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A Literary Criticism of the Classical Themes and Allusions Found in *The Hunger Games*

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Perhaps the most a young adult novelist can hope for is to transcend the bestseller ceiling and cross the border into cultural phenomenon territory; Suzanne Collins has achieved just that with her ever popular *Hunger Games* trilogy, which has ballooned since the 2008 penning of its first installment—*The Hunger Games*—into a lucrative franchise. With over 36.5 million copies in the United States alone, and a film adaptation of the *The Hunger Games* raking in a record-breaking \$155 million in ticket sales over its opening weekend, Collins’ series has attained an unquestionably feverish popularity on the order of J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* or Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* books. It enjoys a broad readership and critical acclaim. Yet *The Hunger Games* is not set in a fantasy universe, but rather a futuristic envisioning of our own present reality. Collins’ brainchild is a novel, set far ahead—an unspecified number of years—into the dystopian future that tackles themes of survival in the face of war and an oppressive government, thereby prompting its readers to think along Orwellian lines more so than many of its equally popular counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

The *Hunger Games* trilogy takes place in Panem, the remains of a post-apocalyptic North America where a luxurious central city termed the Capitol reigns supreme over its 12 outlying, impoverished districts. Annually, two children from each district—a boy and a girl between the ages of 12 and 18—are selected by lottery to compete in the “Hunger Games,” a nationally televised fight to the death that lasts until one victor remains. The winner returns in glory to his/her native district, which the Capitol showers with gifts of food. The series’ heroine and narrator is Katniss Everdeen, who volunteers to compete in her younger sister’s place when young Primrose Everdeen

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008).

is drafted as the female District 12 “tribute.” The Games are not merely a cruel form of entertainment for the Capitol’s pleasure, but also required viewing for all citizens of Panem as a searing visual emblematic of the Capitol’s absolute rule. They are an institution that exists as a form of retribution for a prior districts’ uprising and an implicit reminder that such rebellion never be repeated.

*The Hunger Games* is a richly interwoven tapestry of numerous intriguing parallels to historical events and literary staples. Although set in a futuristic society, the chief inspirations for its narrative structure and themes are drawn from the ancient Mediterranean world. Classical themes and allusions permeate the first novel, and the connections to the classical are mythological, historical, linguistic, and stylistic in nature. The influence of classics in *The Hunger Games*, however, runs deeper than these surface connections might suggest; classical influences serve as the very underpinnings at the story’s core that inform and inspire its sweeping messages, timeless themes, and the questions it demands of humanity.

The prevalence of classical influences highlights their relevance and enduring themes. The ideas contained in myths, narrative poetry and tragic plays from the ancient world have been preserved and sustained in the world of contemporary literature and remain omnipresent even in works like *The Hunger Games* set in the distant future. This speaks to the continual influence of classical literature. According to Mary Lefkowitz, “in imperceptible ways classical mythology is still with us, at least in our literature...narrative patterns established in ancient times have shaped literary forms since antiquity. The plots of myths recur even in contemporary writing, with only names,

dates and places changed.”<sup>2</sup> *The Hunger Games* is certainly testament to this claim. It contains expansive parallels to classical myth, literature and history, from Homeric heroes to Athenian tragic heroines. This vast range of interrelatedness in *The Hunger Games* should not be surprising: “Despite the centuries that separate them, Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy each appeal to the idea of the heroine as exemplary, a standard of comparison”; while the epic “emphasizes the cleverness and beauty of the heroines,” the tragic material stresses “extremity—the horrible crimes committed by or against them. In each case the exemplary heroine is something of a straw woman, set up only to be knocked flat by the superior virtue or the greater enormity of the object of the comparison.”<sup>3</sup> This is certainly true as it applies to Katniss caught in the “greater enormity” of the Games, forced to commit “horrible crimes.” Indeed, throughout *The Hunger Games* several tributes express sentiments that they do not want to be just “a piece in [the Capitol’s] Games.”<sup>4</sup>

In interviews, Suzanne Collins cites two major classical influences that inspired *The Hunger Games*. The first influence, the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, mirrors several aspects of *The Hunger Games*’ plot: Minos, King of Crete, has a falling out with Athens and demands as punishment seven boys and seven girls be selected from among the Athenian youths each year to die in the labyrinth at Knossos. The inner chamber of the labyrinth contained the Minotaur, a monster with the body of a man and

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<sup>2</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Heroines and Hysterics* (General Duckworth & Company Limited, 1981), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Lyons, *Gender and Immortality: Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 35.

<sup>4</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 142.

the head of a bull. Theseus volunteers to go into the labyrinth, and successfully slays the Minotaur to become the savior of Athens.<sup>5</sup>

The legend of Theseus and the Cretan labyrinth dates back to at least the fifth century B.C.E., although its literary sources—Callimachos, Virgil, Ovid, and Apollodorus—all came later.<sup>6</sup> The labyrinth of Knossos is strongly resembles the maze-like setting of the Hunger Games where its participants are forced to compete. Called “the arena”, the setting of the Games is a different landscape each year and is designed by the Gamemakers, complete with various traps and obstacles strategically placed to ensure entertainment. Collins terms the 24 boys and girls selected to compete for the Capitol’s viewing pleasure “tributes”, just as the Athenian youths are called in the Theseus myth.

The tributes are trapped in the arena, with no means of escape, in the exact same circumstances as the Athenian youths stranded in the labyrinth. The labyrinth in the Theseus myth is described by Apollodorus as having so many winding hallways that escape was impossible for any person after entering.<sup>7</sup> The Athenian tributes would certainly die after entering the labyrinth, either at the hands of the Minotaur or by starvation.<sup>8</sup> The tributes of the Games face a similar fate, as all but the victor are either killed off by another child or perish from hunger or environmental dangers. The children in both stories are handicapped in their respective dangerous situations: according to the myth, Minos had ordered that the children sentenced to fall victim to the Minotaur be

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Seltman, “Theseus and the Minotaur of Knossos,” *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 8, no. 32 (1953): 98.

<sup>6</sup> John L. Heller, “Labyrinth or Troy Town?,” *The Classical Journal* 42, no. 3 (1946): 124.

<sup>7</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Keith Aldrich (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1975), 208.

<sup>8</sup> John L. Heller, *The Classical Journal* (1946): 124.

given no weapons, just as the children of Panem are forced to enter the Games with initially nothing but the clothes on their backs.<sup>9</sup>

In the Theseus myth, the threat of their children being selected kept the Athenians in a constant state of fear. Collins describes the efficacy of this fear tactic which she utilized in *The Hunger Games*: “it was the cruelest thing you could do to people, it’s worse than killing them. It’s killing their children.”<sup>10</sup> Such a tactic exists in classical history, in addition to classical mythology, evidenced in the Spartans’ harsh treatment of the Helots. According to the Greek historian Thucydides, Spartan policy was “at all times...governed by the necessity of taking precautions against” the Helots.<sup>11</sup> The Spartans constantly feared a Helot uprising, and Thucydides reports that the Spartans devised ways of eliminating strong Helot youths they viewed as threats. To eradicate potential insurgents, the Spartans promised freedom to those Helot youths deemed most valuable in wartime service. The Helots had barely a chance to celebrate their newfound freedom before “the Spartans...did away with them, and no one ever knew how each of them perished.”<sup>12</sup>

The Capitol’s use of the Games as a fear tactics sets the tone for a way of life of the citizens of Panem, just as the Spartans’ treatment prescribed for the Helots. Katniss explains that the Games serve “as our yearly reminder that the Dark Days [when the Districts rebelled against the Capitol] must never be repeated.”<sup>13</sup> Katniss elaborates that

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<sup>9</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Keith Aldrich (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1975), 208.

<sup>10</sup> Scholastic Video Interview.

<sup>11</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. T. E. Wick (New York: Random House, 1982), 265.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>13</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 18.

the Games—essentially a fight to the death “over a period of several weeks”—is “the Capitol’s way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy.”<sup>14</sup> Mandatory obligation to compete in the Games if chosen is one of many differences that typify the class schism between the District citizens and the Capitol citizens of Panem, their patrician superiors. Paul Cartledge, in his study *Agesilaos and the Crisis of Sparta*, claims it would not be an overstatement to characterize the history of Sparta as “fundamentally the history of the class struggle between the Spartans and the Helots.”<sup>15</sup> Classism breeds paranoia among the ruling elites; the very existence of the Games speaks to the Capitol’s paranoia—however justified—of an uprising, more so than to any real possibility of a district rebellion. Parallel to this, the massacre of 2,000 helots “is much more a reflection of Spartan fears of revolution than of any overt threat posed by the helots.”<sup>16</sup> A similar situation, with a perhaps more legitimate concern for impending revolt, existed in the relations between Roman citizens and their slaves. According to Roger Dunkle, “the harshness of...penalties [including death penalties] for slaves seems to stem from the Roman fear of slave revolts.”<sup>17</sup> Moderately successful revolts indeed had been staged twice in Sicily—135-132 BC and 104-101 BC—and from 73-71 BC in Italy in a movement spearheaded by Spartacus.<sup>18</sup> Katniss is also similar to Spartacus in a number of ways, as Collins crafts her protagonist by seamlessly interweaving aspects of classical heroes culled from both mythical and historical sources.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Cartledge, *Agesilaos and the Crisis of Sparta* (London & Baltimore: Duckworth, 1987), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Richard J. A. Talbert, “The Role of the Helots in the Class Struggle at Sparta,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 38, no. 1 (1989): 25.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

In addition, Katniss—like Theseus—volunteers to enter, and goes forth willingly.<sup>19</sup> Though this action is typical of a classical hero, it imposes a moral responsibility on her that the other contestants do not necessarily shoulder. The gesture is self-sacrificial, which belies her acute survival instincts and talent for self-preservation. The decision to volunteer also introduces a number of complications in analysis of Katniss as a classical “hero” or “heroine”; she triumphs through a combination of archetypal male and female attributes, and her gender is subversive in regard to the patriarchal, breadwinner role she takes on in her own family in the wake of her father’s death. Yet her decision to compete in the Games—and likely die—in place of her sister Prim is the quintessential female move in classical mythology: sacrifice of herself for another.

Katniss’s decision also sets her apart from those who volunteer for self-serving purposes—namely the “career tributes” from wealthier districts, so nicknamed because they are groomed from birth to compete in the Games. Colloquially referred to as “the Careers,” they are taught to crave the honor and glory a Games victory portends, and are trained killing machines. This education parallels the upbringing of Spartan boys trained for war. The Careers have a higher success rate in the Games due to both training as well as perhaps a desensitization to bloodshed; they are psychologically better prepared to face the trauma and emotional aftermath that killing another human being entails.

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<sup>19</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Keith Aldrich (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1975), 90.

The fourteen youths selected in the Theseus myth are always the most attractive children in all of Athens and aesthetic appeal plays a role in the Hunger Games as well.<sup>20</sup> Haymitch, the only past District 12 winner of the Games and mentor to District 12 tributes Peeta and Katniss, informs them, “Well you’re not entirely hopeless...And once the stylists get hold of you, you’ll be attractive enough,” which prompts Katniss’s assessment, “Peeta and I don’t question this. The Hunger Games aren’t a beauty contest, but the best-looking tributes always seem to pull more sponsors.”<sup>21</sup> Beauty raises the stakes in both Greek mythology as well as Roman history, with respect to the value of Roman gladiators; “beauty of face and body was much valued, especially in imperial gladiators, and was reflected in their monetary value.”<sup>22</sup>

This points to the second clear classical basis for *The Hunger Games*, the ancient Roman practice of gladiatorial games. According to Collins, there are three essential elements of gladiator games: “a ruthless, all-powerful government, people being forced to fight to the death, and it to be a popular entertainment.”<sup>23</sup> All of these components parallel certain historical truths regarding gladiator games and treatment of the fighters. Though gladiator games originated in the mid-Republic of Rome, they attained a

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Seltman, “Theseus and the Minotaur of Knossos,” *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 8, no. 32 (1953): 98.

<sup>21</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 56.

<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Collins, “An Interview with Suzanne Collins,” interview by James Blasingame, in *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 52, no. 8 (2009): 727.

heightened role during the Empire as these combats were used as public entertainment and propaganda for assertion of power.<sup>24</sup>

Government officials or other high-ranking benefactors financed gladiator games in ancient Rome<sup>25</sup>, just as the Capitol aristocrats fund the Hunger Games. One ritualistic aspect of gladiator games was a public banquet, termed the *cena libera*<sup>26</sup>, held the evening before the games for the gladiators, *bestiarii* (men who fight wild beasts) and those prisoners sentenced to die.<sup>27</sup> This ceremonial meal parallels the series of elaborate feasts the *Hunger Games* tributes partake in prior to their fight to the death. The Roman gladiators and beast fighters, as well as the district tributes, were given rich foods which Plutarch would call “pleasing the stomach” and a pass to indulge to their stomachs’ content.<sup>28</sup> The overindulgent eating at the *cena libera* is remarkably similar to the scenes in *The Hunger Games* where Katniss details gorging herself at each meal, in the hope of gaining a few pounds prior to the Games. Collins’ descriptions indicate that Katniss’s overeating, however, is motivated by equal parts pleasure and practicality. Katniss is unaccustomed to the richness and the abundance of food that the hedonistic Capitol denizens take for granted, which explains their amused reactions to watching the tributes at mealtimes. Both the *cena libera* and the meals taken in *The Hunger Games* have been transformed into public spectacles, much like the games themselves. The public could

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<sup>24</sup> Yuko Minowa, “The Roman Games and Consumption Rituals” (paper presented at the annual Conference on Historical Analysis & Research in Marketing, Long Island University, 2007), 279.

<sup>25</sup> Leonard L. Thompson, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games,” *The Journal of Religion* 82, no. 1 (2002): 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Yuko Minowa, (2007): 279.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 75.

attend the *cena libera* “out of apparent voyeurism...to observe how the condemned would indulge vulgarly and voraciously in food and drink the night before the macabre entertainment.”<sup>29</sup> A scene in *The Hunger Games* echoes this idea of elite citizens’ disgust at the vulgar table manners of those condemned to die; Capitol citizen Effie Trinket remarks, “The pair [of tributes from District 12] last year ate everything with their hands like a couple of savages.”<sup>30</sup>

A clear incongruity emerges in the focus on table manners among citizens who enjoy gruesome combats for spectacle, which Katniss recognizes. Effie comments on Katniss and Peeta “managing to overcome the barbarism of your district”, to which Katniss responsively thinks, “Barbarism? That’s ironic, coming from a woman preparing us for slaughter...and basing our success on...table manners.”<sup>31</sup> Perceived barbarism dates back to classical writing and even beyond; according to Patrick Brantlinger, equating uncivilized peoples with “barbarians” is “an idea as old as civilization itself.”<sup>32</sup> Identifying a lack of manners or structured social customs as barbarism reaches as far as Homer, who called the Cyclopes, a one-eyed and cave-inhabiting race “an unruly people, who have no settled customs.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Yuko Minowa, (2007): 279.

<sup>30</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 44.

<sup>31</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 55.

<sup>33</sup> For Homer on the Cyclopes, see Cosmo Rodewald, ed., *Democracy: Ideals and Realities*, in the series “The Ancient World: Source Books” (London: Dent and Hakkert, 1975). Quoted in Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 55.

The irony persists in Collins' novel as Effie trains Katniss how to sit like a lady and appear presentable in interviews, all in preparation for a contest in which one's best hope for survival is transforming into a homicidal automaton. The Romans would have considered themselves a civilized people, and yet "there is no doubt that there existed a high tolerance of cruelty and violence in Roman society."<sup>34</sup> Theories elucidating the high degree of tolerance for gladiatorial bloodshed are numerous, but in neither the case of the Romans nor the Capitol citizens of Panem can this tolerance be merely attributed to bloodthirst. The accepting attitude toward this form of entertainment may have had more to do with "Roman attitudes towards the classes of men who became gladiators" and, respectively, the Capitol citizens' disdain for the district inhabitants. The Capitol children are, significantly, never reaped for the Hunger Games; despite the honor Capitol citizens attach to the Games, it would be unthinkable to place their own children in such danger. Violence was more inculcated in Roman society, as "Rome was in origin a warrior society and militarism remained a primary characteristic of the Romans throughout their history."<sup>35</sup> An example of this is the *decimatio*, a practice of punishing a group of Roman soldiers guilty of abandonment by forcing them to select one that the others must all bludgeon to death.<sup>36</sup> Yet it appears that the Capitol and Roman citizens had shared values insofar as regarding violence as entertainment—not punishment—solely among enslaved classes of citizens.

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<sup>34</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 18.

<sup>35</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

The treatment of tributes in the Capitol prior to competing in the Games mirrors the ambivalent attitudes toward Roman gladiators. The tributes are paraded through a series of formal processions, interviews, and training session scoring. Yet in the eyes of the Capitol citizens cheering on their favorites, the tributes embody equal parts athletic stars and cultural outsiders. This dichotomous existence applied to the archetypal gladiator man as well, whom the Romans viewed, according to Marcus Junkelmann, as both “‘a hero and a criminal’ and ‘a darling of the public and pariah.’”<sup>37</sup> For both the tributes and their ancient counterparts, the Roman gladiators, performance and showmanship is vital to currying the audience’s favor.

Though neither Roman gladiatorial combat nor the Hunger Games function as literal human sacrifice, both were born out of death-wrought circumstances. The Hunger Games emerged as payment for “the Dark Days” in which many Capitol citizens died fighting the rebelling districts. Gladiatorial games were originally funeral games performed as offerings for the deceased. Indeed, the very first gladiator fight in Rome was at the funeral of the Roman aristocrat D. Junius Brutus Pera, in 264 B.C.E. It is uncertain whether early gladiators fought to the death, though most duels did not necessarily end in death; a gladiator was generally proclaimed victorious once an opponent started bleeding or was injured to the point of being unable to continue fighting.<sup>38</sup> The heightened ruthlessness of the Hunger Games—wherein all tributes must fight until one remains alive—is in keeping with the social decay Collins portends for the

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<sup>37</sup> Marcus Junkelmann, *Das Spiel mit dem Tod: So Kämpften Roms Gladiatoren* (Mains am Rhein: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2000), 11, quoted in Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 8.

<sup>38</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 12-13.

future. Funeral games are in fact deeply rooted in Mediterranean culture, as a proliferation of literary evidence for funeral games in ancient Greece indicates.<sup>39</sup>

Undoubtedly the most famous example of funeral games in ancient epic was the competition put on by Achilles to commemorate the death of his friend Patroclus in book XXIII of the *Iliad*.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, *The Hunger Games* contains glimmers of funeral rites when Katniss seeks to commemorate the death of her beloved ally, tiny Rue, a twelve-year-old tribute from District 11. Upon Rue's death, Katniss tenderly kisses her temple and defiantly covers the body with wildflowers to show the Capitol "that Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I."<sup>41</sup> Just as the death of Patroclus motivates Achilles to rejoin the fighting and return to battle in the Trojan War, so too does the death of Rue spark an intensified motivation in Katniss, who vows to her dying friend that she is "going to win for both of us now."<sup>42</sup>

Distinctive features of several forms of Roman entertainment seem interwoven with *The Hunger Games*, particularly the *venationes* and public executions of criminals. The *venationes* were games centered on the fighting and hunting of wild beasts; fighting exotic animals genetically engineered and bred by the Capitol also factors heavily in the arena of the Hunger Games.<sup>43</sup> Such animals include "tracker jackers," "jabberjays," and a species of wolf mutts termed "muttations." Roman gladiator duels were also preceded by midday executions of criminals for public viewing in the arena; such criminals

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<sup>39</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 13.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 237.

<sup>42</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 233.

<sup>43</sup> Leonard L. Thompson, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games," *The Journal of Religion* 82, no. 1 (2002): 29.

included murderers, rebellious slaves and heretics.<sup>44</sup> Though public execution does not happen in conjunction with the Hunger Games, it is referred to as occurring outside of the Games in Collins' book. Katniss mentions that anyone in Panem's districts can be "publicly executed for inciting a rebellion."<sup>45</sup> The tribute Rue, who hails from hardscrabble, agricultural District 11, explains that her district's people are not allowed to eat any of the crops they harvest; such a transgression merits a public whipping. The crop reference is a subtle hint that food does not grow in the supermarket, and in the futuristic society of Panem, the Capitol citizens enjoy an even greater convenience than the supermarket—delicious food at the touch of a button. The Capitol's reliance on the Districts' various industries foreshadows the unspoken ever-present threat of rebellion fueling their fear tactics.

In addition to violence, persona is another component that factors heavily into entertainment for both the Romans and Capitol citizens. Roman gladiatorial games themselves were very often based on classical mythology, as gladiators would dress in costume and act out scenarios as mythical characters. Gladiators were viewed as glamorous heroes, and "the narrative patterns of Greek and Roman mythology provided the gladiators, their fans, and politically minded producers of the games, an ideal environment in which to contextualize these attitudes."<sup>46</sup> The mentors and handlers in *The Hunger Games* encourage the tributes they oversee to craft an image that will appeal to sponsors. Gladiators themselves were image-conscious, as winning crowd favor was

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<sup>44</sup> Leonard L. Thompson, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp: Death in the Roman Games," *The Journal of Religion* 82, no. 1 (2002): 29.

<sup>45</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Monaghan, "Bloody Roman Narratives: Gladiators, 'Fatal Charades' & Senecan Theatre," *Double Dialogues* 4 (2003).

crucial to their success—if not literal survival, as the stakes in *The Hunger Games* are higher. The gladiators drew from Greco-Roman myth to create their public personas, just as the tributes tried to exude a specific image in their pre-Games interviews: Katniss muses that a tribute can select different approaches such as ferocity, wit, sexiness or mysteriousness.

Just as the tributes in *The Hunger Games* are encouraged by their mentors and handlers to adopt a mystique-maximizing image, so too did the gladiators draw from Greco-Roman myth to create their public personas. Perhaps the mythical connections sought to mitigate the brutality of the games at hand, or at the very least elevate the gruesome fighting to a justifiable level of profundity. Pointing to mythical origins may have been a coping mechanism of sorts, a practice that dates back to the Greek tragedians, as noted by Deborah Lyons: “tragic choruses often resort to comparison with events from the mythic past in an attempt to come to terms with the horror they see unfolding before them.”<sup>47</sup> In Panem, an array of appealing and charismatic tributes that Capitol citizens may root for is in keeping with the playful, game-like nature of the spectacle meant to downplay the horror of what the Games really mean to the districts.

Gladiators chose stage names in alignment with their desired image, and their primary source of inspiration was “Greco-Roman myth and legend, which was familiar to most spectators.”<sup>48</sup> A famous example is the emperor Commodus, who emulated

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<sup>47</sup> Deborah Lyons, *Gender and Immortality: Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 37.

<sup>48</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 124.

Heracles in his defeat of men and beasts in the arena in 192 C.E.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, each tribute is assigned a stylist and makeover team, and they are first introduced to the Capitol citizens in a public procession on chariots, perhaps the most classical vehicle Collins could have chosen, for its Hellenic roots and popularity under the Roman Empire. The costume and performance aspect is interesting as it relates to the Hunger Games' rituals of presenting the tributes in costume and introducing them to the public by way of television—the modern medium of public spectacle—interviews. The costumes are carefully selected and specifically representative of each district's signature industry. For example, District 1 produces luxury items for the Capitol, and their tributes are described by Katniss in the procession as “so beautiful, spray-painted silver, in tasteful tunics glittering with jewels.”<sup>50</sup> The District 1 tributes' names, “Glimmer” and “Marvel,” evoke the idea of gushing over precious metals; this fixation on flashy names echoes the gladiators' preferences for assuming stage names associated with jewels and gold. Favorite gladiator names included Amethystus (‘amethyst’) and Aureolus (‘golden’); possibly these gems were even embedded into their armor or weapons.<sup>51</sup> The glorification of such materialism indicates a superficiality and sparkle as ephemeral as the audience's cheers.

The machinations of such popular entertainment involving humans fighting for sport are at the hands of an all-powerful government in both the Roman Empire and Panem. Collins may be using an allegory for mass culture as social decay, which

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<sup>49</sup> David Potter, *The Victor's Crown: A History of Ancient Sport from Homer to Byzantium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 238.

<sup>50</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 69.

<sup>51</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 125-126.

undeniably has classical roots. According to Brantlinger, the Romans under the Empire set “the pattern of negative classicism, bread and circuses, decadence and barbarism,” all of which are characterized in *The Hunger Games*.<sup>52</sup> The name Panem—the Latin word for bread—is a clear reference to the famous phrase *panem et circenses*, “bread and circuses.” The idea of *panem et circenses* manifests in *The Hunger Games* in that the Capitol both governs and produces the televised Games, thereby supporting the assertion that “bread and circuses” implies “a supposed collusion between governments and the producers of culture and entertainment.” Appearing first in Juvenal’s tenth satire, the phrase summarizes the idea in ancient Rome that “the multitude must be fed bread and cheap entertainment if it was to be kept quiet, submissive and loyal to the powers that be.”<sup>53</sup> While the Hunger Games are endlessly promoted for all, only the Capitol citizens—who are exempt from the pool of tribute lotteries—can enjoy watching.

“Panem” is a cruel misnomer for a country of starving districts; the name suggests a propagandist bent indicating a bountiful nation, which is far from the truth. Panem is essentially a perversion of the bread-and-circuses model, as the masses are the civilized ones, by contemporary values, whereas supposedly elite privileged Capitol citizens exhibit barbarism in enjoying the Hunger Games. Collins defies the assumption that the masses are equated with barbarism, an idea to which Capitol citizens certainly subscribe. This assumption pervades social and political theory and is rooted in Heraclitus’s social thought that “the multitude” be considered barbarians.<sup>54</sup> Panem’s name is also significant as bread is an important symbol throughout *The Hunger Games*, and a motif inextricably

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<sup>52</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Bread and Circuses: Theories of Mass Culture as Social Decay* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 53.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

linked to Peeta, the baker's son whom Katniss calls repeatedly "the boy with the bread."<sup>55</sup> Peeta is her link to survival, both prior to the Games by providing bread on one desperate occasion and in the arena by serving as her protector. Yet Collins defies gender stereotypes in making Katniss and Peeta interdependent on one another. Their relationship is a mutual symbiosis and they rely upon one another as one would rely on bread for sustenance, which becomes a permanent marker of Peeta's identity in Katniss's view: "nothing will change the fact that we've saved each other's lives in [the arena]...And beyond that, he will always be the boy with the bread."<sup>56</sup>

Issues of classism abound in both ancient Rome and Panem. The districts' forced participation in the games is one of numerous differences separating them from the Capitol citizens comprising the upper echelon of Panem. The divide is apparent in the constant decadence manifested in the Capitol. The architecture—which is described as grandiose and suggestive of a classical model—and aesthetic taste is gaudy to Katniss's plebeian eyes. She describes the Capitol as a candy-coated world, as superficial as its citizens: "all the colors seem artificial, the pinks too deep, the greens too bright, the yellows painful to the eyes."<sup>57</sup>

Another example of the overindulgent nature of elite citizens is their attitudes towards food. In *The Hunger Games* series, Capitol citizens enjoy excessive partying and overindulge on food to the point where they induce vomiting in order to eat even more: "And here in the Capitol they're vomiting for the pleasure of filling their bellies again and again. Not from some illness of body or mind, not from spoiled food. It's

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<sup>55</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 374.

<sup>56</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 311.

<sup>57</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 59.

what everyone does at a party. Expected. Part of the fun”<sup>58</sup> To participate in such activity when citizens in the districts are dying of starvation—as do some tributes in the aptly named “Hunger Games”—highlights the absurdity of such a practice. Though rare, similar parties were held in ancient Rome; elaborate dinner soirees sometimes contained purging between lavish courses. The Roman historian Suetonius wrote often of such lurid affairs; he recorded that Tiberius once “spent a night and two whole days feasting and drinking” with companions in luxurious Capri.<sup>59</sup> Suetonius also mentions the emperor Claudius’s gluttony, though he was not the only classical writer to take note of a voracious spectacle by an emperor. Cicero wrote of seeing Caesar indulge at a banquet and following with a subsequent “course of emetic”, implying he vomited the meal—just as the Capitol citizens would.<sup>60</sup> Petronius’s *Satyrcon* also references such indulgent dinner parties.

Suetonius also writes of Tiberius’s penchants for wild orgies, consisting of “teams of wantons of both sexes, selected as experts in deviant intercourse [who] ...copulated before him in triple unions to excite his flagging passions.”<sup>61</sup> This lustful appetite is seen later in *The Hunger Games* series among the wealthiest Capitol citizens, who use attractive Hunger Games victors, such as the character Finnick Odair, as prostitutes; Collins implies that these unions were both hetero and homosexual.

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<sup>58</sup> Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009).

<sup>59</sup> Suetonius, *Suetonius: With an English Translation*, trans. John Carew Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 353.

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Dando-Collins, *The Ides: Caesar's Murder and the War for Rome* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 62.

<sup>61</sup> Suetonius, *Suetonius: With an English Translation*, trans. John Carew Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 353.

In addition to Games exemption and lavish lifestyles, yet another distinction setting the Capitol apart from the districts is the nomenclature of their respective inhabitants. Names are one of the most obvious markers of the Capitol citizens' classical roots as they are largely derived or directly extracted by Collins from Greek and Roman history. It is exclusively Capitol citizens and career tributes who bear classical names plucked from history: Caesar, Claudius, Flavius, Octavia, Venia, Portia, Seneca, Cinna, and Cato are among them. In *The Hunger Games*, Seneca is the head Gamemaker, which is ironic considering his historical counterpart's disapproval of gladiator games and all forms of entertainment for the masses; Seneca wrote in his Epistle 7, *On Crowds*:

But nothing is as ruinous to the character as sitting away one's time at a show — for it is then, through the medium of entertainment, that vices creep into one with more than usual ease...what we have now is murder pure and simple. The combatants have nothing to protect them; their whole bodies are exposed to the blows; every thrust they launch gets home...There are no helmets and no shields repelling the weapons. What is the point of armour? Or of skill? All that sort of thing just makes the death slower in coming. In the morning men are thrown to the lions and the bears: but it is the spectators they are thrown to in the lunch hour. The spectators insist that each on killing his man shall be thrown against another to be killed in his turn; and the eventual victor is reserved by them for yet another form of butchery; the only exit for the contestants is death.<sup>62</sup>

These words predict the Capitol's preference for watching more "exciting" kills, and their practice of throwing randomly selected children into the arena without weapons, disregarding the danger it imposes squarely on tributes who have the misfortune of being young and unskilled.

The name "Cato" likely is a reference to the Roman general and statesman Cato the Elder, a man so patriotic he closed many a speech with the phrase "*Censeo*

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<sup>62</sup> Seneca, *Seneca Letters from a Stoic*, trans. R Campbell (:Penguin, 1969): page number.

*Carthaginem esse delendam*” (the common English version of this is “*Carthago delenda est*,” Carthage must be destroyed).<sup>63</sup> *The Hunger Games* Cato character is similarly patriotic and eager to represent his district in the Games. Katniss’s stylist—a Capitol citizen who sympathizes with her and is ultimately revealed to be a rebel masquerading as an insider—is a clear reference to Lucius Cornelius Cinna, a Roman consul who teamed forces with Marius and the enemy Samnites to attack Rome.<sup>64</sup> Coriolanus is the name of both the Capitol president in *The Hunger Games* and an elite Roman general. Collins purposefully gives none of the characters from the poorest districts, 11 and 12, such classical names. In fact, the names of all major District 12 characters are tied to nature in some way, perhaps to emphasize their wholesome earthiness and natural appearance. “Katniss” and “Primrose” are both plants, while “Peeta” refers to a bread of Mediterranean origin—as in “pita”—and “Gale” refers to gusts of wind.

There is an inevitable link between decadence and decline. When a select few control the masses, tensions inherently arise and inevitably threaten society. Gibbon argues in *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* that Rome became increasingly materialistic and its “immoderate greatness”<sup>65</sup> arguably is akin to the level of mastery and extravagance attained by those in the Capitol of Panem.

The names of *Hunger Games* characters may have in many cases simply surface connections to their historical figures, but deeper parallels exist between major characters

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<sup>63</sup>Charles E. Little, “The Authenticity and Form of Cato’s Saying ‘Carthago Delenda Est’”, *The Classical Journal* 29, no. 6 (1934): 429.

<sup>64</sup>Melissa B. Dowling, “The Clemency of Sulla,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 49, no. 3 (2000): 326.

<sup>65</sup>Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 6. (London: Plummer and Brewis, 1820), 398.  
Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Heroines and Hysterics* (General Duckworth & Company Limited, 1981), 41.

and classical mythological counterparts. In numerous respects, the relationship between Katniss and the male District 12 tribute, Peeta, is modeled on the myth of Theseus and Ariadne, though Collins inverts the gender roles. Katniss is the heroic Theseus figure, whereas Peeta—loyal and infatuated—strongly resembles Ariadne. Ariadne harbors a crush on Theseus, just as Peeta has favored Katniss his whole life. Only once the heroic characters—Theseus and Katniss—encounter their respective challenges of surviving the labyrinth and the Games are Ariadne and Peeta afforded the opportunity to advance the relationship by aiding the object of their affections. Ariadne helps Theseus exit the labyrinth successfully by supplying a ball of thread for him to retrace his steps; Peeta similarly protects and helps Katniss along en route to their joint victory in the Games. While Peeta and Ariadne are both undeniably clever, they are in the shadows of their respective stories' final triumphs, as Katniss and Theseus are the ones who commit the crucial final kill. Peeta and Ariadne are both pawns in a story starring the hero at the center of the action; Ariadne is kidnapped in the Theseus myth, as is Peeta later in *The Hunger Games* trilogy.<sup>66</sup>

According to the Catullus version of the myth, Theseus betrays Ariadne by abandoning her on the island of Naxos. Katniss is not nearly as coldhearted, as she maintains her alliance with Peeta to the bitter end of the Games—even outsmarting the Capitol with a suicide attempt to ensure that they can both win and live—but she has several opportunities to desert Peeta, comparable to Theseus's desertion. The most significant of these is at the finale of the Games, when it is announced that there can only be one winner—revoking a prior stated rule—thus requiring that she and Peeta fight to

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<sup>66</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Keith Aldrich (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1975), 90.

the death. Katniss does not turn against Peeta, but her survivor instincts do induce an unconscious temptation; upon hearing the rule change, she states: “before I am even aware of my actions, my bow is loaded with the arrow pointed straight at his heart. Peeta raises his eyebrows and I see the knife has already left his hand on its way to the lake where it splashes in the water. I drop my weapons and take a step back, my face burning in what can only be shame.”<sup>67</sup> Peeta, similar to Ariadne, is unquestioningly loyal to Katniss, whereas Katniss reaches the humane decision an instant later than her suitor.

Katniss’s ultimate decision to save Peeta proves she is a nobler hero than Theseus himself. Theseus leaves Ariadne to be ravaged by beasts and left unburied (the dishonorable fate of fallen Games tributes), whereas Katniss protects Peeta and herself from the “muttations”—genetically engineered wolves that threaten the lives of the final remaining contenders in the Hunger Games. Collins again subverts the dynamic by initially depicting Peeta as the possible betrayer; Katniss suspects that he is a traitor at two points in the book. The first occurs when Peeta chooses to be coached by their shared mentor in secret, separate from Katniss, and her hurt registers immediately: “Betrayal. That’s the first thing I feel.”<sup>68</sup> The second occasion is when Katniss suspects Peeta has allied himself with the career tributes in a hunt to kill her, and her reactionary thoughts display shock at such “disgrace” as she concludes “the noble boy...was playing just one more game with me.”<sup>69</sup> However, in fabricating a romance with Peeta to woo sponsors and captivate the Capitol audience, Katniss—like Theseus—is really the figure exhibiting duplicitous behavior throughout, and thus the parallel remains intact. While

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<sup>67</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 343.

<sup>68</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 114.

<sup>69</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 162.

Katniss never betrays Peeta at the expense of his life, she indeed manipulates his emotions for her own gain. Katniss herself admits “I seem heartless in comparison [to Peeta].”<sup>70</sup>

The parallel presents the question of who or what the symbolic Minotaur in *The Hunger Games* might be. The Capitol, external instigator of the cruel practice, may symbolize the King Minos character. A good case may be made for Cato, the District 2 “career tribute”, being the Minotaur as he is the final tribute Katniss and Peeta must rally to kill in order to win the Games. Just as Theseus sets out to slay the Minotaur, Katniss seems solely focused on overcoming Cato. She notices his strength and ferocity in the training and has kept an eye on him ever since; like the Minotaur, Cato is framed in Katniss’s mind as the ultimate, decisive kill: “Twenty-one tributes are dead, but I still have yet to kill Cato. And really, wasn’t he always the one to kill? Now it seems the other tributes were just minor obstacles, distractions, keeping us from the real battle of the Games. Cato and me.”<sup>71</sup> In turn, Cato himself is firmly set on killing Katniss, telling the other tributes in his alliance, “When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes.”<sup>72</sup> Katniss herself acknowledges that Cato “had it out for me since the beginning” and “has a special hatred for me”, due to her outscoring him in the preliminary training round of the Games.<sup>73</sup> In the character of Cato, Collins blurs the line between human and beast; he seems to take pleasure in killing the other children, and demonstrates a deranged behavior bordering on psychotic.

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<sup>70</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 363.

<sup>71</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 327.

<sup>72</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 317.

<sup>73</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 323.

Cato certainly demonstrates the most monstrous innate qualities of all the tributes in the Games. Katniss describes him as “brutal, bloody Cato who can snap a neck with a twist of his arm” and freely admits, “Cato might not be entirely sane.”<sup>74</sup> Yet another interesting, perhaps less obvious, candidate for the Minotaur would be Katniss herself. In the arena, the career tributes form an alliance focused on the common goal of killing her specifically; Katniss is a target ever since a high training score established her as a legitimate threat. They “hunt” her as a group, each wishing to be first to draw blood; it is very reminiscent of the Calydonian boar hunt in Greek mythology. While not monstrous like Cato, Katniss is prone to hotheadedness, presuming, “I believe Cato could easily lose his judgment in a fit of temper. Not that I can feel superior on that point...Maybe I do understand Cato better than I think.”<sup>75</sup> In addition, if Katniss were both the Theseus figure and the Minotaur, it would shed light on her attempted suicide with the poison berries at the end of the Games as a means of coming full circle and ending her time in the arena. She is both the Theseus character—the hero making the final kill—and the Minotaur as her suicide would result in killing the “monster” within her.

Ultimately, if any “monstrous” qualities may be derived from the heroine character of Katniss, the primary source is her treatment of Peeta. Her deception toward him in their faux romance, though necessary for survival, seems to induce as much guilt as her homicides. Jeri Debrohun, in an analysis of the Catullus version of the myth, argues that the monstrousness of the Minotaur is downplayed in Ariadne’s words because, for her, the true monster is the duplicitous Theseus. According to Debrohun, it is “the more consequential ‘monstrous falseness’ of Theseus that is at issue” for

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<sup>74</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 323-324.

<sup>75</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 324.

Ariadne.<sup>76</sup> While Katniss is conflicted over her true feelings, her ambiguity is sufficient reason for Peeta to feel hurt, as he assumes her affection for him in the arena “was just some strategy” that was “all for the Games.”<sup>77</sup> Such betrayal is the most impactful and defining of one’s character; Ovid writes that Phyllis addressed her husband Demophon (Theseus’ son) with, “Of all the great deeds in the long career of your sire [Theseus], nothing has made impress upon your nature but the leaving of his Cretan bride [Ariadne]”<sup>78</sup> and these words ring true for Katniss as well. Whatever Katniss or Theseus may have accomplished as heroes is presumed relatively insignificant; what ultimately defines Katniss’s character and legacy is her treatment of Peeta. In fighting for his survival, as well as her own, she preserves a sense of humanity in the cruelest of circumstances.

The behavior of the tributes in the arena raises the theme—also prevalent in classical myth—of where the line between human and beast may be drawn. The brutality of the Games seems to metamorphose the tributes into savages, thereby serving to confirm the Capitol perception of them. Peeta asserts that “I don’t want them to change me in there,” as his primary fear before entering the Capitol’s Games is that they will “turn me into some kind of monster that I’m not.”<sup>79</sup> The line between human and beast—as manifested by the Minotaur, among other classical monsters—is something Katniss struggles with, and though she regularly kills animals for food, she is hesitant to kill humans for her own survival—despite her friend Gale’s insistence that there’s no

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<sup>76</sup> Jeri Blair Debrohun, “Ariadne and the Whirlwind of Fate: Figures of Confusion in Catullus 64,” *Classical Philology* 94, no. 4 (1999): 423.

<sup>77</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 372.

<sup>78</sup> Ovid, *Heroides and Amores*, trans. Grant Showerman and G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 27.

<sup>79</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 141.

difference in hunting them. Though the Capitol citizens cheer on homicides, even their approval has its limitations—cannibalistic tributes induce disgust among audiences and are generally sabotaged by the Gamemakers “to ensure the victor [is not] a lunatic.”<sup>80</sup>

Katniss recalls a tribute—with the Roman name “Titus”—from a previous year’s Games who tried to eat the hearts of his victims; the very existence of cannibalistic tributes proves the inherent danger in treading the line between human and beast.

Katniss is comparable to Theseus as well as numerous other heroes and heroines throughout classical mythology and history. The interweaving of different gendered aspects packaged into the singular character of Katniss is testament to her complexity as well as Collins’ belief that either sex can attain status as a hero. Spartacus emerges as the clearest historical parallel to Katniss. Some of the figures in Greco-Roman mythology Katniss is especially similar to include Diana/Artemis, Alcestis, Odysseus, Achilles and Heracles.

The gladiator slave Spartacus and Katniss have many similarities beyond being enslaved in their societies and forced to compete for entertainment. Spartacus was ethnically Thracian, and there are implied racial divides in *The Hunger Games*. Katniss hails from the poorest neighborhood, “the Seam,” in the impoverished District 12.<sup>81</sup> Katniss also describes the tributes from agrarian District 11 as darker skinned, while she identifies herself as olive-skinned. The Capitol residents, with their colorful hair and skin dyed in bright hues, may as well be as separate from the districts racially as they are economically.

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<sup>80</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 143.

<sup>81</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 17.

Katniss attains immense fame as a Hunger Games competitor and ultimate victor, not unlike Spartacus, who is the most famous gladiator of the ancient world and a widely known symbol of personal freedom.<sup>82</sup> As a historical figure, he is best known for leading an army of slaves against their Roman masters in a successful revolt spearheaded by gladiators. This spiraled into an actual war over a span of several years. Spartacus eventually retaliated by making Roman soldiers he captured participate in their own shameful gladiator matches as payback.<sup>83</sup> Katniss is presented with a similar opportunity towards the end of the trilogy when—in the wake of a district rebellion—she is given the chance to vote on whether Capitol children should be subjected to their own Hunger Games. She also reluctantly becomes the face of a rebellion, as her primary motive in *The Hunger Games* is to return home to District 12 alive, not incite an uprising. Her displaced motives may resemble those of Spartacus, who—according to Plutarch—aimed for his men to return home, and did not intend to invade Rome.<sup>84</sup>

The details of Spartacus's life are acknowledged by Collins as part of her inspiration in writing *The Hunger Games*; she told *The New York Times* that she was “heavily influenced by the historical figure Spartacus. Katniss follows the same arc from slave to gladiator to rebel to face of a war.”<sup>85</sup> Beyond these similarities, Katniss seems to exhibit the same inner qualities of strength that Spartacus demonstrated; Plutarch wrote

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<sup>82</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 31.

<sup>83</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 23.

<sup>84</sup> Barry Baldwin, “Two Aspects of the Spartacus Slave Revolt,” *The Classical Journal* 62, no. 7 (1967): 291.

<sup>85</sup> Susan Dominus, “Suzanne Collins’s War Stories for Kids,” *New York Times*, April 8, 2011, accessed May 15, 2012.

Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 6. (London: Plummer and Brewis, 1820), 398.

that Spartacus “had a great spirit and great physical strength.”<sup>86</sup> Katniss’s spirit is also celebrated and referenced as one of her strengths throughout *The Hunger Games*. Her mentor, Haymitch, confirms that it is most admirable quality: “as for the citizens of the Capitol...no one can help but admire your spirit.”<sup>87</sup> Prim comments to her sister, “You’re so fast and brave. Maybe you can win.”<sup>88</sup> It seems for Spartacus and Katniss, strength of spirit provides a competitive edge and fuels a hope for survival; in response to Haymitch’s commendation, Katniss ruminates, “My spirit. This is a new thought. I’m not sure exactly what it means, but it suggests I’m a fighter. In a sort of brave way.”<sup>89</sup>

Spartacus unseated the social framework of his society, just as Katniss did in outsmarting the Capitol to force their hand and allow the unprecedented outcome of two winners. From the Romans’ standpoint, “the success achieved by Spartacus’ army against Roman armies reversed the natural order of things”<sup>90</sup>; Katniss also disrupts the “natural order” of her society, unintentionally causing a chain of threatening events to unfold. This bears striking resemblance to another classical mythic figure, the title character from the tragedy *Alcestis* by Euripides. Alcestis, in the self-sacrificial vein of Katniss, offers up her own life in place of her husband Admetus’. Due to Alcestis stepping forward, Admetus does not die when he is fated to, thereby unseating the natural order of their society.

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<sup>86</sup> Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, Vol. 3. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), 337.

<sup>87</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 121.

<sup>88</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 36.

<sup>89</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 121-122.

<sup>90</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 32.

Alcestis offered up her own life in exchange for her husband's, even though the length of a mortal's life, according to Greek mythology, is only as long as a string spun, measured and cut by the Fates. Katniss also—as she herself acknowledges—sacrifices her own life, because volunteering to compete in the Games is essentially volunteering to die as the chances of winning are slim. Fate decreed that Admetus from the myth and Primrose from *The Hunger Games* be the ones to die, but the heroic figure steps in to save each life.

Referring to Katniss as a hero or heroine specifically is problematic because these terms occupy drastically different roles in the paradigm of classical literature. Though she exemplifies prototypically “masculine” traits of classical heroes in her role as a futuristic analogue of Theseus, Heracles, and others, reducing Katniss to a gender-subversive icon would be an oversimplification. Her very first heroic deed is an act of self-sacrifice; Elise Harrison cites self-sacrifice as one of the major motives of suicidal females in classical mythology. Katniss's act of volunteering falls precisely in line with what Harrison characterizes as “a common motif throughout Greek mythology,” the idea of sacrificing oneself for a greater good, an impulse that is often mixed with a “too-severe adherence to ungrounded social demands.”<sup>91</sup> The distinction between actually killing oneself and volunteering to die is muddled in Greek myth, just as in *The Hunger Games*; Katniss's volunteering to suffer the threat of death morphs into a calculated suicide attempt—and both decisions bookending *The Hunger Games* are viewed by her nation's entire population. The voluntary suicide of a female to prevent or end a war, plague or other imminent danger is common in Greek myth; an example is the sacrifice of

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<sup>91</sup> Garrison, Elise P., “Suicide in Classical Mythology,” working paper, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 2000.

Iphigenia during the Trojan War. Katniss must threaten suicide in order to end the “war” of the Hunger Games. In a deeper connection to the trilogy, Katniss may be the one who volunteers, but it is ultimately Primrose—the sister originally selected—who dies in the final book just before peace in Panem is achieved. The message as to why a female must die in order to attain peace is unclear, but there may be a greater comment in Prim’s death regarding the inescapability of fate. Katniss accepts the chance of losing her life just as Alcestis accepted death, and both did so willingly in order to prolong the life of a loved one. Alcestis is established by Euripides as the model wife to which all Greek women should aspire; Katniss is emblematic of a model sister, volunteering although it is unprecedented in District 12 for anyone—even a sibling—to compete in another’s place. The unconventionality of Katniss’s volunteering is underscored in *The Hunger Games*; Peeta’s brothers do not even consider this as an option. Alcestis initiates a descent into the Underworld—an archetypal rite of passage that many classical heroes, from Heracles to Aeneas, must undertake—and ultimately returns to live again. Katniss makes her own descent of sorts right before the Games begin, as she is shepherded “down into a tube underground, into the catacombs that lie beneath the arena.”<sup>92</sup>

The impact and importance of both Alcestis’ and Katniss’s choice to endanger themselves for a loved one cannot be minimized; it may in fact be the reason for their redemption and second chance at life. According to Plato’s *Symposium*,

“no one will die for you but a lover, and a lover will do this even if she’s a woman. Alcestis is proof to everyone in Greece that what I say is true. Only she was willing to die in place of her husband, although his father and mother were still alive. Because of her love, she went so far beyond his parents in family feeling that she made them look like outsiders, as if they belonged to their son in

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<sup>92</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 144.

name only. And when she did this her deed struck everyone, even the gods, as nobly done. The gods were so delighted, in fact, that they gave her the prize they reserve for a handful chosen from the throngs of noble heroes—they sent her soul back from the dead. As you can see, the eager courage of love wins highest honors from the gods.”<sup>93</sup>

It is perhaps Katniss’s very willingness to die in Primrose’s place that justifies her right to be spared. Katniss implicitly understands that strength of spirit accrues admiration of heroic nobility: “I can’t show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does”<sup>94</sup>

While the self-sacrifice decision ushers Katniss into the arena, her similarity to other mythical figures accounts for her success and ability to survive once the Games begin. Readers with any classical background will instantly recognize her connection to huntresses Diana/Artemis and Atalanta; Katniss is a literal huntress, in order to feed her family, and her weapon of choice is the bow—like Diana. Incidentally, the bow is also the weapon of choice for Paris in the *Iliad*, whereas Hector—as well as Cato in *The Hunger Games*—wields a spear; classical myth and *The Hunger Games* both suggest that the bow is an ideal weapon for physically smaller characters. Katniss also shares Diana’s professed desire for virginity, telling her friend Gale, “I never want to have kids”<sup>95</sup> and admits in regard to Peeta that even “if I do have feelings for him, it doesn’t matter because I’ll never be able to afford the kind of love that leads to a family, to children.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989), 10-11.

<sup>94</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 179.

<sup>95</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 8.

<sup>96</sup> *The Hunger Games*, 373.

This may be reflective of the idea prevalent in Greek mythology that “a woman can keep her identity only by remaining a virgin.”<sup>97</sup>

Katniss also bears resemblance to Heracles, as she “saves” her district by winning the Hunger Games, thereby providing food for a year. Heracles must often act as civic hero, embodying the “savior” role much like Katniss.<sup>98</sup> He is “preserver of society and civilized life”, which is a role that comes at the cost of rendering him outside human in a new home set in the district’s designated “Victor’s Village” neighborhood. She is given free meals for life, a common reward in the ancient world for victors of the Olympics and other games<sup>99</sup> and enjoyed at the Prytaneum as referenced in Plato’s *Apology*.<sup>100</sup> Much like Heracles, Katniss’s life post-games is defined by being both hero and outsider. She continues to defend and protect a society from which she feels increasingly distanced. This bifurcated role of the hero is a complex issue that dates back even to ancient philosophy, as the problem of the city’s “Guardians” is discussed in Plato’s *Republic*: “the city really belongs to them, yet they derive no good from the city.”<sup>101</sup> Katniss is circumstantially forced to step into the “Guardian” role, however it is this very casting that prevents her from happiness and disconnects her from the very society she aims to preserve in the fight against the Capitol. She, like Heracles, must grapple with animalistic instincts to prove that a humane heart lies at the core of her savage exterior.

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<sup>97</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Heroines and Hysterics* (General Duckworth & Company Limited, 1981), 1.

<sup>98</sup> Stephen L. Harris and Gloria Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images & Insights*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 324-235.

<sup>99</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 157.

<sup>100</sup> Plato, *The Trials of Socrates: Six Classic Texts*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 54.

<sup>101</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 103.

Katniss additionally resembles Odysseus in her use of clever tactics—often enlisting the aid of others—to stay alive. Her survival instincts and quick-thinking exhibited in *The Hunger Games* are unparalleled among her fellow tributes, which is why she ultimately wins the games. She combines the greatest qualities of the heroes of classical epic—strength as well as intellect. *The Hunger Games* also has numerous other nods to classical epic in terms of style. It contains countless examples of classical epic conventions, some possibly unintentional on Collins’ part. Cataloguing the troops in a Homeric fashion occurs in *The Hunger Games* when each fallen tribute’s face and hometown district is flashed in the sky as the Panem anthem plays. *The Hunger Games* contains exotic beasts and monstrous mutations, and these types of animals abundantly pepper the adventures in classical epic. Collins even uses epithets—a device common in classical epic—for many of the tributes. Katniss becomes known as “the girl on fire” while another unnamed tribute is dubbed “Foxface” due to her cunning and countenance. Katniss’s triumphant moments in the Games—cleverly evading other tributes, orchestrating sneak attacks and utilizing natural elements to destroy their supplies—echo heroic scenes of *aristeia*—the Greek term for a hero’s finest moments in battle—from the *Iliad*. The Iliadic hero Hector sees omens in the form of birds, such as the eagle of Zeus, just as Katniss sees mockingjays in the sky at key moments throughout the Games that serve ostensibly as warning signs.

Etymologically there are also strong classical origins permeating the vocabulary of Collins’ *Hunger Games* universe. Those the Capitol punishes by cutting out their tongues to serve as mute slaves—a punishment seen in classical myth for Philomela in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—are called “avoxes”; this is a melding of the Greek “alpha

privitive” and the Latin noun “vox” to mean “without voice.” The horn-shaped structure holding the Arena’s food and supply source is termed the “cornucopia,” a Latin word meaning “horn of plenty” which appears in several myths, including one starring Heracles. The intentional misspelling of “Capitol” is likely a clever allusion on Collins’ part to the Capitoline hill in Rome. One especially interesting linguistic choice is Collins’ word “tesserae,” the term for the supply of grain and oil that children can receive, in exchange for entering their name more times in the Hunger Games “reaping” pool. This term is derived from the Greek word “tesserae” meaning “four” (sided)<sup>102</sup>, as in dice, thereby suggesting a connection to chance or fortune.

The word “tesserae” highlights the major theme in *The Hunger Games* of fate, which is a direct nod to classical mythology. Fate—and acceptance of one’s fate—factors into every classical myth, from Alcestis to Oedipus. Prim’s eventual death in the series may be an Oedipal implication about the inescapability of one’s fate, despite Katniss’s heroic, Herculean efforts to save her. An oft-repeated catchphrase uttered in *The Hunger Games* is, “May the odds be ever in your favor.” The idea of fate looms large both in *The Hunger Games* and ancient culture. Fate is what links many of the classical allusions in the book. The Capitol citizens use fate to justify why the lowborn class of their environs’ citizens must compete in the Games, just the Greeks and Romans both believed that the gladiators were of lesser status and worth and therefore “deserved whatever fate befell them.”<sup>103</sup> Fate is also attributed as the reason the pivotal females in

<sup>102</sup> Samuel Birch, *History of Ancient Pottery Volume II: Greek, Etruscan and Roman*, (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1858), 238.

<sup>103</sup> Roger Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 34.

both *The Hunger Games* and classical myth must die. It is the ultimate determinate that governs all else; even Ariadne states in Ovid's *Heroides*, "I had hope for a better fate."<sup>104</sup>

Many significant questions lie here at the crux of fate and justification of cruel treatment. Furthermore, Katniss's ordeals following the Games suggest that surviving to witness the death/torture of loved ones may be a fate worse than death. From myth to modern literature, storytelling has served as a way of making sense of death—oftentimes rationalizing bloodshed by ascribing a greater meaning or sacrificial purpose for it. Whatever the means, the narrative structure remains untouched.

*The Hunger Games* proffers copious insight when read as a political and social commentary, but it perhaps makes a more salient point in functioning as a modern myth. It is not only an indictment of the global devolution in the vein of Hesiod's—and later Ovid's—ages of the world, but also uses all the fantastical elements of myth—heroes and outlandish beasts—to channel universal experiences. Many classical writers—Virgil perhaps the most prominent—have used fictional stories enmeshed in socio-political criticisms to express cultural truths. Collins reveals truth by contextualizing her message within the framework of a fictional narrative. Her frequent classical allusions do not imply a lack of originality but rather serve as proof of the universality of themes embedded within the ethos of Western literature. *The Hunger Games* taps into a cultural consciousness that has existed since antiquity, and raises eternal issues: the necessity of performance for survival, the uncertain divide between humanistic civilization and barbaric beastliness, and the preservation of humanity in the cruelest circumstances. Our own experiences in the modern world lend credibility to the belief that a perfect empire is

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<sup>104</sup> Ovid, *Heroides and Amores*, trans. Grant Showerman and G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 27.

illusionary, though the revelations posited by *The Hunger Games* hardly stop there.

Collins' book enables both the imbibing of classical culture as well as the ignition of a dialogue concerning timeless questions continually facing humanity.

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