile debate over whether Bowie or T. Rex's Marc Bolan created glam rock, it seems this performance made that point moot; regardless of who first donned glitter on their cheeks or eyelids, Bowie was now the undisputed king of glam. Bowie had elevated glam style in a way that set him apart from other musicians in the genre:

Before Bowie came careering along, in his boas and boots, most glam-rock bands looked as though they'd be far more comfortable knocking about on children's television, singing to a man in an oversized bear outfit, say, or dancing merrily in a multicoloured plastic playground surrounded by foam palm trees... Until Ziggy came along, the Seventies was the sort of decade that tucked its shirt into its underpants. Compared to Bowie, the rest of the glam-rock crowd was full of window dressers. (Jones 75-76)

Unlike more "benign" acts, Bowie looked "transgressive, odd, dangerous... as though he might turn out to be trouble" (Jones 123). While glam had made rock music fun again, Bowie had now added that key element -- transgression -- that always seems to magnify the devotion of young fans to rock music.

After Bowie's performance on *Top of the Pops* on July 6, 1972, "the Seventies would finally begin" (Jones 81), as would the brief reign of Ziggy

Stardust. As Dylan Jones explains, “Bowie’s performance didn’t just kick-start the Seventies, in a way it did the same for the Eighties, as many of those who saw him on television that day didn’t get a chance to fulfil their own dreams until years later -- John Lydon, Boy George, Sean Ryder, Dave Gahan of Depeche Mode, Dave Wakeling of the Beat” (Jones 124). His book *When Ziggy Played Guitar: David Bowie and the Four Minutes that Shook the World* features enthusiastic recollections of this performance from a number of prominent British musicians who would rise to fame in the years and decades that followed. Ian McCulloch from Echo and the Bunnymen says that it helped people like him “forge an identity and a perspective on things” (qtd. in Jones 123); Siouxsie Sioux recalls, “It was the moment that I knew music was made for me,” explaining how it helped to bring together the Bromley Contingent (qtd. in Jones 125); Robert Smith of the Cure remembers immediately putting on some of his older sister’s makeup and being thrilled at how odd it made him look and how much it upset people (Jones 125). Perhaps the most striking recollection comes from Gary Kemp of Spandau Ballet:

The first time I fell in love it was with a man... Gender-bending was suddenly far more rebellious than drugs and violence. [The performance] became the benchmark by which we would forever judge pop and youth culture. It was a cocksure swagger of pouting androgyny that appealed to pubescent working-class youth across Britain -- a Britain still dominated by post-war austerity and weed-filled bombsites. For us, the Swinging Sixties

had never happened; we were too busy watching telly. The object of my passion had dyed orange hair and white nail varnish. Looking out from a tiny TV screen was a Mephistophelean messenger from the space age, a tinselled troubadour to give voice to my burgeoning sexuality. Pointing a manicured finger down the barrel of a BBC lens, he spoke to me: "I had to phone someone, so I picked on you." I had been chosen. Next to him, in superhero boots, his flaxen-haired buddy rode shotgun with a golden guitar. As my singing Starman draped his arm around him, I felt a frisson of desire and wanted to go to their planet. I had witnessed a visitation from a world of glitter. That night, I planned my future." (qtd. in Jones 124)

An overriding theme that can be drawn from these memories of Bowie -- and supported by the many heartfelt remembrances shared after his death -- is the feeling that Bowie made people feel less alone in the world. For the first time, the freaks, weirdos, and losers of that generation felt like being different might not be such a bad thing.



## **CHAPTER IV:**

### **FUNCTIONS OF PERSONA**

#### **Defining Motive**

The reason for exploring the various elements of Burke's pentad discussed in the previous chapter (scene, agent, act, agency, purpose) is to determine motive. *Motive* in Burke's terminology is different from *purpose* in that purpose seeks to explain why an agent performed a particular act, while motives are, according to Burke scholar William Benoit, "utterances that usually occur after actions, intended to explain, justify, characterize, or interpret those actions" (70). As briefly discussed in the previous chapters, purpose is forethought on the part of the agent, whereas motive is usually hindsight on the part of the agent or others examining the act. In Bowie's case, motives for creating Ziggy Stardust include offering an alternative to binary systems of gender and sexuality and dealing with his family's troubling history of mental illness. Examining the effects of the Ziggy Stardust character in relation to these motives will prove that a stage persona can serve genuine rhetorical purposes.

#### **Gender and Sexuality**

In addition to being a huge step away from the anti-spectacle culture of the 1960s, Bowie's exotic, androgynous appearance blurred the boundaries of gender and sexuality. In early-1970s England, homosexuality was still very

taboo; the act itself was only made legal in 1967, and arrests for “gross indecency” tripled over the next three years (Trynka 187). Although the feminist and gay liberation movements were inspired by the antiwar movement, even the counterculture’s attitudes toward gender and sexuality were actually rather conservative (Auslander 30). Robert McRuer, who specializes in queer and disabilities studies, explains that “despite the abstract rhetoric of love and sexual freedom that dominated the movement, the privileging of masculinity through an emphasis on ‘groovy’ heterosexual performance meant that the counterculture was often homophobic as well as sexist” (qtd. in Austlander 30-31).

Despite (or possibly because of) these negative attitudes toward women and homosexuality, Bowie flaunted his femininity and openly declared his attraction to men. In 1970, Bowie wore a dress on the cover of *The Man Who Sold the World* and gave an interview with *Jeremy*, the UK’s first mainstream gay magazine (Breward 194); the next year, he admitted to *Melody Maker* that he was “gay -- and always [had] been” (qtd. in Trynka 187). Although Bowie is often criticized for not living up to this claim later in his life due to his lack of same-sex relationships after the 1970s, it seems plausible that Bowie may have used the word “gay” to mean not entirely heterosexual, the way the word “queer” is used today, especially considering that he was married with a child at the time. Regardless, it is difficult to overstate the importance of this statement at a time when his contemporaries remained firmly closeted: “For all the playfulness, this was a momentous announcement -- utterly without precedent in the music

business, and ravishingly brave” (Trynka 187). Bowie, having been introduced to London’s gay intelligentsia during his affair with Lindsay Kemp, also frequented the Sombrero, a gay nightclub in London, and had spoken frankly about having an open marriage with then-wife Angie, who was openly bisexual and with whom he had a young son. Using his charm and good looks to establish a pattern of sexual ambiguity -- Charles Shaar Murray says that Bowie had “a genius for inducing a powerful, platonic man-crush in fundamentally straight guys” (qtd. in Trynka 187) -- Bowie continued to blur the boundaries between masculine and feminine, gay and straight, well beyond (but particularly well during) Ziggy Stardust.

By presenting himself in a feminine manner in the press, on album covers, and in live performances, Bowie emphasized the constructed nature of gender and problematized the gender binary. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler posits that gender is a type of improvised performance and points out that drag in particular “fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (137). Drag replaces “the law of heterosexual coherence” -- the use in heterosexist culture of the connection between biological sex and gender to impose a norm of heterosexual desire -- with a performance that emphasizes the difference between sex and gender and “dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity,” thereby denaturalizing both concepts: “*In imitating gender, drag*

*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself -- as well as its contingency* (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 137-38). The fact that Bowie was in an open heterosexual marriage and had a child while maintaining this effeminate visage and affirming his bisexuality only added to the effect, as did his resemblance to then-wife Angie, who was also slim and, at the time, had a similar hairstyle and color. At a glance, it might have been difficult to tell husband from wife.

Furthermore, Butler asserts that drag parodies “the very notion of an original” and “reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin,” emphasizing that “[t]his perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization... As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself” (138). Instead of referencing some sort of original or ideal woman, “gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction” (138). While Bowie-as-Ziggy’s performances would not be considered drag in the more common sense of the term, because he did not present himself as a woman, his performances served a similar purpose: emphasizing the constructed nature of himself as a character and of gender more generally while resisting the cultural norms that push people to participate in and perform these imitative practices.

Bowie's disruption of the gender binary can also be examined as a form of category crisis: a situation in which borders between distinct categories blur and become permeable, allowing individuals to cross from one category to another (Garber 16). Cultural studies scholar and Harvard professor Marjorie Garber argues that "one of the most consistent and effective functions of the transvestite in culture is to indicate the place of... 'category crisis,' disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances" (16). She claims that transvestism "will always function as a sign of overdetermination" and "is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female, but the crisis of category itself" (16, 17). Garber points out that in contemporary popular culture, and especially in pop-rock music, "cross-dressing, 'androgyny,' and gender-bending have become almost de rigueur... calling into question received notions of 'masculine' and 'feminine,' straight and gay, girl and woman, boy and man" (354). Garber discusses how Bowie's boyhood idol, Little Richard, embodied this concept: in the 1950s, when makeup and glitter were unknown in the mainstream, Richard was a defiantly gay man who wore makeup, teased his hair, and wore outlandish costumes, dressing up like the Queen of England for one show and like the pope for the next. While a queer persona would normally have been very taboo at this time, Richard used it as a way to distract from his race, thus making him an unusually clear example of how cultural anxieties about

things like class and race can be refocused as anxieties about gender (Garber 302).

Garber further explains that category crises can indicate displacements from the axis of class and race onto the axis of gender, citing the rise in transvestism “both in the theater and in the streets” in medieval and Renaissance Europe, when dress for various social classes, as well as for men and women, was dictated by law: “Once again, transvestism was the specter that rose up... to mark and overdetermine this crisis of social and economic change” (Garber 17). In the early 1970s, class conflicts were certainly on the rise in England, where, around the time Bowie appeared on *Top of the Pops* on January 6, 1972, unemployment figures passed one million (Jones 19). During a roundtable discussion held in support of the *David Bowie Is* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, educationalist and pop culture scholar Sir Christopher Frayling, who like Bowie grew up in south London in the 1950s and 1960s, recalled: “One of the things that Bowie did at that time was change the debate from class to gender; we were going on about class -- Marx, demonstrations and all that -- but he was talking about something else” (“David Bowie Then...” 283). Writer Philip Hoare, who grew up in Southampton (which “had no sense of connection to any cosmopolitanism”), added that Bowie “created a pattern that one could follow, which was... not about class, but about gender... To go out wearing a woman’s jacket and high-heeled shoes... you could believe you were David Bowie” (“David Bowie Then...” 283).

But not everyone was a fan of Bowie's gender-bending ways, including those who may have had the most to gain from them socially. Camille Paglia points out that, although Bowie pushed boundaries of gender and sexuality, he found himself at odds with both feminism and the gay liberation movement. Despite the involvement of drag queens in the Stonewall Riots, gay men wanted to distance themselves from drag queens to avoid stereotypes of effeminacy, and feminists were often hostile toward drag queens for what they saw as mockery (Paglia 90). Feminists also may have been put off by Bowie's use of makeup, which many at the time considered "accoutrements of female oppression" (Paglia 90). Similarly, Butler points out that drag and cross-dressing are considered offensive by many feminists, who consider these practices to be "degrading to women," but she believes this critique is overly simplistic (*Gender Trouble* 137). She explains, "As much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman' (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (*Gender Trouble* 137). Besides, Bowie's futuristic and ambiguous look acts less as a flagrant representation of the feminine than as its signifier, perhaps reflecting his interest in Asian theater. Drawing on Roland Barthes' description of the *Bunraku* puppet theater tradition of Japan, popular culture scholar Shelton Waldrep connects Bowie's approach to the visual form of rock music to Asian theater gesture. Using a phrase borrowed from Barthes, Waldrep argues that in Bowie's performances gender is "absented" rather than

erased (*Future Nostalgia* 17). Barthes explains that, in the Japanese tradition, “The transvestite actor (since the women’s roles are played by men) is not a boy made up as a woman, by dint of a thousand nuances, realistic touches, costly simulations, but a pure signifier whose *underneath* (the truth) is neither clandestine... nor surreptitiously signed... simply *absented*”; rather than portray or copy the woman, he “only signifies her” (qtd. in Waldrep 17-18). As opposed to “Western drag shows” with “opulent blondes whose trivial hand or large foot infallibly give the lie to the hormonal bosom,” this type of performance “is the gesture of femininity, not its plagiarism” (qtd. in Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia* 18). Since Bowie had quite an affinity for Asian culture, it does not seem farfetched that traditions such as these would have influenced his performances. Rather than “plagiarize” femininity by presenting himself as a woman (or as a man dressed like a woman), Bowie incorporated feminine style and gestures into Ziggy’s performances, obliterating the line between male and female and complicating even further the notions of gender performance and the gender binary.

Furthermore, Waldrep compares Bowie’s “attempts to create a feminized body,” especially as Ziggy Stardust, to female artists like Carolee Schneemann and Karen Finlay, who “emphasized the materiality of their bodies, the degradation of the female body in art and in life, but its separateness from the male body as well” (*Future Nostalgia* 18). By exploring “the limits of the gendered body,” Bowie “called into question the limits of our definitions of gender and



sexuality, creating not transvestitism or camp, but the defamiliarization of the body in a way that can only be compared to that of feminist performance artists” (*Future Nostalgia* 18). Waldrep explains that “Bowie made the male body new again, removing centuries of encrusted meaning to suggest the possibility of new interpretations of it” and associates him with French feminist writers like “Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig [who] were, in starkly different ways, attempting to write through the female body -- to create an experimental new language with which to represent the female, feminine, or lesbian” (*Future Nostalgia* 18). Connecting these performances to feminism further emphasizes the rhetorical nature of Bowie’s work as Ziggy Stardust.

Despite these observations, however, Waldrep also asserts that, “[w]hile a number of theories have been promulgated about Bowie’s performance of Ziggy and his alien visitation, none quite gets it right, at least in terms of sex, gender, and representation” (*Future Nostalgia* 29). Discussing Bowie’s performance of Ziggy Stardust in terms of drag and androgyny is problematic because Bowie is really doing neither. Waldrep insists that in his pre-Ziggy incarnations, as seen on the covers of *The Man Who Sold the World* and *Hunky Dory*, “he was still not doing drag -- not dressing as a transvestite -- but dressing as a man wearing clothing that men (still) rarely adopt. He was forging his own approach to gender while calling attention to the scope and limits of how it is usually constructed by history and culture” (*Future Nostalgia* 39). Many of Bowie’s performances “seem to be closer to a pastiche of gender in which [he] places the codes of maleness

and femaleness (or really, masculinity and femininity) next to each other. His own body is reinscribed in such a way that both its male characteristics (strong legs, tall stature) and its female ones (narrow shoulders, large eyes) are called attention to" (Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia* 29). The result is neither drag nor androgyny, but rather "an alternative to gender encoding as it might exist in the future" and "an alternative mainly to straight male sexuality -- one that is not gay, but allows for the possibility of feminine self-expression or of same-sex erotics" (Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia* 30).

The key to this "reinscribing" of Bowie's body were the creative costumes designed by Freddie Burretti and, later, Kansai Yamamoto, which took advantage of Bowie's long, lean figure and the outlandish fashions of the time to invent imaginative ways to exhibit the male form:

Indeed, Bowie's use of costume at this time often meant taking the sartorial excesses of seventies clothing—platform shoes, mixed patterns, artificial fabrics—and sending them up with sci-fi, gender-bending touches resulting in extremely ugly creations that could nevertheless be compoundingly erotic in their ingenious display of his skin. The designs often emphasized his long legs, his shoulders, and his stomach: areas usually associated with the male gaze of a woman's body. This feminizing effect was reflected in the glitter of the costumes, which signified both glamour and the feminine as excess... Indeed, much of what might be seen a Bowie's ability to create -- or draw from -- a gay erotics came from

his ability to suggest (better than a talented transvestite) how the body in its clothes codes gender and encodes sexuality. (Waldrep, *Aesthetics* 111-12)

An excellent example of this is the knit jumpsuit worn during the *Aladdin Sane* tour, which can be seen in D.A. Pennebaker's film of Ziggy's final show in 1973. Essentially a unitard missing its right leg and left arm and shoulder, it is knit in horizontal sections with a variety of geometric patterns in red, blue, white, and green. The somewhat masculine color scheme is offset by comically oversized bangles on his left wrist and right ankle, along with a lush feather boa. The top is cut at a sharp angle, exposing almost his entire collarbone the way one might see on a woman's one-shouldered dress, but it also exposes the left half of his chest, which along with his sinewy right thigh reaffirms his masculinity. While some of Bowie's costumes from this era easily could have been worn by women -- Kate Moss wore the red "Woodland Creatures" playsuit from this tour to accept a Brit Award on Bowie's behalf in 2014 -- this jumpsuit would have left them overexposed (at least by Western standards).

Even though Bowie's appearances as Ziggy Stardust may not have been "drag" as most people would define it, he was working to achieve the same goals: to use the blurring of boundaries between genders to bring attention to the constructed nature of identity. Waldrep asserts that "Bowie's performances are performances of self, ones in which the self is presented as a character in a fiction," and subsequently the audience is "implicated in performances such as

these, made to feel a part of the manipulation of media, genre, and tradition, but also to understand the constructedness of self, the vampiric interconnection between representation and identity -- most especially, perhaps, in terms of gender" (*Future Nostalgia* 18). American drag performer and television personality RuPaul Charles, in discussing the difference between drag and transgender on the daytime talk show *The Real*, echoes this sentiment by explaining, "Drag is really making fun of identity. We are shapeshifters. We're like, 'Today, I'm this. Now, I'm a cowboy. Now, I'm this.' That's what drag is about... I'll do whatever I want to do at any time" (qtd. in Nichols). One could easily imagine Ziggy-era David Bowie saying the same thing.

Of course, Bowie's work also went beyond gender and into the realm of the sexual, which he treated with the same kind of ambiguity. Philip Auslander extends Judith Butler's analysis of gender as performance to sexual identity, arguing that "Bowie's presentation of his sexuality on these occasions [claiming to be gay in *Melody Maker* and kissing Lou Reed at a press conference in London] suggests a perception of such identities as performative, not expressive. His performance of a gay or bisexual identity did not express some essential quality of his person; it was, rather, a performance of signs that are socially legible as constituting a gay identity" (135). For Butler, "If gender attributes or acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an

act or attribute might be measured” (*Gender Trouble* 141). For Auslander, the same can be said about attributes and acts associated with sexuality.

However, Bowie’s performance of these gay attributes and acts was “multiply subversive”: “Rather than raising questions about his own sexuality, Bowie threw the sexuality of rock into question, not only by performing a sexual identity previously excluded from rock but also by performing that identity in such a way that it was clearly revealed as a *performance* for which there was no underlying referent” (Auslander 135), thereby indicating that “the heterosexuality considered normative in rock culture is no more foundational than any other sexual identity” (Auslander 136). Waldrep similarly argues that Bowie’s work was also designed to bring into question the values of rock culture, that Bowie’s target for deconstruction is not his own identity “but the assumed identity of rock itself as white, heterosexual, and male... Bowie is not expressing the self, and he is not creating a representation of a gay or bisexual man (or woman or transgendered person), he is commenting upon the presumed innocence of rock’s naturalist pose” (*Future Nostalgia* 33-34).

Auslander further points to Butler’s discussion of gender parody and subversion, “the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames [that] brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (*Bodies That Matter* 31), and points out that the songs “Hang on to Yourself” and “Suffragette City” can be viewed as examples, as both songs are “played overly fast, sung in mannered voices, and convey sexual

urgency in almost parodic terms” (Auslander 137). Although both “Hang on to Yourself” and “Suffragette City” clearly feature a male protagonist having sex with a woman, their placement on the album indicates that they are sung from the perspective of the titular character, a “queer alien” whose “hyperbolic representations of male heterosexuality [are] pushed to the edge of hysteria” (Auslander 137). Surely it is no coincidence that these are the most aggressive, rock-oriented tracks on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. In concert, Bowie’s costumes highlight this juxtaposition, particularly with “Suffragette City,” for which he wears a long, sparkly earring and a playsuit that exposes almost the entirety of his arms and legs.

Tigers on Vaseline aside, by playfully probing the gray areas between the binaries of gender and sexuality, Bowie (or Ziggy) offered the “glittering generation” of his manifesto an opportunity to explore their own ideas of what it meant to be male or female, masculine or feminine, gay or straight, or perhaps all or none of the above. Waldrep postulates that Ziggy’s seductive powers stem from the fact that he is “alien, futuristic, or even god-like” and may function as a figure so inspiring that men could be attracted to him without feeling transgressive: “He opens up an alternative terrain where it is possible that his followers, male and female, are both his lovers. His charisma, however, is itself both feminine and masculine because he plays both roles, often a subject and object at the same time. Bowie seems to imagine a universe in which sexuality is no longer a binary choice” (*Future Nostalgia* 30). With people now openly

declaring themselves bisexual, pansexual, polysexual, asexual, demisexual, non-binary, genderfluid, agender, and a host of others, perhaps we are finally catching up to where Bowie was over forty-five years ago.

### **Coping with Concerns about Mental Health**

In *The Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke acknowledges the connection between rhetoric and psychology, explaining that "in the Freudian concern with the neuroses of individual patients, there is a strongly rhetorical ingredient... The *ego* with its *id* confronts the *super-ego* much as an orator would confront a somewhat alien audience, whose susceptibilities he must flatter as a necessary step towards persuasion" (37-38). Burke describes the Freudian psyche as "quite a parliament, with conflicting interests expressed in ways variously designed to take the claims of rival factions into account" (38). If rhetoric is by nature "*addressed*, since persuasion implies an audience," then a person can be his or her own audience (38). In Bowie's case, in addition to consciously creating personae to develop his abilities as a songwriter and performer and to defy cultural norms that he found objectionable, there was most certainly a psychological component as well, especially considering the dark emotional states in which personae like Ziggy Stardust and the Thin White Duke left him. Bowie himself admitted that a lot of Ziggy's story "came out of my own problems. It was a way of creating myself" (qtd. in Jones 14). In particular, Bowie "needed to find a way to express and understand the legacy of his family politics and

childhood adversities” (James 111), and although Bowie doesn’t directly address his family history directly in the lyrics of *Ziggy Stardust*, “they are his attempt to deal with the legacy of madness” his family passed down to him (James 106), as well as a reflection of “Bowie’s preoccupation with the mechanics of fame and power, the mutually parasitical relationship between star and fan, politician and voter” (James 92). While Ziggy offered Bowie a mask to hide behind in case he was incapable of effectively portraying a rock star, he also served as an imaginative way to exorcise his psychological demons.

Psychologist and author Oliver James believes that Bowie’s personas were constructed as a means to work through psychological difficulties rooted in his childhood. Through a thorough examination of Bowie’s life, career, and family history, James explores how differences in upbringing, rather than genetic causes, led Bowie to artistic self-expression while it led his half-brother Terry to madness. Bowie’s mother, Peggy Jones (née Burns), was the eldest of six children, five of them girls. She had her first child, Terry, out of wedlock and left him to be raised by her mother Margaret, whom James suspects may have suffered from borderline personality disorder; she was cold and distant, socially ambitious, and averse to physical affection. Shortly after Terry’s birth, after the start of World War II, things began to unravel for the Burns family. Two of Margaret’s daughters, Una and Vivienne, suffered from schizophrenia, and a third, Nora, was manic depressive (what we now refer to as bipolar) and at one point was treated with a lobotomy. These misfortunes in addition to her



husband's death from leukemia in 1946 caused Margaret to become even more disturbed: "She found it hard to express emotion or affection, disliked physical contact with others, had profound status envy, was isolated and remote, and showed increasing hostility and violence towards others (James 20). During a "furious row" with Peggy, who blamed her mother for the family's misfortunes, Margaret declared that Peggy was a "bad seed," that the whole family was cursed, and that the curse would only end when all the family members were dead (James 21). By this time, Peggy had married and given birth to Bowie, who grew up well aware of his grandmother's "curse" and experienced the mental deterioration of his aunt Una and half-brother Terry firsthand.

Although many believe that mental illnesses, particularly schizophrenia, are passed on through genetics, James offers evidence that genetics are only a very small factor; children who experience "childhood adversity" -- "childhood sexual and physical abuse; emotional abuse (such as over-control, stigmatisation, favouritism); physical and emotional neglect; bullying; and parental death" -- are three times more likely to develop schizophrenia, and the risk increases with the number of adversities (23). Emotional abuse in particular increases the risk of psychosis twelvefold, more than any other form of childhood adversity (23). Clinical psychologist John Reed indicates that childhood adversity forces children to develop coping mechanisms that can manifest as psychotic symptoms later in life; these events "[affect] brain development to create a heightened sensitivity to stresses in adult life, making psychosis more likely"

(James 26). Given the evidence that Margaret was emotionally abusive toward her children and Terry, and that Bowie's mother was in turn emotionally abusive toward him, it becomes more understandable why so many of his family members suffered from mental illness.

However, additional factors account for the difference in outcome for Terry and Bowie. Embarrassed by the social stigma of having an illegitimate grandchild, Margaret was particularly resentful of Terry, adding to her tendencies toward cruelty. When Terry was ten and Peggy married Bowie's father, John Jones, he moved in with his mother and new stepfather. Unfortunately, John was resentful of Peggy's lingering affection toward Terry's absent father (whom she called the love of her life) and therefore immensely disliked Terry (James 33). Peggy continued to be distant and critical, and when she and John bought a house in Bromley, they left Terry, then seventeen, behind (James 35). After enlisting and serving in the National Service, Terry stayed with various friends and relatives but managed to stay near Bromley so that he could visit Bowie frequently.

In his late twenties, Terry's mental health began to deteriorate; his once impeccable appearance became disheveled, and his moods became dark and violent (James 39). In 1967, he had a hallucination in which Christ appeared to him in the sky and said he had been chosen "to go out into the world and do some work" for Him (James 41). He moved in with Peggy and John and received outpatient care from a nearby hospital. While Peggy was still emotionally

abusive, John apologized to Terry for his earlier hostility and worked to build a more nurturing relationship with his stepson. Unfortunately, when John died in 1969, Terry's mental state began to deteriorate once again, and because Peggy was unwilling to care for him, he was admitted to Cane Hill, the local mental hospital (James 44). During his hospitalization, Terry was allowed to stay with family members, and Bowie, then living in Haddon Hall in South London, often invited Terry to stay with him for weeks at a time. As Bowie's star ascended, the two fell out of touch and did not see each other for several years. Although he was happily married for a time, Terry spent nearly all his adult life in Cane Hill before committing suicide in 1985 (James 50).

Despite their shared genes, Bowie fared much better than Terry due to some key differences in their upbringing. Several friends and family members have commented about the general lack of affection and emotional warmth in the Jones household (see James 54), and Peggy in particular, out of interest in keeping up appearances, always insisted that Bowie's appearance always be clean and tidy: "Bowie's preoccupation with his appearance and his capacity to make himself so visually alluring and fascinating was something he had learnt from Peggy" (James 58-59). Peggy was overbearing and controlling, behavior that persisted well into Bowie's adulthood. However, this over-control and lack of warmth may have been mitigated by Bowie's status as the "favoured" child in the household; James identifies this as the "critical factor that enabled Bowie to become a star" (60). The Joneses shared their home with various children over

the years -- Terry; his father's daughter from a previous marriage, Annette; and Bowie's cousin Kristina, whose mother Una was often too mentally disturbed to care for her. But Bowie was always, as Annette once put it, "the god of the house," allowed to choose what the family watched on television and often receiving exciting gifts from his father, including his first musical instrument, a saxophone (James 60). This favoritism "may have given Bowie a strong sense of entitlement and an exaggerated self-esteem," which could have been a key factor in preventing him from slipping into madness (James 66).

However, being the favored child was not without its drawbacks. Kristina was very jealous of Bowie and was aggressive toward him in his early years, punching and pushing him and telling him cruel lies to make him cry (Jones 62). The other problem, perhaps more significant, was that Bowie often felt guilty about his father's treatment of Terry, the only person in the household from whom Bowie received physical affection and a key stimulus for the development of Bowie's imagination and interest in music. James posits that this guilt combined with Kristina's aggression and his parents' dislike of physical contact contributed to Bowie's tendency to dissociate, exemplified by the ease with which he cut ties with friends and colleagues as an adult (63). This detachment and his supercharged ego indicate that Bowie likely had some sort of personality disorder:

As his songs often displayed, he wrestled with both exaggerated self-love... and self-loathing. ... [A] solid sense of self-efficacy comes from

having felt loved, not from being favoured. Deep down, Bowie may have felt like a fraud, in danger of being found out, an impostor. This feeling is common in people whose parents put pressure on their children to succeed and be perfectionists, as John undoubtedly had done.” (James 67)

Bowie’s narcissism and perceived omnipotence, defenses against the weak sense of self and precarious grip on reality caused by his upbringing, are also common in people with personality disorder, as are drug addiction and compulsive sexual behavior, which Bowie also exhibited (James 68-69).

However, James believes that “both his narcissism and omnipotence... played a crucial role in enabling him to power on through all the adversities on his way to stardom” (68).

Although, as James puts it, “there are countless substance-abusing, personality disordered people with artistic leanings... [w]hat makes Bowie’s story so important is the way he managed both to realise his ambitions and to express his emotional turmoil by creating musical personas” (69). In a sadly ironic turn, Bowie was largely able to do this because of Terry, with whom Bowie played games of pretend as a child. James explains that, because this type of play strengthens children’s sense of what is real and what is not, this likely gave Bowie a more solid grasp on reality that Terry lacked because he had no such playmate as a child (71); his lack of a steady, loving caregiver as a small child would have led to insecurity that likely also would have diminished or suppressed

his drive to play as a toddler (79). But significantly, in bringing his personas to life, Bowie “was only doing what all of us do, to a greater or lesser extent: he was just achieving it more extremely and with greater dexterity” (James 111).

By “what all of us do,” James refers to the day-to-day need to present different personality traits depending on context; one may act very differently at home than at work, or around one’s boss instead of one’s friends. These fluctuations would indicate that one does not have a single “true self,” but this does not mean that the masks one adopts are false. According to Dr. Kennon M. Sheldon and his colleagues, integration -- in psychoanalysis, the process of developing and maintaining a well-balance psyche -- “is not defined as being consistent in one’s life, but, rather, as feeling authentic in one’s life” (1381). They explain that authenticity is behavior that “is authored by the self” or “internally caused,” clarifying that “[p]eople feel most authentic when they act with a full sense of choice and self expression,” which entail “the ability to effectively regulate and maintain one’s intentional states... the ability to process new information more deeply... and the ability to think more creatively” (1381). James clarifies, “It is not differentiation or variation in our personality traits, *per se*, that is indicative of fragmentation in personality but, rather, betrayal of the feeling of self-determination that underpins authenticity” (146). What matters is having a sense of autonomy that runs across different social contexts. Having multiple personas is a necessary part of modern life; the key is maintaining a sense of autonomy and self-determination.

However, perhaps because his childhood adversities put him at an increased risk for psychosis, there were times when Bowie was engulfed by his persona. According to his cousin Kristina, who accompanied Bowie for part of the Ziggy Stardust tour, “I would watch him when he got off stage and afterwards I could see that he dropped the character,” but as the tour went on, it became more difficult to tell Ziggy and Bowie apart, especially since fans and members of his entourage acted as if they were “dealing with Ziggy, not David” (qtd. in James 98). At one time, a poster campaign for the tour claimed that “David Bowie *is* Ziggy Stardust” (James 99), and even the artwork for the album gives equal visual prominence to the names “David Bowie” and “Ziggy Stardust,” “helping to cement the idea that David Bowie was Ziggy Stardust” (Broackes 122). Spiders drummer Mick “Woody” Woodmansay recalls, “You’d come off stage and he’d do interviews as Ziggy -- you’d be sat in a taxi with this alien. You’d ask a question and he’d look right through you. He had turned into Ziggy Stardust” (qtd. in James 99). Bowie himself admits to losing himself in his creation: “I fell for Ziggy too. It was quite easy to become obsessed night and day with the character. I became Ziggy Stardust... Everybody was convincing me that I was a Messiah... I got hopelessly lost in the fantasy... I can’t deny that the experience affected me in a very exaggerated and marked manner” (qtd. in James 99).

In the same interview, Bowie offered a tremendously insightful summation of his experience with the Ziggy persona:

Ziggy, particularly, was created out of a certain arrogance... But remember, at the time I was young and I was full of life, and that seemed like a very positive artistic statement. I thought that was a beautiful piece of art, I really did... Then that fucker would not leave me alone for years. That was when it all started to sour. And it soured so quickly you wouldn't believe it. It took me an awful long time to level out. My whole personality was affected. Again, I brought that upon myself. I can't say I'm sorry when I look back, because it provoked such an extraordinary set of circumstances in my life. I thought I might as well take Ziggy to interviews as well. Why leave him onstage? Looking back it was completely absurd. It became very dangerous. I really did have doubts about my sanity. I can't deny that the experience affected me in a very exaggerated and marked manner. I think I put myself very dangerously near the line. Not in a physical sense but definitely in a mental sense. I played mental games with myself to such an extent that I'm very relieved and happy to be back in Europe and feeling very well. But then, you see, I was always the lucky one." (qtd. in Jones 171, 173)

Bowie's acknowledgment of his lack of control over Ziggy indicates an acute awareness of his own psychological fragility and the need to create balance between his creative and destructive forces.

In "Dear Dr. Freud -- David Bowie Hits the Couch," Ana Leorne comes to a similar conclusion. She examines some of Bowie's personas through the lens of



psychoanalysis, arguing that each one represents “a unique combination of Eros [life] and Thanatos [death]” and “a different view of Freud’s theory of perversions” (112). Leorne explains that Ziggy Stardust represents the Dorian Grey syndrome Bowie struggled with in his twenties, seeking immortality through art, “[b]ut while the regular patient experiences an alienation from the self in this process... Ziggy Stardust was constructed in a full conscious level leading to approaching each aspect of the fragmentation carefully in order to absorb it as a whole, instead of dealing with it as a mere projectional mirror of his own drives” (113). As Bowie lost control of Ziggy and found it increasingly difficult to separate himself from the character offstage, Ziggy’s drive toward death and self-destruction (Thanatos) began to outweigh his drive for creation (Eros); since Ziggy’s purpose had been to enhance Bowie’s creativity, and that purpose was no longer being served, Bowie destroyed this persona so that he could move on to his next creative phase (Leorne 113-114).

Like Leorne, James believes that once Bowie had expressed what he needed to through Ziggy, he “killed” the persona (105); however, he does not address the continuity between Ziggy and Aladdin Sane. Despite Ziggy’s dramatic departure, Leorne asserts that the Aladdin Sane character is just a continuation of Ziggy, as supported by Bowie calling Aladdin Sane “Ziggy goes to America” (Leorne 115). Unfortunately, this “new” persona revealed itself to be simply “Ziggy without the metaphorical veil that hides the pulsion of Death” (Leorne 116). In the midst of Bowie’s personal struggles -- a crumbling marriage,

deceitful business partners, and habitual use of pharmaceutical-grade cocaine -- he became increasingly paranoid and detached from reality, "a destructive drive from within acting as if his pulsions were now fully ruled by a Thanatos impulse, now completely out of control" (Leorne 117). This loss of control, Leorne claims, eventually led Bowie to create the hyper-disciplined and unfeeling Thin White Duke (118-19). As Bowie once explained, "One puts oneself through such psychological damage in trying to avoid the threat of insanity... You start to approach the very thing you're scared of" (qtd. in Jones 183).

James acknowledges that Bowie came closest to psychosis during the time that he was battling cocaine addiction and that this mental state led to the creation of the Thin White Duke persona, but he insists that "Bowie had just enough sense of self to hang on during the dodgem-car ride that his turmoil became. Instead of resisting, he embraced it, using his considerable intellect and the facade of confidence his favoured status had conferred upon him" (89). Bowie himself admitted to worrying about his cocaine usage at the time, comparing it to being in a car without steering and heading toward the edge of a cliff (James 89), and he made a point in 1978 of clearly stating that he had abandoned the Duke completely: "I took that image off. I put it in a wardrobe in an LA hotel and locked the door" (qtd. in James 89). James ultimately concludes that, unlike other musicians who adopt stage personas (Elvis Presley, Madonna, Lady Gaga), Bowie used his to "understand his current psychology and its

history” and to overcome his internal conflicts (109), which is part of what makes his artistic output in the early-to-mid 1970s so profound.

Perhaps because of this “legacy of madness,” Bowie himself had a lifelong interest in the theories of Carl Jung and references him directly in songs like “Drive-In Saturday” and “Glass Spider” and indirectly in countless others. Tony Oursler, an American multimedia artist and longtime friend of Bowie’s who accompanied him to see the first public exhibition of Jung’s *Red Book* in New York in 2009, notes that Bowie “inhabits Carl Jung’s world of archetypes, reading and speaking of the psychoanalyst with passion” (qtd. in Stark 83). Australian artist and author Tanja Stark explores how Jung functions as both an inspiration for and a way of reading Bowie’s work, asserting that “Jung placed recurring emphasis upon several primal images that emerged around the journey toward individuation that are evident in the work of Bowie; the Persona, the Anima/Animus, the Shadow and the Self” and that archetypes “can be creative and life developing or stagnating and toxic” (84). Indeed, it is possible that Bowie saw himself as Jung’s “visionary artist,” who drew creative inspiration from the depths of the Unconscious, used widely understood archetypal themes, and often expressed “repressed energies and ideas that swirled beneath dominant paradigms” in their work (Stark 85). Whether Bowie modeled himself after this figure or simply happened to fit its description, the similarities between the two are uncanny (no pun intended).

Jung also understood that “over-identification with archetypes could be problematic,” which becomes even more significant when considering Bowie’s succession of personae (Stark 84). Jung believed that “inner plurality” was an essential element for the visionary artist, while “extreme imbalance was psychologically problematic” (Stark 90). When Bowie lost control to one of his personae, it indicated that his conscious mind or ego was being overpowered by the Shadow, the Jungian archetype that represents the dark or unknown parts of one’s personality, which is also the seat of creativity; this would ultimately cause Bowie to lose touch with ordered reality (Stark 92). When Bowie suggested that he was losing control to his personae, “that his personas involved a dissociative psychic splitting of his underlying identity, it suggested powerful personal complexes behind the creative masks” (Stark 90):

So while Bowie’s chameleon-like procession of personas functioned as potent archetypal images within society, (the subversive artist, mysterious outsider, androgynous alien, the illuminated prophet), as they took on a psychic life of their own, amplified by hubris, fans and media, it seems he was perpetually forced to manage, integrate or crucify these characters with their potentially self-fracturing and possessing energies that entangled him as they split off and dominated his psyche like autonomous archetypes. (Stark 91)

Bowie’s work reflects an interest in the mind and the search for individuation, the integration of the psyche that results from the assimilation of

the personal and collective unconscious into the Self. Stark points to “The Man Who Sold the World” as an example of a song that demonstrates this quest, albeit in rather ambiguous terms (95): the entity that the protagonist “passed upon the stair” (“although [he] wasn’t there”) represents the unconscious, which he represses (“I thought you died alone... Oh no, not me/I never lost control”), but after acknowledging it and isolating himself from it in an act of ego differentiation (“I laughed and shook his hand/and made my way back home”) he searches “for form and land/For years and years...” before recognizing the collective unconscious again (“all the millions here”) and becoming one with it (“We never lost control”). Thirty years later in an interview broadcast by the BBC, Bowie explained the song in somewhat similar terms, stating, “I guess I wrote it because there was a part of myself that I was looking for... That song for me always exemplified kind of how you feel when you’re young, when you know that there’s a piece of yourself that you haven’t really put together yet. You have this great searching, this great need to find out who you really are” (qtd. in Stark 95).

Bowie’s interest in Jung may also be part of why his work resonates so deeply with so many people. As Stark points out, Bowie’s rather oblique lyrics often represent archetypal themes in a new, sci-fi inspired context that reflects modern anxieties about alienation in addition to the search for a unified Self. For example, in Bowie’s breakthrough hit “Space Oddity” Major Tom, fulfilling the role of Jung’s hero archetype, braves the launching of his capsule into space and leaving his capsule only to find himself distraught by the notion of being able to

see the entire world but being helpless to affect change upon it: "Planet Earth is blue / And there's nothing I can do." This notion will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

The psychological self-exploration involved in creating Ziggy Stardust was likely at least partly responsible for his prolific output because he understood from early on how important his work was to his mental health: "There were too many suicides [in my family] for my liking... as long as I could put those psychological excesses into my music and into my work, I could always be throwing it off" (qtd. in Jones 183). As Bowie grew into middle age, he frequently revisited previous personae as a way to reconcile his past with the person he was becoming, as with the resurrection of Major Tom in "Ashes to Ashes" and his use of a Thin White Duke doppelganger in the video for "The Stars (Are Out Tonight)." As he himself once put it, "You have to accommodate your pasts within your persona... it helps you reflect what you are now" (qtd. in James 105-106). While at times his personae seemed to drive Bowie toward insanity rather than away from it, perhaps confronting his heritage of madness ultimately allowed him to avoid being consumed by it.

## **Conclusion**

Studying Bowie's use of persona through dramatism, and examining his motives with the benefit of hindsight, should compel us to reassess the role of persona in rhetorical scholarship as well as in our everyday lives. Bowie's case in

particular indicates that persona may be the key not only to communicating more effectively, but also to exploring our own inner worlds and dealing with the world around us. His successes and failures offer us clues to ways we might realize our potential by constructing new personae or examining and embracing the ones we may already have. A better understanding of persona would allow us to reframe situations and approach them in different, perhaps more beneficial ways (James 154). The key implication of Bowie's work, and of persona in general, is that we can choose who we are; we may not be able to control our circumstances or the behavior of others, but we can make intelligent choices about our persona in order to make the best of any given situation.

## CHAPTER V: CONSUBSTANTIALITY AND IDENTIFICATION

Bowie's transformation into Ziggy Stardust makes sense using the terms of Burke's pentad, but what about identification? If the key focus of Burke's philosophy of rhetoric is the necessity of identification to persuasion, what did Bowie have to gain by this metamorphosis? How did presenting himself as a fictional extraterrestrial messiah help him connect to an audience largely comprised of very earthbound suburbanite youth?

In *Dramatism and Development*, Kenneth Burke establishes three methods for using identification as a rhetorical strategy. The first, which Burke says is "quite dull," is identification by sympathy, which "flowers in such usages as that of a politician who, though rich, tells humble constituents of his humble origins" (*Dramatism* 28). The second is identification by antithesis, "as when allies who would otherwise dispute among themselves join forces against a common enemy" (*Dramatism* 28). Burke offers as an example a politician deflecting criticism by claiming it is unpatriotic and "reinforces the claims of the nation's enemies" (*Dramatism* 28). The third form of identification, which Burke claims is the most powerful, is identification by inaccuracy, "situations in which [identification] goes unnoticed" (*Dramatism* 28). His "prime" example is the use of the word "we" to make inequity or difference seem more like unity, "as when the statement that 'we' are at war includes under the same head soldiers who are



getting killed and speculators who hope to make a killing in war stocks”

(*Dramatism* 28).

Burke further relates the concept of identification to social change, alienation, and art in “Twelve Propositions by Kenneth Burke on the Relation between Economics and Psychology,” his response to critic Margaret Schlauch's review of *Attitudes Toward History* which attempts “to codify [his] ideas on the relation between psychology and Marxism” (*Philosophy* 242). He explains that economics and psychology are united by the concept of the “symbols of authority”: in economics, these are connected to ownership of resources, the systems of education, legislation, and law enforcement, whereas their connection to psychology is related to “morals, laws, social relationships, etc.” (Proposition 1) (*Philosophy* 242). There are two basic attitudes people can take toward reigning symbols of authority: acceptance and rejection, “with intermediate gradations” (Proposition 2); rejecting these symbols results in alienation (Proposition 3). In terms of psychology, the “concept for treating relations to symbols of authority, possession and dispossession, material and spiritual alienation, faith or loss of faith in the ‘reasonableness’ of a given structure's methods and purposes and values, is that of ‘identity’” (Proposition 4) (*Philosophy* 242-43). Each individual is made up of many “corporate identities,” which are sometimes in conflict (Proposition 5), and during times when “shifts in allegiance to the symbols of authority” occur, “the problems of identity become crucial” (Proposition 6) (*Philosophy* 243-44).

Analyzing art and applying the results to our lives help us understand the processes of change of identity (Proposition 7), which is necessary because “[i]dentification itself is a ‘mystification’” (Proposition 8) (*Philosophy* 244). Values, which are formed by economic conditions, form the “objective material” artists use to create symbols that appeal to their audiences (Proposition 9) (*Philosophy* 244-45). Style itself “is an aspect of identification”; a man who copies his boss's style may get advancement vicariously “by merely ‘owning the insignia’ of his boss,” who is his symbol of authority (Proposition 10) (*Philosophy* 245-46). Because people are both “actors and acters” who enact and change roles, their behavior and relationships should be examined through the lens of drama (Proposition 11) (*Philosophy* 246). Finally, the symbolic drama between imaginary obstacles in art must “reflect the real obstacles of living drama,” and even though works of art usually deal with “conflicts among social values,” these conflicts are rooted in economic conflicts (Proposition 12) (*Philosophy* 246-47).

While this discussion will occasionally draw from Burke’s “Twelve Propositions” in its examination of identity, alienation, and the rejection of symbols of authority, the primary focus will be Burke’s three key forms of identification. In *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie*, Shelton Waldrep points out that, because *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* is often read “as a parable or allegory about the relationship between a rock and roll singer and his fans,” it is intended “to make [Bowie’s] audience self-conscious about the process of their own identification

with Bowie himself" (141). In addition to supporting Waldrep's reading of this album, Bowie's lifelong interest in the constructed nature of identity and the perils of celebrity suggests that his transformation into Ziggy Stardust may have been (among other things) an attempt to introduce these concepts to his audience.

### **Identification by Sympathy**

In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke explains that identifications engender transformations of perception or attitude, which is the goal of persuasion (46). Burke's first method of identification is establishing rapport "by the stressing of sympathies held in common," which "comes quite closest to downright persuasion" (Burke, "The Rhetorical Situation"). In addition to the aforementioned example of a rich politician telling humble constituents that he comes from humble beginnings, Burke also mentions politicians kissing babies (or "kissing women on their babies"), as well as a traveler feeling a "kind of temporary friendliness" when encountering someone from the same town or who works in the same profession ("The Rhetorical Situation"). Identification by sympathy relies on sameness or common ground to create a connection between rhetor and audience. So how, then, does David Bowie presenting himself as an alien being aid (or, alternatively, as a human under the influence of extraterrestrials) in this type of identification?

The most obvious answer, mentioned countless times as mourners shared their tributes on social media following his death, is that they identified with his

sense of difference and alienation. Bowie's "alien" persona acted as a (rather on-the-nose) metaphor for the outcast, and over the course of his career his choice to portray characters who are "somehow out of balance with both [their] personal and sociological surroundings" acted as a rallying call for others who felt similarly alienated (Chapman 29). Trans writer Paris Lees describes feeling like Bowie "was one of us. Like no one I'd ever met and yet, on some level, like every weirdo I've ever known. He wasn't just a freak, though. He was *the* freak. ... Bowie didn't just make being different 'OK'. He made it fucking brilliant."

Bowie's use of science fiction themes was likely another point of connection for fans. The emergence of the New Wave of science fiction in the 1960s had revitalized the genre, and it had been rising in popularity. The space race stirred even more interest in sci-fi, and films like Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Planet of the Apes* brought the New Wave's interest in philosophical and social commentary to the masses. While some may have considered Bowie's return to themes of space an attempt to recapture the success of "Space Oddity," space would be a recurring theme throughout Bowie's career; it was a fitting metaphor for Bowie's interest in both alienation and the search for self-understanding: "Bowie's expressions of alienation worked at two different, sometimes competing, levels: His costumed personae were sometimes symbolic, shocking statements, while his feelings were taken as a realistic expression of alienation" (Friedlander 246). By the time Bowie transformed into Ziggy Stardust, he was also interested in using Ziggy's position

as an outsider to make observations about life on Earth from a fresh perspective, often expressing feelings mirroring not only his audience's sense of alienation after the political turmoil of the 1960s, but also their dissatisfaction with the status quo and interest in exploring taboo territories.

By recreating himself in an extraterrestrial form, Bowie also offered his audience a primer in the transformation of identity. Burke contends that "all symbolism can be treated as the ritualistic naming and changing of identity (whereby a man fits himself for a role in accordance with established co-ordinates or for a change of role in accordance with new co-ordinates which necessity has forced upon him)" (*Attitudes Toward History* 285). He explains that, because "any given structure of society calls forth conflicts among our 'corporate we's,'" changes in identity occur in everyone and are necessary, and this necessity leads to, "in art, the various ritualizations of rebirth" (*Attitudes Toward History* 268-69). Later, Burke elaborates that art depicts changes of identity "[p]articularly in periods extremely transitional in emphasis" as well as "in more stable eras" because "the maturing of the individual exposes him to 'climacteric stages' of one sort or another," and therefore, even in a stable structure, problems of rebirth (of dramatic change in identity) will be found to vitalize the symbolic structures of art" (*Attitudes Toward History* 317-18). In other words, even if the early seventies had been less tumultuous, people would still need art expressing changes of identity to help them cope with the critical shifts they inevitably face as they progress through life.

Because many of Bowie's fans were adolescents and young adults living in a time that was "extremely transitional in emphasis," they would be facing these "climacteric stages" themselves, and Ziggy provided them with an opportunity to consider how these "dramatic change[s] in identity" could affect them (Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* 317-18). In depicting not only his own transformation into Ziggy Stardust but also Ziggy's transformation from alien prophet to "rock 'n' roll suicide," Bowie offered his audience examples of "rebirths" to consider as they faced down their own inevitable transformations. Bowie indicated that it was possible for one to take control of one's identity and shape it as one saw fit. This statement, written by feminist author Caitlin Moran and circulated heavily on Twitter after Bowie's death, aptly demonstrates the impact of this message:

When in doubt, listen to David Bowie. In 1968, Bowie was a gay, ginger, bonk-eyed, snaggle-toothed freak walking around south London in a dress, being shouted at by thugs. Four years later, he was still exactly that -- but everyone else wanted to be like him, too. If David Bowie can make being David Bowie cool, you can make being you cool. PLUS, unlike David Bowie, you get to listen to David Bowie for inspiration. So you're one up on him, really. YOU'RE ALREADY ONE AHEAD OF DAVID BOWIE. (qtd. in Lewis)

In this sense, Bowie's metamorphosis into Ziggy Stardust can be read as a conversion narrative. Building on Burke's concept of identity as constitutional,

Dana Anderson argues that “the first-person constitution of identity is *strategic*, a declaration of the substance of one’s self, formed in response to some situation this constitution addresses” (97). Anderson further demonstrates that “[i]n Burke’s analysis, a constitution’s attempt to shape human action... makes it inherently strategic -- inherently rhetorical” and that “[l]ike the conversions that ‘turn’ them, these constituted identities demand a turning on our part as well, a turning from convictions or conduct that the narrative of another’s transformed selfhood calls into question” (Anderson 140-41). In Bowie’s case, adopting the guise of Ziggy Stardust forced his audience to question their own identities in relation to the issues Ziggy raised for them, such as gender, sexuality, and identity.

Although the key term for self-presentation in rhetoric is usually considered to be *ethos*, Anderson contends that using the terms *ethos* and *identity* interchangeably obscures how each term informs the other. Anderson defines *ethos* as “the linguistic presentation of character” and *identity* as “the strategic constitution of the self” (91). He argues that while “it is temptingly practical to regard *ethos* as *the* term for how the person or the rhetor factors into that rhetor’s attempts to teach, to delight, and even to move us toward specific beliefs and behaviors” (91), identity, “an important aspect of how selves act rhetorically in society,” is “central to a society’s understanding of what a person is,” further asserting that “identity and ethos form a conceptual tandem better equipped than either term alone to account for the complex ways in which the

person of the rhetor becomes itself as a means of persuasion" (95). Although *identity* and *ethos* are sometimes used interchangeably, "the identity or self-understanding a rhetor portrays evokes a much more powerful expectation about realness and authenticity than the character or agential nature a rhetor may depict [*ethos*]" (Anderson 96). Identity is supposed to be "trans-situational," to be true regardless of audience or occasion: "When ethos fails to meet expectations that underlie its persuasiveness, it is inappropriate. When identity fails, it is a lie" (Anderson 98). However, this does not mean that one's identity (or at least one's expressions of one's identity) cannot be adapted to a given situation. For example, Bowie used the persona of Ziggy Stardust to boost his ethos, and some aspects of his identity that bled over from previous publicity -- his sexuality in particular -- further enhanced the ethos of that persona. Had he identified as straight, his presentation as Ziggy would have seemed much less credible, if not derogatory.

For the many fans who listened to Bowie's previous work after discovering him through Ziggy Stardust, one commonality might have been the struggle to find a voice and identity that connected with others. Aside from "Space Oddity," Bowie had very little success as a songwriter and performer before the release of *Hunky Dory* and *Ziggy Stardust*; however, even the dramatic changes in Bowie's self-presentation between those two albums, released less than seven months apart, would have been apparent to even the most casual of followers. By representing himself as Ziggy on stage and in interviews, Bowie blurred the lines



between fantasy and reality and made the distinctions between “authentic” identity and fictional character irrelevant. Presenting himself as an alien (identity) made Bowie seem exotic and enlightened (ethos) and made fans consider the possibility “that one could transcend one’s immediate physical, social and even sexual environment to construct a new idealized version of the self” (Chapman 35). For later audiences who had the advantage of hindsight, Bowie’s various incarnations modeled an “escape from being riveted to the fact of who we are, and thereby demonstrates the power and importance of artistic expression, for rock stars and lonely teens alike” (Cooper 139). The realization that one could alter one’s identity at will gave Bowie’s fans an empowering sense of agency and control over their own lives.

### **Identification by Antithesis**

Burke’s second form of identification, identification by antithesis, occurs when two parties work together against a common enemy. Bowie’s audience consisted largely of British youth disillusioned by the country’s social and political state, and many were drawn to him because he represented transgression against the reigning symbols of authority. Burke explains that “[o]ne ‘owns’ his social structure insofar as one can subscribe to it by wholeheartedly feeling the reasonableness of its arrangements” (*Attitudes* 330); the term *alienation* is used “to designate that state of affairs wherein a man no longer ‘owns’ his world because, for one reason or another, it seems *basically unreasonable*” (*Attitudes*

216). Bowie was able to tap into this disillusionment very effectively, perhaps because of his own background growing up in the overbearing suburbs: "If you'd asked me at the time what it was I was trying to do, I had simply no idea. All I knew, it was... this otherness, this other world, an alternative reality, one that I really wanted to embrace. I wanted anything but the place I came from" (Bowie qtd. in "David Bowie Hang on to Yourself" 00:10:40-00:11:02). Furthermore, the personae Bowie created "were impeccably suburban: he read romantic literature; he was obsessively, narcissistically, self-effacing" (Frith 176), which only made them more relatable to his audience. Bowie provides an apt expression of this suburban *ennui* in the song "Life on Mars?" from *Hunky Dory*. He conveys "a melancholic sense of being both bored and trapped" (Critchley 24): the story begins with a girl who goes to the movies only to find the film "a saddening bore" and ends with the song's protagonist declaring that he has written the film (perhaps a metaphor for his formulaic existence) "ten times or more" and that "it's about to be writ again" (Bowie, "Life on Mars?").

One of the draws of glam rock in general, for both Bowie and his fans, was that it "offered its followers an escape from the confinement, drudgery and physical, mental and emotional restrictions of the inner city and suburbia" (Chapman 35). Through his creation of the Ziggy Stardust persona and the fictional narrative built around him, Bowie "created a fantasy space in which fans could join him on an imaginative journey outside of otherwise humdrum or painful daily lives" (Escamilla). Glam rock, at its finest, was about more than style and

music; it was about liberation. As Bowie later wrote, “We were giving permission to ourselves to reinvent culture the way we wanted it. With great big shoes” (qtd. in Gilmore).

A substantial part of Bowie’s appeal was his defiance against the cultural norms his audience felt had created this sense of repression, which had been forced upon them by an older generation with very different values, particularly regarding sex. To use Burke’s terminology, these young people had rejected the reigning symbols of authority, and this rejection led to their alienation (“Twelve” 242-43). Burke also observes that “[a] compensatory increase in sensuality generally accompanies a loss of faith in the reasonableness of a society’s purposes,” clarifying that “[p]eople try to combat alienation by *immediacy*, such as the senses alone can provide” (*Attitudes* 217-18). In *Teenage: The Creation of Youth 1875-1945*, English writer and music journalist Jon Savage postulates that the psychological repercussions of the atomic bomb “precipitated a new kind of global consciousness” and, therefore, “[f]aced with the prospect of instant vaporization, many began to focus totally on the present... [and] privileged living in the moment” (qtd. in Jones 9). This made Bowie’s combination of sexual ambiguity and futuristic aesthetic both a fitting expression of and an apt call for sensuality and immediacy: as Ziggy Stardust, Bowie “recalibrated sexuality in a way that was debauched but distilled, decidedly racy but also refined... a kind of degenerate asceticism” (Critchley 59). Rather than being forced to follow

outdated expectations about sex and relationships, this generation seemed determined to play by their own rules.

Indeed, one of the most straightforward aspects of Bowie's rejection of symbols of authority involved rebuffing the norms related to gender and sexuality. According to Peter Hook of Joy Division and New Order, "Something about that rock attitude and that blurring of sexuality... is very, very alluring to young people, especially teenagers, with the confusion of growing up" ("David Bowie and the Story of Ziggy Stardust" 00:43:33-00:43:47). For some, however, Bowie's play with sexuality and gender was more than a pose to enhance his "rock attitude." Michael Escamilla, a psychiatrist and Jungian analyst who is the Director of the Center of Excellence in Neurosciences at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center in El Paso, points out that Bowie's "openness and acceptance of transgender, homosexual and bisexual tropes also reached out to many in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community who for the first time had a popular star expressing images from what had been a largely closeted (and oppressed) lifestyle." Lee Black Childers, a photographer from Andy Warhol's Factory who worked for a time as Bowie's tour manager, recalls that in the early seventies, people in the LGBTQ community felt persecuted and were constantly in fear of violence; by publicly declaring himself gay and presenting himself as sexually ambiguous in his performances, Bowie "liberated a lot of people" ("David Bowie and the Story of Ziggy Stardust" 00:29:30-00:29:38). In *Queer Noises*, British music journalist John Gill makes similar

claims about the effects of Bowie's sexuality on LGBTQ youth and on the British public more generally:

As someone who left school aged fifteen, the year David Bowie released *Hunky Dory*, I belong to a generation that probably has to thank Queer David for the comparative ease with which we came out. However outrageous the model, Queer David was blessed with the glow of celebrity... at a time when queer appearances in the media tended to be in the form of arrests and police statistics... Queer David's... packaging of sexual outrage created a safe space where many of us, gay, bi, or straight, could play out games and experiment with difference, finding ourselves and going through the motions of teenage rebellion, in a way that not even punk could imitate. (qtd. in Waldrep, *Aesthetics* 113-14)

For many young people, Bowie was their first example of how a queer lifestyle could entail something other than shame and isolation, and this kind of visibility for the queer community had a tremendous impact.

### **Identification by Inaccuracy and the Assumed “We”**

The third type of identification Burke designates is identification by inaccuracy or unawareness. In “The Rhetorical Situation,” Burke defines this by offering the example of a person driving a car who confuses the engine's power for his own; it is the car's engine making the car move rather than the driver's foot on the accelerator (269). He then explains that one form of identification by

inaccuracy is “that scarcely noticeable, workaday pronoun, ‘we’” (272). Using an assumed “we” places the rhetor erroneously in the same category as the audience in order to create a sense of unity and equality, as in Burke’s example of the statement that “we” as a nation are at war (272). The implication is that everyone in the given country is fighting a battle that is really only being fought by the country’s army; the citizens are mistaking their army’s power for their own. While I do not contend that Bowie’s fans mistake Bowie’s power for their own, many of them did express their affinity for Bowie -- and the sense of empowerment he gave them -- by imitating him, particularly in their personal style.

In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke explains that, unlike the legendary hero, who “possesses characteristics which his followers can *possess only in attenuated form*,” the secular hero “is, by definition, a hero whom one can emulate, and even surpass” (Burke, *Attitudes* 268). Bowie aimed “to create a performative paradigm that was reproducible in and by his disciples and fans” (Waldrep, *Aesthetics* 145). Esteemed music critic Simon Frith recalls these “Bowie boys” quite fondly, describing them as “the bravest of all the youth cults” and asserting that “every youth pose since has owed something to them” (176). Moreover, he explains that, unlike other British pop fans who dressed like their idols, “the Bowie boys didn’t just get ready on their nights out. Bowie-ism was a way of life – style as meaning – and no other idol has had such an intense influence on his fans as David Bowie... Bowie was youth culture not as collective

hedonism but as an individual grace that showed up everyone else as clods” (176).

In Britain in the early seventies, emulating Bowie’s style was an ideal method for rejecting symbols of authority, although it still required some measure of bravery. Holly Johnson, lead singer of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, recalls: “You were taking your life in your hands to wear mascara to school in Liverpool in 1973, or dyeing your hair bright red... My parents were horrified: ‘What have I done to deserve this walking freak show for a son?’” (“David Bowie and the Story of Ziggy Stardust” 00:44:01-00:44:20). But aside from the pleasant side-effect of appalling parents, which is often the goal of such types of behavior, Bowie’s fashion followers usually had more meaningful motives. In “Playing Dress Up: David Bowie and the Roots of Goth,” authors David Shumway and Heather Arnet clarify that emulating Bowie’s style differed from emulating that of other musicians like the Beatles or the Rolling Stones because “[i]mitating them meant copying the real thing; imitating Bowie meant playing a role that someone else had played” (131). Bowie’s fans found the idea of taking other forms attractive, and “[t]hey too wanted to disguise themselves from the world and play dress up. When you are dressed up as another persona, no one can harm you, because the real you is hidden from view. Bowie understood this, as did his adolescent fans” (131). Just as Bowie used Ziggy as a mask to cover his insecurities, so his fans appropriated his fashion sense to veil their own inner turmoil.

For some fans, dressing like Bowie required a great deal of effort. In *When Ziggy Played Guitar: David Bowie and Four Minutes That Shook the World*, author Dylan Jones reminds readers that, unlike our current “heavily mediated environment, where glamour is a lifestyle choice with an exponential amount of entry points, and where the idea of luxury is available to all,” in the early seventies life was “incredibly dull, at least visually,” and “[g]lamour as a precept just wasn’t available” (150). Suburbanite kids did their best to make due, tinting their hair with markers, wearing glittery socks, and painting their shoes unusual colors (Jones 145, 148, 146). Jones recalls taking a train from Sussex to Finsbury Park to see Bowie at the Rainbow with a friend in December of 1972. Along the way, the two of them changed into their “Bowie gear,” and at the concert “[h]alf the audience had enviable Ziggy haircuts” (141). A few weeks later, he saw his first Ziggy clone in the flesh, looking like “a princess from the planet Phantasmagoric” (149). He credits Bowie for giving fans the “gumption” to dress flamboyantly and show off, tracing it all back to Bowie’s performance on Top of the Pops in 1972, a day “when the world suddenly went from black to white to colour, when we passed from childhood to adolescence, almost as if we’d slipped through the wardrobe into Narnia” (80-81). He later notes that “the by-product of Ziggy’s success was the validation of identity, our identity. What Ziggy did was create an army of misfits under the aegis of community. Of course, we weren’t a community at all, just a collection of lost souls who wanted our sermons accompanied by some toe-tapping hymns” (202).



While Jones claims that Bowie's fans were not really a community, other fans share stories about feeling a sense of camaraderie among Bowie devotees. In his discussion of sectarianism as "colony thinking," Burke points out that the spread of literacy "led to a subtler kind of colony, usually lacking in material body: the 'colonies of the mind'" (*Attitudes Toward History* 321). Burke explains how, through one's preferences in reading, one's identity can be shaped by membership in a group whose other members "may be scattered across all the earth and through all periods of history" and that "a lonely man, off by himself, [could shape] his identity by membership in one or another of such vaguely corporate units" (*Attitudes Toward History* 321). It would appear the same holds true for Bowie fans. Duran Duran's Nick Rhodes claims, "You didn't just buy into how great the songs were, or how strange the lyrics were, you bought into him being different, and it rubber-stamped you as being someone who thought about life in a different way... Bowie bonded a generation" (qtd. in Jones 129). Similarly, romance author Kaite Welsh writes, "You didn't need a stage or fans or a record deal to dress like him, and you wouldn't be alone if you did. Whether you had a gang of equally glittery friends or just Ziggy Stardust looking up at you from the front of an LP, you had a tribe." Marc Almond of Soft Cell describes a comparable sense of affinity: "Being down at the front [at a Ziggy show], I just remember being lost in the whole emotion of the thing, you know. It was incredibly powerful, and I'd never seen a band like that before. You really kind of wanted to be a part of it. It was part of belonging to something, as well, wanting

to be part of a culture, part of a gang” (“David Bowie and the Story of Ziggy Stardust” 00:51:50-00:52:06). This sense of kinship points to an underlying effect of art in general: “Art is inherently rhetorical to the extent that it addresses others and aims at effect. But its rhetoric becomes compelling for others when the art brings to life in them the idea that, in the face of constant fragmentation and creeping incoherence, people can bring order and purpose to their life together” (Clark 20).

Burke’s comments about the use of “we” can also easily be applied to Bowie and his fans. It seems no coincidence that the first pronoun used in *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* in the opening track “Five Years” is “we”: “Pushing through the market square / so many mother sighing / news had just come over / we had five years left to cry in.” The use of “we” is perhaps most effective in “Starman,” which starts with first-person singular narration before switching to first person plural in the uplifting chorus when the protagonist explains that the Starman would “like to come and meet us, but he thinks he’d blow our mind.”

Similarly, in key songs Bowie consistently uses second person after he has used “we,” which infers a more personal and direct relationship with the listener. Both “Five Years” and “Starman” delay the use of “you” until later in the song, after the collective or assumed “we” has been established. Indeed, a common observation from those who saw Bowie perform “Starman” on *Top of the Pops* in July of 1972 was that when Bowie sang, “I had to phone someone so

I picked on you” and pointed into the camera, they felt like he was speaking to them personally: “To a generation of pasty, bum-fluffed schoolboys, and over-excited, under-confident schoolgirls, Ziggy Stardust was the most exotic thing we had ever seen. And he was talking directly to us, the intergalactic gypsy queen beaming straight to every secondary-modern, grammar, and crammer of early Seventies Britain” (Jones 36).

## **Conclusion**

In “Psychology and Form,” Burke argues that defining art as a “waking dream” makes sense, but this definition becomes problematic because people “understand it to mean art as a waking dream for the artist” when “[i]t is, rather, the audience which dreams, while the artist oversees the conditions which determine this dream” (40). He calls the artist “the manipulator of blood, brains, [and] heart” (“Psychology and Form” 40-41), which resembles sentiments Bowie’s fans often share when discussing his influence. With Bowie, “the fan desire to get to know him, to immerse oneself in his worlds, fantasies and projections -- is particularly acute, observable and most assuredly *real* in the experiential sense” (Cinque, Moore and Redmond 2). This connection to his fans illustrates Bowie’s impact as a rhetor. Not only is his viewpoint “off-kilter, original, and strange,” but “[m]ore importantly, he sees things differently and has found a way to visualize what he sees so that his unique vision is meaningfully communicated to an audience” (Hunt 189).

Even fans who never met Bowie often mention a sort of intimate connection with him that extends beyond nostalgia. Critchley discusses feeling like Bowie was his “clandestine companion” and that he was not alone in this view: “I feel an extraordinary intimacy with Bowie, although I know this is a total fantasy. I also know that this is a shared fantasy, common to huge numbers of loyal fans for whom Bowie is not some rock star or a series of flat media clichés about bisexuality and bars in Berlin” (Critchley 18). For those who met him, such as music journalist Mick Brown, Bowie was an “affable, charming, and down-to-earth man” whose “breezy candor” often led them “to believe after five minutes acquaintanceship that [they had] known him all [their lives].” Like Critchley, Brown believes he shares this feeling with all of Bowie’s followers: “And it was a gift of intimacy that he gave to millions of his fans, the sense that no matter what he was singing about – the heady liberation of sexual transgression of ‘Rebel Rebel’... domestic bliss in ‘Kooks’, the escapism of the dance floor in ‘Let’s Dance’ – he was singing to, speaking for, them. There was a David Bowie for everyone.”

The ultimate effect of Bowie’s rhetoric and fans’ strong sense of identification with him through his transformation into Ziggy Stardust seems to have been an understanding that identity is “fragile and inauthentic,” and this fragility allows us to reinvent ourselves as we see fit (Critchley 55). Renowned music critic Simon Frith aptly explained Bowie’s appeal when he wrote that Bowie “[made] available to those fans a way of being a ‘star’... Glam rock

dissolved the star/fan division not by stars becoming one of the lads, but by the lads becoming their own stars" (176).

## **CHAPTER VI:**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **Research Objectives**

The primary goal of this dissertation is to provide a framework for understanding the rhetorical functions of stage persona. Kenneth Burke's pentad and the concept of identification proved useful in examining the relationship between artist, stage persona, and audience from a rhetorical perspective. I focused on David Bowie because he is one of few artists to put tremendous conscious effort into creating his personae and to discard personae when they no longer suit his purpose, despite objections from fans. This project serves as a means to begin understanding the use of personae that are constructed as rhetorical tools, which in turn helps us better understand less obvious iterations of persona.

By using stage personae, and the persona of Ziggy Stardust in particular, David Bowie was able to use his background in theater to his advantage by playing a role, both in the studio and on stage (and eventually off stage as well). This made him more comfortable on stage, allowing him to take greater risks during live performances. Ziggy also offered Bowie a possible scapegoat if his new interest in a more rock-oriented sound did not work out well; he could discard the persona and start fresh if necessary. It seems likely, given Bowie's family history of mental illness and his own preoccupation with the threat of

madness, that Bowie also used Ziggy as a tool to explore his own psyche while maintaining control over his sanity. On a larger scale, Bowie used Ziggy to call attention to outdated social norms about gender and sexuality by presenting him as androgynous and sexually ambiguous, especially in his style of dress.

In constructing the persona of Ziggy Stardust, Bowie made drastic alterations to his physical appearance, style of dress, and musical performances. He cut his long blond hair and dyed it a bright, unnatural red; shaved his eyebrows; and began wearing dramatic makeup to enhance his feminine features. He wore outrageous, often risqué outfits with bold jewelry and high-heeled and platform shoes. Musically, he shifted to a more rock-oriented sound and began performing with a band, whereas before he had preferred to perform alone. His performances were also campier and much more theatrical.

While musicians in the 1950s and 1960s were expected to maintain a consistent persona that was in keeping with who they were offstage (or who their audience believed them to be offstage), glam rock in general, and Bowie in particular, helped shift those attitudes by embracing theatricality and artifice, and audiences responded well to this less serious attitude. In Bowie's case, audiences embraced the "fakery" of his Ziggy persona because, in addition to being somewhat novel and giving Bowie an aura of enigma, it functioned as a metaphor for their own sense of alienation and frustration, enhancing their connection to Bowie and his music.

While this study only focuses on one performer and one particular persona, in Bowie's case it does seem that Bowie's adoption of a persona may have contributed to his audience's sense of community. It is difficult to say whether Bowie's work without the attached persona would have had the same effect, but Ziggy seems to have created a bond among some British youth by encouraging them to express themselves and assuring them that they were not alone. His unique sense of fashion also allowed fans who emulated his style to easily identify one another.

### **Bowie beyond Ziggy**

It is important to acknowledge that stage personae are not always as effective as Bowie's Ziggy Stardust. The Thin White Duke, the persona Bowie developed around 1976, offers an excellent example of an unhealthy use of a stage persona. Whereas Ziggy was created to make Bowie more comfortable on stage and to help him process his family's issues with mental health, the Duke was mostly an outlet for Bowie's dark interests like Nazi iconography and the occult. Ziggy allowed Bowie to connect with fans in very positive ways; the Duke mostly just fed his cocaine addiction and paranoia. When Bowie began to feel like he was losing control of Ziggy, he "retired" that persona. By the time Bowie had escaped the Duke, he had suffered severe physical and psychological trauma. While the Thin White Duke seems to have frightened Bowie away from persona for a time, he continued to explore personae in less consuming ways,



such as acting in films, playing a variety of roles in music videos, and writing and singing songs from the perspectives of a myriad of characters.

### **Persona Beyond Bowie**

Since the heyday of Ziggy Stardust, several musicians have been inspired by Bowie's use of stage persona and have imitated it to varying degrees and with varying degrees of success, and they often share some elements of Bowie's purposes and motives. For example, Ziggy Stardust was, among other things, a chance for Bowie to wipe the slate clean and reinvent himself, and many artists before and since have followed this path. In the early 2000s, Christina Aguilera created an alter-ego, X-tina, whose aggressive sexuality and edgy look helped her shed her image as an innocent teen pop princess. Lizzie Grant spent a few years recording EPs and playing acoustic gigs before adopting the melancholic persona of Lana Del Rey and becoming an indie sensation. Sometimes established performers as diverse as country legend Hank Williams and famed rapper Snoop Dogg adopt personae to reinvent themselves musically. Williams released an album of religious recordings under the name "Luke the Drifter," even claiming facetiously in interviews that Luke was his half-brother (Masino 58); and rapper Snoop Dogg similarly used the name Snoop Lion to record a reggae album after his conversion to Rastafarianism. These personae are usually used to avoid alienating an artist's established audience, but in some cases this tactic fails dramatically. In 1999, Garth Brooks created the ill-fated

Chris Gaines in an attempt to try his hand at rock music and acting, releasing an album under Grimes's name and even appearing as him on television. Ultimately, this was a poorly planned publicity stunt to create buzz around a film Brooks planned to star in as the Chris Gaines character, but the film was never made, and the album's lukewarm reception led Brooks to quickly put this persona to bed.

Other artists, like Bowie, have taken on a persona to develop or support a concept album. Tori Amos's politically charged 2007 album *American Doll Posse* presented her as five different characters based on Greek goddesses as she explores the complexities of the life of the American woman. Amos performed as these characters on the supporting tour, with each character playing the songs attributed to her on the album as well as her own renditions of Amos's previous work. Similarly, My Chemical Romance's 2006 album *The Black Parade* follows a character called simply The Patient as he deals with his impending death, and the band performed concerts as members of the Black Parade Band, donning black marching uniforms like those worn by the Beatles on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

In the spirit of Ziggy's gender-bending ways, performers like Prince and Lady Gaga have used personae to explore their own gender identities and comment on gender politics. Prince often wrote and sang in the guise of Camille, a female version of himself (or gender-fluid, depending on one's interpretation) presented in songs by use of pitch-shifted vocals. An album attributed to Camille

with no mention of Prince was scheduled for release in 1987, but Prince pulled the project at the last minute, using several of the songs on *Sign o' the Times* and as B-sides (Juzwiak). Camille did, however, make occasional appearances in Prince's work, and the Camille album was eventually released for streaming after his death. Similarly, Lady Gaga had a short-lived male persona called Jo Calderone, whom she portrayed in various fashion shoots and at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2011. Calderone referred to Gaga as his girlfriend and claimed to be an Italian American from New Jersey; some speculate that he was intended to be read as transgender (Michelson). Gaga claims that her performance of Jo was "meant to manipulate the visualization of gender":

I wanted to see how I could take someone who is so approachable and so relatable and press a much more unrelatable issue that is so hidden... how I could put someone who is challenging all of those things in a very pop culture moment and force people to deal with it no matter how uncomfortable or exciting it may be. (qtd. in Michelson)

Frequently performers use personae to distance themselves from their performances, much in the same way Bowie used Ziggy as a safety net that would protect him from possible backlash, and this distance often offers them a cathartic exploration of parts of themselves that normally remain hidden. Beyoncé claims to have created Sasha Fierce in 2008 as a mechanism "to safely and publicly experiment with performances of her sexuality while keeping her ladylike integrity intact," but like Bowie she eventually found this persona

restrictive and discarded her in 2010 (McDonald). Rapper Eminem uses the violent and self-deprecating persona of Slim Shady to explore the more destructive elements of his personality, while the persona of Marshall is used to express more positive feelings, like his love for his daughter Hailie. Nicki Minaj uses numerous personae in her music and performances, ranging from a gay man (Roman Zolanski) to a Harlem crackhead (Tyrone), but her first persona, Cookie, was created to help her cope with her troubled upbringing; like Bowie, she studied acting early in her career and uses those skills to create and enact her many characters (Goodman). The universality of these artists' various motives – reinvention, catharsis, exploration of identity, and artistic liberation – goes a long way toward explaining not only the long-standing history of persona in popular music, but also why the use of persona continues fascinate both artists and fans.

### **Re-evaluating Rhetorical Terminology**

As Anderson explains, using the terms *ethos* and *identity* interchangeably overlooks the nuances of these terms and how they can complement each other. He defines *ethos* as “the linguistic presentation of character” and *identity* as “the strategic constitution of the self,” despite the common practice in rhetoric of using *ethos* as a blanket term for anything related to self-presentation. Aristotle provides precedent for limiting the scope of *ethos* to what is spoken: while “moral character... constitutes the most effective means of proof” and “[t]he orator

persuades by moral character when his speech is delivered in such a manner as to render him worthy of confidence,” he stresses that “this confidence must be due to the speech itself, not to any preconceived idea of the speaker's character” (17). So how does persona fit into all of this? If we take Bowie as an example, he employed various personae throughout his career that varied in degrees of fiction and reality, but he also managed to maintain a fairly consistent sense of identity over the course of fifty years and more than two dozen albums by returning to similar themes and cultivating a uniquely performative voice and singing style. Bowie helps us disambiguate these terms somewhat, but more research is needed to fully explore the interrelationship between ethos, identity, and persona.

### **Limitations of Study**

Obviously, due to the very complicated nature of this topic, some details have been left undiscussed simply due to the scope of this project. Focusing on just one of Bowie's stage personae using Burke's dramatism and the concept of identity, along with supplementary information from Brummett and Anderson, allowed for a relatively comprehensive examination of the use of stage persona. However, this came at the cost of discussing Bowie's other personae in detail, not to mention personae of other performers. Additionally, by using Ziggy Stardust as my example and focusing mostly on contemporaneous fan experiences, I have precluded discussion about how changes in media and technology over the past several decades, especially social media, may affect

the use of a stage persona. Considering the extensive output of both Bowie and Burke, the number of artifacts and writings I was able to draw from was limited out of necessity, as well.

### **Future Implications**

In addition to examining more artifacts and considering other performers, future studies could benefit significantly from more investigation into the fields of identity studies and celebrity studies. Identity studies could offer insight into the construction of persona and how it relates to perception of self, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. Celebrity studies could add to and benefit from examinations of celebrities' use of persona, particularly as it relates to audience.

In my research on this topic, I was surprised to find very little connecting the concept of persona to composition pedagogy. In addition to considering how instructors might use persona to better engage their students, teaching students how to develop personae would have far-reaching ramifications. Introducing students to academic writing and asking them to create their own scholarly persona, considering what that persona's key characteristics might be and how they differ from the student's, would help them better understand the expectations that come with college-level writing. Since most composition instructors discuss rhetorical context, discussing persona more explicitly would

enhance current practices by offering students another way to consider appropriateness and decorum.

Students could also consider persona in terms of curating content for social media, perhaps examining different types of user profiles and determining what makes them effective or ineffective. They could also use this information to cultivate a more professionally appropriate social media presence that would help prepare them to enter the job market.

As Brummett points out, personal style is perhaps the most important rhetorical system in today's visual culture. Because of this increased emphasis, examining style as it relates to persona, and to rhetoric in general, will be crucial to the advancement of the field.

## **Conclusion**

As a lifelong David Bowie fan, I have always been bothered by the cliché of comparing him to a chameleon. I understand that the idea is to convey that he changed frequently and drastically; the problem is that most people also believe chameleons change their colors in order to blend in with their environment and camouflage themselves from predators (although that is not the only reason). Blending in was never really Bowie's forte. As someone whose entire oeuvre seems to emphasize the value of embracing one's weirdness and questioning the reigning symbols of authority, Bowie created a body of work largely focused on the notion that "we do have a choice in who we are" and that "[p]ersonas are a

key means by which to exercise it" (James 163). Bowie openly expressed his own eccentric identity through his various personae and in doing so encouraged others to, as Oliver James would put it, "up their Ziggy": to consider who they wanted to be and take steps toward that goal. By examining the Ziggy Stardust persona through the framework of Burke's dramatism and identification, I hope to have provided an opportunity for others to explore the concepts of identity and persona in new and interesting ways.



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