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# Peeta's Virtue in the *Hunger Games* Trilogy

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**Abstract:** The Latin *virtus* literally means “manliness” (*vir* = man) and, by extension, the positive qualities that a man should have. During the transition from Latin to French to English, “virtue” lost its gender specificity, but retained its reference to positive qualities. Thus, by the Enlightenment period, separate standards of virtue had emerged for women and men. Suzanne Collins disrupts this gendered virtue dichotomy in her *Hunger Games* trilogy. Peeta Mellark is a natural diplomat and peacemaker, a gentle soul who fits the feminine model of virtue better than the masculine model. Although Peeta engages in violence when necessary, he is philosophically closer to Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi. Peeta is the complement of Katniss Everdeen, who echoes classical male heroes like Odysseus in her combination of martial prowess and trickster wiles. Other significant characters in the series, such as Primrose Everdeen and Gale Hawthorne, reflect the traditional virtues assigned to their gender. Thus Collins depicts various masculinities and femininities: masculine *virtus*, feminine *virtus*, masculine virtue, and feminine virtue. By having Katniss choose Peeta over Gale, Collins portrays Peeta's gentle masculinity as a fully legitimate alternative to Gale's martial heroism.

**Keywords:** *Hunger Games*, masculinity, nonviolence, virtue, dystopia

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Consider this premise for a dystopian novel: An authoritarian administration declares that predominately peaceful protests are “riots,” and so dispatches paramilitary forces to quell dissent. These forces then attack both protesters and journalists, teargas the local mayor, and abduct people off the streets using unmarked vans. As surely any writer of the genre would agree, this is a strong dystopian scenario. According to NPR's reportage, though, that scenario is neither fictional nor distant. Rather, it recently played out in my home state of Oregon (Treisman 2020; Levinson et al. 2020). Or consider this alternate dystopian premise: A new pandemic ravages the globe. Health experts encourage people to wear cloth masks to slow the spread of the virus. Unfortunately, in a certain nation, many men decide that wearing face masks is a sign of weakness, so they refuse to comply. In that nation, hundreds of thousands die from the disease. That's another strong dystopian scenario. However, this second scenario is also the stuff of current events, not fiction (Reny 2020).

As a literary critic, I cannot offer policy solutions for our current social ills. At least, I cannot do so while acting in my scholarly capacity. (Armchair punditry is separate matter.) What I can offer, though, is a rigorous reading of certain works that speak to our troubled times. Since every reading is necessarily limited in both perspective and scope, each critic must choose the lens that allows them to make their unique contribution. In the two scenarios above, we see a society wrestling with resistance to authoritarianism and toxic concepts of masculinity. In that spirit, this essay will draw on masculinity studies and nonviolence theory as critical lenses, using them to analyze the character of Peeta Mellark from Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy. Peeta Mellark is a physically strong, mentally agile, heterosexual male with a very conventional crush on the girl of his dreams. Based on that description, he hardly seems a candidate for atypical or subversive masculinity. Peeta, though, exemplifies a type of virtue

usually coded as feminine, and because of his many conventional qualities, he cannot just be written off as a special case. Thus, he suggests an alternative to toxic, patriarchal modes of masculinity.

Disruption is a core theme of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, which presents a distant-future dystopia. In the books, our current civilization has long since collapsed under the weight of corruption and ecological crisis. Although set in the future, the books draw heavily on the past, especially Roman history and mythology. These classical references ground the trilogy's speculation, and the intertwined resonances of past, present, and future contribute to the tale's compelling weight. Certainly, the trilogy has proven massively popular. In August 2012, *Deadline Hollywood* reported that its three books—*Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire*, and *Mockingjay*—had surpassed J. K. Rowling's seven Harry Potter books as Amazon's all-time bestselling series. The four movies based on the trilogy, according to the website Box Office Mojo, brought in nearly three billion dollars in worldwide ticket sales. On a more serious note, Thai activists adopted a three-fingered salute from the *Hunger Games* to protest Thailand's 2014 military coup, leading the junta to outlaw the gesture (BBC 2014). Rebekah Fitzsimmons (2020) drew a similar line from YA dystopian literature to recent American protests. She noted that “helpful algorithms embedded in popular book-buying sites” guided *Hunger Games* readers toward similar dystopian works that reinforced the trilogy's themes. As a result, YA dystopian works “have been instructing young readers in a pedagogy of resistance, overthrow, and utopian hope for the past decade” (16).

The story Collins weaves across the three books, in which oppressed districts rise up to overthrow an oppressive central government, certainly challenges the legitimacy of authoritarian governments. It also, though, challenges restrictive, hierarchical gender norms. Furthermore, this disruption of gender norms helps advance Collins's political message, which is ultimately about the horror of war (Levithan 2018). The character Peeta Mellark is particularly important for this, as he represents an alternative to visions of masculinity defined primarily by the capacity to inflict violence.

This essay first explores the links between the *Hunger Games* trilogy and the classical world, and then examine the relationship between our English word “virtue” and the Latin word *virtus*. I use the concepts of “virtue” and *virtus* to explore femininity and masculinity in two pairs of characters: Primrose Everdeen and Gale Hawthorne, who reflect traditional gender stereotypes, and Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark, who disrupt those stereotypes. In particular, I examine the role nonviolence theory can play in illuminating Peeta's masculine virtue, and how Peeta's eventual fall and redemption serve the trilogy's core message.

## **Panem and the Classical World**

The *Hunger Games* trilogy takes place in a country called Panem, which occupies much of North America in a dystopian future. As punishment for a rebellion that occurred three-quarters of a century prior, the decadent Capitol demands yearly tribute from twelve districts. For tribute, each district sends a pair of children selected from those between ages twelve and eighteen. These tributes must fight to the death in the nationally televised spectacle—the Hunger Games. Sixteen-year-old Katniss Everdeen causes a splash when she volunteers to take the place of her twelve-year-old sister, Primrose. Katniss is joined by a classmate from her district, Peeta Mellark. They convince the Capitol audience that they are deeply in love, which forces the Gamemakers to change the rules to allow both to survive. The pair even go so far as to threaten suicide through poisonous berries, which would rob the games of a victor (Collins 2008).

In many districts, this behavior is interpreted as an act of defiance, and Katniss becomes a revolutionary symbol—the Mockingjay. To quell the flames of rebellion, the Machiavellian President Snow arranges to have the following year's tributes drawn from the pool of existing victors. As a result, Katniss

and Peeta are sent back into the arena. Katniss succeeds in disabling the force field around the arena, though, allowing her to be rescued by an airship from District 13 (previously thought destroyed). In retaliation, President Snow orders Katniss and Peeta's home district firebombed. Peeta is also captured by the Capitol (Collins 2009).

District 13 is home to a military, collectivist society that lives in underground bunkers. The uprising is their opportunity to move against the Capitol. They rescue Peeta, but he has been brainwashed into hating Katniss. While on a mission inside the Capitol, though, Peeta slowly recovers his true feelings for Katniss. As the rebellion nears victory, the rebels send medics—including Primrose Everdeen—to aid Capitol refugees. A ship with Capitol markings attacks the refugees, however, and Primrose is among those killed. When Katniss discovers that the ship was really controlled by rebels, she realizes that the District 13 president, Alma Coin, is as dangerous a dictator as Snow. Given the chance to execute Snow, Katniss instead kills Coin. For the Mockingjay to turn traitor would damage public morale, so the new government attributes her act to trauma-induced insanity. Katniss and Peeta eventually marry and raise a family, though they suffer PTSD for the rest of their lives (Collins 2010).

Throughout the trilogy, Collins colors her narrative with explicit allusions to classical Greece and Rome. The literary critic Kathryn Strong Hansen (2015), among others, has noted that Katniss has strong resonances with the goddess Artemis. The Minotaur myth is another obvious reference. One source for this tale is Plutarch's (ca. 100/1831) *Life of Theseus* in which Athens suffers a military defeat at the hands of Crete. Every seven years thereafter, Athens must send seven pairs of youths and maidens to Crete, where they are sent into a labyrinth to be devoured by the monstrous Minotaur (4). The Athenian tribute in the legend, then, resembles that collectively extracted from the twelve districts. The parallel is meant to be explicit. As Susan Dominus (2011) reported in *The New York Times Magazine*:

As her primary influence, Collins, who has a love of classical plays, frequently cites the Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, in which the people of Athens are required by their Cretan adversaries to offer up seven boys and seven girls for sacrifice to the deadly Minotaur, a half-human monster who lives in a maze. "I was also heavily influenced by the historical figure Spartacus," she said. "Katniss follows the same arc from slave to gladiator to rebel to face of a war."

The games or "quells" themselves certainly owe a great deal to Roman gladiatorial games. As the philosopher Adam Barkman (2012) observed,

According to Seneca, these games were "pure murder" corrupting everyone involved. The emperors were corrupted by holding the games, the crowds were corrupted by watching the murderous spectacle, the gladiators themselves were corrupted because, unlike the virtuous Katniss and Peeta, they typically let the fear of dying in the Colosseum take priority over any fear they might have had of murdering an innocent person. (273)

It is no accident, then, that the nation of Panem takes its name from the Latin word for bread—the first word of Juvenal's famous phrase *panem et circenses* or "bread and circuses." Collins (2010, 223) makes this connection explicit in *Mockingjay* when Plutarch Heavensbee applies the phrase to the pampered Capitol citizens. Nor is it an accident that most Capitol citizens have Roman first names: Seneca, Caesar, Portia, Cinna, Claudius, Octavia, Venia, Flavius, Coriolanus. The Capitol is a new Rome, and, like the old Rome, its own indulgence sows the ground for its fall.

These classical parallels add weight to Barkman's description of Katniss and Peeta as "virtuous." Our English word "virtue" descends from the Latin word *virtus*, with the root meaning of *virtus* being similar to our "manliness." Yet the phrase "feminine virtue" is far more common today than "masculine virtue." (As a rough indicator, a Google search for the former produces ten times as many results as a search for the latter.) Are Peeta and Katniss "virtuous," then, in the sense of *virtus* or virtue? In truth, both. Just as Collins bridges past and present with her classical allusions, the characters in the trilogy reflect *virtus*/virtue in a range of ways.

### **Masculine *Virtus* and Feminine Virtue**

The Latin word for "man" is *vir*, and thus the qualities appropriate for a man are encapsulated in the Latin word *virtus*. As Donald Earl (1967) pointed out in *The Moral and Political Tradition of Rome*, our understanding of *virtus* or "manliness" depends on what we think a man should be:

Define the end of man as to achieve maximum material prosperity and *virtus* may consist in the more or less ruthless acquisition of money. Define it as the salvation of an immortal soul and *virtus* may consist in prayer, contemplation and withdrawal from the world. ... *Virtus*, for the Republican noble, consisted in the winning of personal preeminence and glory by the commission of great deeds in the service of the Roman state. (20-21)

We can supplement Earl's observation with the definition of *virtus* from Lewis and Short's (1891) Latin dictionary: "*manliness, manhood*, i. e. the sum of all the corporeal or mental excellences of man, *strength, vigor; bravery, courage; aptness, capacity; worth, excellence, virtue, etc*" (1997). The etymological link between *vir* and *virtus* impeded the extension of the latter term to women, the same way an English speaker might hesitate to describe a woman as "manly." As Myles McDonnell (2006) noted in his book *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic*, "In the Latin of the late Republic, *virtus* is ascribed to women on only a handful of occasions"; and in most of those instances, *virtus* indicated courage and was also qualified by another word (162-65).

However, as *virtus* made its way from Latin via French into English (courtesy of the Norman invasion), the link between "virtue" and "manliness" was lost. The English "virtue" does not echo "man" the way *virtus* echoes *vir*. Since "virtue" could comfortably be used to describe the ideal qualities of either gender, English speakers had the opportunity to distinguish between masculine and feminine virtue. Historian Amanda Vickery (1998) described an Enlightenment-era manifestation of this tendency in her book *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*:

The early eighteenth century has been isolated as a key period ... when courtesy writers began to dwell at some length on the naturalness of female virtue, the benefits for men of female company and the positive pleasures of matrimony and domestic life. The mid-eighteenth century saw the phenomenal success of the novel of sensibility, which glorified the supposedly female qualities of compassion, sympathy, intuition and "natural" spontaneous feeling, while neglecting the cardinal virtues of reason, restraint and deference to established codes and institutions. (41)

Elsewhere in her book, Vickery noted the importance of reputation and obedience for eighteenth-century feminine virtue, which would certainly be in tension with "neglecting ... restraint and ... established codes"

(54, 59). Nevertheless, we can detect the outlines of distinct stereotypes regarding masculine and feminine virtue. These are, in fact, the very traits literary critic David Emerson (2009) associated with traditional masculinity and femininity in “Innocence as a Super-power: Little Girls on the Hero’s Journey”—although Emerson made clear that he was merely describing conventional gender constructs, not endorsing them. Emerson wrote, “We generally consider such traits as physical strength, courage, independence and self-reliance, and the tendency to use force as ‘masculine’ traits, as opposed to traits identified as ‘feminine’ such as empathy, nurturance, connection with community, and negotiation” (132). In this dichotomy we hear very clear echoes of both Roman *virtus* and Vickery’s eighteenth-century “female virtue.” This stereotypical division, however, masks both the internal instability of gender constructs and their imperfect match to actual human beings. As Emerson acknowledged, it “is important to differentiate the concepts of masculine and feminine from the actual genders of male and female. Humans—and well-written fictional characters—contain both masculine and feminine aspects to varying degrees” (132). That certainly applies to the characters of the *Hunger Games* trilogy. It is also important to recognize that while sex is a biological category, gender is a cultural construct. Since Katniss and Peeta are cisgender characters, this distinction will sometimes sit below the surface in the following pages, but it should be considered a core postulate of contemporary gender studies.

This phenomenon of unstable gender constructs stretches back to ancient times. As Pamela Gordon (2012) observed in *The Invention and Gendering of Epicurus*, “Male Epicureans were notorious for withdrawing to the Garden in the company of women, and for their supposed subversion of conventional notions of what it means to be a Greek (or a Roman) and a man” (189). Yet there were at least some attempts to blend this stereotype of male Epicureans with more conventional modes of masculinity. As Gordon further noted, “Cassius’ reclaiming of *virtus* for the Epicureans ... suggests that his view was that a good Epicurean man was also a good Roman man according to the dominant construction of masculinity, but perhaps he meant to stretch the concept of manliness” (191). For the Middle Ages, let us consider what critic Holly Crocker (2007) said about the Middle English *manhed*, the predecessor of our Modern English “manhood.” In her book *Chaucer’s Visions of Manhood*, Crocker wrote,

As a borrowing from the Latin tradition of *virtus*, *manhed* signifies masculine virtues, including strength, loyalty, and bravery. But aspects of steadfast fortitude are not the only requirements for the medieval rendering of this masculine ideal, so that humility, mercy, and compassion also constitute its meaning. Potentially the most surprising elements of *manhed*, therefore, are qualities that valorize passivity. ... late medieval piety associates Christ’s passivity with strength since it is an expression of love. Despite, or I would say because of, the maternal imagery used to vest Christ’s agony with emotive force, the association of obedient passivity with idealized femininity is difficult to maintain, at least in exclusive terms. (10)

According to Crocker, then, “masculine virtue” can absorb qualities often stereotyped as feminine, at least in particular time periods. The opposite is also true. In *Virtue’s Faults: Correspondences in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women’s Fiction* (1996), April Alliston distinguished between active, masculine heroes and passive, feminine heroines who “are interesting when they are victims” (86). However, Alliston also noted the tendency of Gothic literature to “double” the heroine by pairing female characters (friends or sisters) who respectively embody active, masculine *virtus* and passive, feminine virtue (121). Although depictions of the latter in some cases were ambivalent or even negative, the presence of female characters with active, stereotypically masculine traits destabilized “ideal” femininity in Gothic literature by admitting the possibility of a subversive alternative (152, 161).

The preceding survey moves from ancient Rome to Chaucer to the Gothic literature. Those reference points, though spread across a long span of time, give us a snapshot of the cultural history standing behind an English-language author who draws explicitly on classical sources. Two insights distilled from that survey will guide this analysis of the *Hunger Games* trilogy: (1) Our contemporary culture has inherited a stereotypical dichotomy between masculine *virtus* and feminine virtue; and (2) Both halves of this dichotomy prove unstable when subject to close scrutiny.

## Gale and Primrose

Every character in *Hunger Games* could represent a unique mode of masculinity or femininity. As Jessica Miller (2012) observed, “Gender is constructed differently in Panem than in our world, with male and female characters expressing a wide range of gendered traits and actions” (159). A complete survey of characters, though, would prove unwieldy. We can see how Collins destabilized traditional constructs of masculine and feminine virtue just by focusing on Katniss Everdeen’s own district and generation. Of this subgroup, the four most important characters are Katniss Everdeen, Peeta Mellark, Primrose Everdeen, and Gale Hawthorne.

Gale and Primrose embody very traditional models of masculine *virtus* and feminine virtue (Miller 2012, 150, 155). (Opposing *virtus* to “virtue” in this way is just a convenient conceit of the present essay, but it will prove useful for organizing the ideas that follow.) Gale, like Katniss, is a hunter—a role traditionally associated with masculinity. He also shows the wanderlust associated with male epic heroes when he suggests that Katniss run away with him, using their skills to live off the land (Collins 2008, 9). Gale’s hunter skill set later allows him to transform into a soldier, officer, and strategist. He embodies Roman, masculine *virtus*. Primrose, on the other hand, embodies feminine virtue. She is a kind-hearted healer and an innocent child.

If we take Emerson’s (2009) article seriously, this latter trait also has gendered connotations. Emerson wrote,

It seems to me that a truly feminine version of the Hero’s Journey must emphasize feminine qualities of the heroes, rather than merely the physical fact of being female. Since adult women have the option to draw on many masculine traits to help them in their quests, it is easier to see the feminine traits in the forefront of the hero’s actions if we look to protagonists who do not naturally possess physical strength, fighting skills, or independence. This would be the very young female child. (133)

Let us take a closer look at this suggestion. Adults, in general, have greater “physical strength” and “independence” than children. As Emerson noted, though, those traits have been historically coded as masculine. Conversely, “weakness” and “dependence” have been historically coded as feminine, and children are comparatively weaker and more dependent than adults. This has some disturbing implications. Within this framework, male humans would appear most “masculine” as adults, and female humans would appear most “feminine” as children. Nor is it hard to find evidence that femininity has been linked to childishness, historically. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, emphatically denounced the infantilizing of women in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792/1999):

Men, indeed, appear to me to act in a very unphilosophical manner when they try to secure the good conduct of women by attempting to keep them always in a state of childhood. ... Children, I grant, should be innocent; but when the epithet is applied to men, or women, it is but a civil term for weakness.

Now, had there been no tradition of equating femininity with childish innocence, Wollstonecraft would not have needed to denounce it. Emerson, then, correctly identified an existing cultural construct, even if he did not analyze that construct's troubling implications. Although Emerson and Wollstonecraft addressed different specific situations, they tapped into the same underlying cultural pattern.

There is even a direct precedent for Emerson's hypothesis in Hans Christian Andersen's (1844/2013) story "The Snow Queen." Late in the story, the Finn wife declares of the protagonist, Gerda,

I can't give her greater power than she already has. Don't you see how great it is? Don't you see how mortals and animals have come to serve her, how, in her bare feet, she has come so far in the world? She mustn't be made aware of her power by us. It's in her heart, it's the fact that she is a sweet, innocent child. (178)

In short, Gerda exhibits the very "innocence as superpower" that Emerson studied in his article. Not only that, but Andersen even had one of his fairy-tale characters state the thesis explicitly. Arguably, Primrose exhibits this same quality as Gerda. Katniss impulsively volunteers to replace her younger sister as tribute because of Primrose's sweetness, vulnerability, and innocence. Primrose is not the only character, though, whose depiction is influenced by the stereotypical coding of femininity as childlike and masculinity as mature. Katniss's description of Gale during their first encounter in the woods is telling: "He was only fourteen, but he cleared six feet and was as good as an adult to me" (Collins 2008, 118). Thus the young Gale's masculinity is coded as adult-like in an explicit declaration from the point-of-view character.

At the beginning of *Hunger Games*, Primrose and Gale are arguably the two most important people to Katniss, who is the main protagonist and point-of-view character. Certainly, they are her most straightforward close relationships, given the strain between Katniss and her mother. They serve as anchor points for Katniss, and thus indirectly for the reader. However, while Collins provides these archetypes of masculine *virtus* and feminine virtue, she does not treat them as binding. Indeed, Collins subverts assumed gender stereotypes with both her heroine Katniss Everdeen and the young man who joins Katniss in the arena, Peeta Mellark.

### **Katniss and Peeta**

If Gale and Primrose exemplify traditional tropes of masculine *virtus* and feminine virtue, Katniss and Peeta invert and subvert those tropes. Katniss, after all, is Gale's hunting partner and an expert shot with the bow. Although not as physically strong as some of the male characters, Katniss is tough, resilient, and wily. Both she and her mentor Haymitch Abernathy echo the mixture of fighter and trickster perhaps best exemplified by Homer's Odysseus. For both Katniss and Haymitch, this mixture allows them to survive the intertwined horrors of competing in the Hunger Games and living in a dystopian society. We see from Katniss a steady stream of aggressive, martial heroism throughout the three books, from taking her sister's place in the Hunger Games to disabling the force field over the second arena to slaying President Coin, the new dictator.

As for Peeta, contrast Katniss's assertion that Gale "was as good as an adult to me" with her enduring image of Peeta as "the boy with the bread." This phrase, or a variation on it, appears about a half

dozen times in the first book. Although it is absent from the second book, it reappears in the third. This mental nickname (Katniss never says it out loud) is based on her first clear memory of Peeta. Following her father's death in a mining accident, the eleven-year-old Katniss and her family nearly starve to death. After he sees Katniss lurking outside his family's bakery, Peeta intentionally knocks a couple of loaves into the fire. This earns him a blow from his mother, who then sends Peeta out to feed the damaged bread "to the pig" (Collins 2008, 30). Instead, he throws the loaves near where Katniss is hiding. The bread, once the burnt parts are scraped off, proves the most substantial meal Katniss or her family have eaten in weeks (31).

Years later, when they are tributes together in the Hunger Games, Katniss continues to view the physically strong, sixteen-year-old Peeta through the lens of that first encounter. In her mind, he remains "the boy with the bread." For example, the second to last sentence of the first book reads, "Already the boy with the bread is slipping away from me" (374). The feminine traits emphasized by Emerson (2009)—"empathy, nurturance, connection with community, and negotiation" (132)—are Peeta's natural strengths. Peeta also has the innocence and purity of heart Emerson attributed to "the very young female child" (133), which is reinforced to the reader by how Katniss perceives him.

A scene near the end of the first book highlights the Katniss and Peeta *virtus/virtue* dynamic. Katniss, Peeta, and Cato, a borderline psychotic male tribute from District 2, are the last three survivors in their Hunger Games. They are trapped atop a giant cornucopia by a pack of "muttons," vicious beasts genetically engineered by the Capitol. Cato captures Peeta and holds a knife to his throat. If Katniss shoots Cato, he will pull Peeta down with him. If she surrenders, as Cato demands, the District 2 tribute can kill both her and Peeta. Peeta indicates a third option by using his own blood to mark an X on the back of the other boy's knife hand, thus telling Katniss where to shoot (Collins 2008, 334-36). This is a classic hero, villain, damsel dynamic—with Peeta the damsel to Katniss's hero. Indeed, this scene exemplifies literary critic Tom Henthorne's (2012) observation that Peeta, in general, "needs to be rescued and then protected ... as if he were the damsel in distress" (58). In this scene, though, Peeta proves himself the worthy counterpart to the hero by finding a way to contribute to his own rescue (as all the best damsels do). Thus the *virtus* of Katniss and the virtue of Peeta are integral to the first book's climax.

It is too simple, though, to treat Katniss and Peeta merely as gender-swapped characters. They are both more complex than that. If Peeta is the "damsel" in the scene atop the cornucopia, he is closer to a "knight" in an earlier confrontation with Cato. In that incident, Katniss drops a nest of tracker jackers from a high tree onto a group of tributes that is hunting her, getting stung herself in the process. (The tracker jackers are genetically engineered wasps with highly poisonous, hallucinogenic venom.) Peeta is part of the group beneath the tree, leading Katniss to believe that he has betrayed her (Collins 2008, 189-90). The group flees to the lake, although a pair die before they reach it. Before Katniss escapes, though, Peeta returns from the lake and screams at her to run (190-93). Katniss flees while Peeta prevents Cato from pursuing her. As Katniss describes it,

Behind him, Cato slashes his way through the brush. He's sparkling wet, too, and badly stung under one eye. I catch the gleam of sunlight on his sword and do as Peeta says. Holding tightly to my bows and arrows, banging into trees that appear out of nowhere, tripping and falling as I try to keep my balance. Back past my pool and into unfamiliar woods. The world begins to bend in alarming ways. ... Sick and disoriented, I'm able to form only one thought: *Peeta Mellark just saved my life.* (194)

We later learn that Peeta receives a thigh wound during his fight with Cato (253). Indeed, it is due to this very wound that Katniss must take care of him. This recalls the thigh wound Adonis received in Greek and Roman mythology, a scene that Ovid depicted in *Metamorphoses* (ca. 8/2010):

But the enraged animal used his curved snout  
 To root out the spear, drenched with his blood,  
 And went after the boy, who was panicking now  
 And running for his life. The boar sank his tusks  
 Deep into his groin and left Adonis to die  
 On the yellow sand. (291)

The association with Adonis, of course, reinforces the idea of Peeta as an innocent youth. We find a parallel incident in Homer's *Odyssey* (ca. 800 BCE/1997), with the legendary protagonist suffering the same boyhood injury. Unlike Adonis, Odysseus survives his encounter with the boar, but a thigh scar marks him thereafter (457). However, the thigh wound recalls another powerful reference,—that of the mature Fisher King from the medieval Grail legend (Spence 1913, 141). The injury's resonances, then, are ambiguous. In any case, unlike Adonis, Peeta does not obtain his wound due to youthful foolishness, but rather during an act of protective heroism.

Nor is Peeta the only one of the pair coded as innocent. We learn in the second book that the other victors perceive Katniss as the innocent one—at least regarding sexuality. As such, they make a point of behaving in aggressively sexual ways around her. Ironically, it is Peeta (as inexperienced as Katniss) who points out what is going on. Peeta explains, “It's like when you wouldn't look at me naked in the arena even though I was half dead. You're so ... pure” (216). Katniss, conversely, considers her behavior toward Peeta far from “pure.” In her book *Virtuous Necessity: Conduct Literature and the Making of the Virtuous Woman in Early Modern England*, literary critic Jessica Murphy (2015) argued, “Chastity is multivalent, it encompasses a range of meanings, and these meanings are often contradictory” (33). This idea certainly sheds light on the dynamic before the Quarter Quell. Katniss and the other victors have very different notions of chastity. Katniss believes that making out with a Peeta during a publicly televised spectacle is enough to mark her as unchaste. The more worldly victors intuit this sensibility, but recognize it as evidence of her sexual innocence.

Katniss also has complex mythological resonances. Literary critic Kathryn Strong Hansen (2015) pointed out that “when the narrative begins Katniss strongly evokes the figure of Artemis because of their shared status as bow-wielding hunters” (162). The moon goddess is not the only reference point for Katniss, though. Katniss's transformation into the Mockingjay also echoes the mythological transformation of Philomela into a nightingale. *Mockingjay*, however, inverts the Philomela myth by having Katniss ultimately abandon her quest for vengeance (Hansen 2015, 175). A more detailed exploration of these mythological references would divert us from the main thread of this article. However, interested readers should certainly take a look at Hansen's article, “The Metamorphosis of Katniss Everdeen: *The Hunger Games*, Myth, and Femininity.” Antje M. Rauwerda's (2016) article “Katniss, Military Bratness: Military Culture in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games Trilogy*” is also worth noting, as Rauwerda specifies ways in which Katniss diverges from mythological models.

Katniss and Peeta disrupt our understanding of gender codes, forcing us to rethink our concepts of masculine, feminine, *virtus*, and virtue. Rather than new definitions for these key concepts, let us instead play with the following fuzzy zones: “Masculine” designates the overlap in qualities and characteristics (either innate or socially constructed) between Gale and Peeta. “Feminine” designates the same overlap between Katniss and Primrose. *Virtus* designates this overlap between Katniss and Gale. Finally, “virtue” designates this overlap between Primrose and Peeta. These designations—feminine virtue, masculine virtue, feminine *virtus*, masculine *virtus*—are like marks on a map that lacks precise boundaries. Rather than a comprehensive theory of gender, this framework is intended as a tool to help us

think about certain gender expressions. In reality, gender is neither linear nor planar, but multidimensional.

In *Female Masculinity* (2018), Jack Halberstam suggested that “there are some very obvious spaces in which gender difference simply does not work right now, and the breakdown of gender as a signifying system in these arenas can be exploited to hasten the proliferation of alternate gender regimes in other locations” (41). In other words, Halberstam’s book sought to make the multidimensionality of gender more visible and culturally influential. However, as Halberstam also noted,

Because so few people actually match any given community standards for male or female ... gender can be imprecise and therefore multiply relayed through a solidly binary system. At the same time, because the definitional boundaries of male and female are so elastic, there are very few people in any given public space who are completely unreadable in terms of their gender. (20)

Given the wide reach of that “solidly binary system,” we should seek to detoxify gender identities and forms of gender expression even for those who still fall within the binary framework. However, this detoxification project is complementary to the destabilization project that Halberstam advocates, as toxic expressions of gender identity often prove the sites of greatest resistance to “alternate gender regimes.” As for Katniss and Peeta, they are not entirely free of that “solidly binary system,” but they do point toward its conceptual instability. Furthermore, their discrete gender expressions are valid, even though the binary system is not.

One might ask, though, given Halberstam’s well established concept of female masculinity, whether the notion of feminine *virtus* is even necessary. Certainly, there is overlap between the two concepts. Nevertheless, the language of virtue/*virtus* carries ethical connotations that “female masculinity” lacks, and this suits a book series trying to send a message about war and violence. Furthermore, some critics have found Katniss a problematic fit for female masculinity. Though not using that exact term, Vera Woloshyn, Nancy Taber, and Laura Lane (2013) argued that

Katniss’ character is represented as possessing masculine and feminine characteristics; her female body marks her as a woman with elements of emphasized femininity while her actions encompass elements of hegemonic masculinity. These characteristics emerge at different junctures throughout the books, with the tendency towards a demonstration of more emphasized femininity as the narrative progresses. (152)

Woloshyn, Taber, and Lane (2013) clearly view this progression as disappointing. In part, though, their disappointment is predicated on the terms of their analysis: a dialectical tension within Katniss between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity (154). This framework is appropriate for their larger project of analyzing how media representations of gender influence adolescents. Still, within that framework the heroine must walk a narrow tightrope to avoid being “compromised” by the end. Even if Katniss does not ultimately prove an embodiment of female masculinity, though, the fuzzy zone of feminine *virtus* fits her across her entire arc.

### **Race and Class in Panem**

This next section draws on the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. to examine the character of Peeta Mellark. Before using the work of two nonwhite men to analyze an ostensibly white

character, though, it would be appropriate to give some attention to matters of race and ethnicity in *Hunger Games* more broadly. Some of the most important work in masculinity studies explores racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in conceptions of masculinity. However, as Ronald L. Jackson II and Murali Balaji (2011) pointed out in the introduction to *Global Masculinities and Manhood*, “there has not been enough scholarship in reframing manhood and masculinities across different cultural contexts to counterbalance the hundreds of studies, media images, and representations that concretized a white masculinity as the prototypical masculinity of the world” (21). When it comes to literary studies, we can apply this insight in two ways: first, by exploring how literary works *reflect* culturally diverse masculinities (the influence of culture on literature); and second, by examining how literary works *depict* culturally diverse masculinities in their fictional worlds.

For the *Hunger Games* trilogy, though, applying the insight of Jackson and Balaji is complicated. Collins is a white American, and cannot help but reflect this background in her work. Perhaps by pulling in models from outside of “white masculinity” when analyzing her characters, we can help dilute its hegemony. For example, using the writings of Gandhi and King to analyze the masculinity of Peeta Mellark displaces “white masculinity” as the default lens. There is also the matter of depiction. Does Collins depict culturally diverse masculinities in her fictional world? This is a tricky question, because as rhetorical theorist Sonya C. Brown (2015) observed, “Collins envisions a future in which race and ethnicity no longer seem to function as meaningful social categories” (191). This point is worth exploring in more detail.

Viewed through the eyes of Katniss Everdeen, Panem society does not appear heavily racialized. Yes, Katniss is certainly aware of patterns of physical difference, including ones that a twenty-first-century reader might interpret as racial or ethnic. She notes in the first chapter of *Hunger Games*, for example, that she has the “black hair, olive skin ... [and] gray eyes” common to the families of mine workers. Conversely, her mother and sister have “light hair and blue eyes,” because her maternal grandparents “were part of the small merchant class that caters to officials” (Collins 2008, 8). Although this hints at a racialized distribution of labor in District 12, the contradictory evidence is more substantial: There does not seem to be a stigma attached to intermarriage between the two groups noted above, and the children of District 12 attend unsegregated schools (8, 12, 300). Furthermore, Katniss never seems to ascribe moral or biological significance to naturally occurring differences in human facial features or coloration, nor does she seem aware of anyone else doing so. We could attribute this to the protagonist’s inexperience and political naivety. However, we should also consider the recently published prequel, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (2020), which is told from a young Cornelius Snow’s point of view. In this new book, the future dictator is already Machiavellian, deeply political, and highly class-conscious, but, like Katniss, he does not seem race-conscious.

District 12’s deep Appalachian history, which Katniss recalls learning about in school, reveals that not all forms of oppression are racial (Collins 2008, 41). As Richard A. Brisbin, Jr. (2002) observed in *A Strike Like No Other: Law & Resistance During the Pittston Coal Strike of 1989-1990*, “Until the New Deal of the 1930s, many coal miners worked and lived in conditions constituted as belated feudalism or as traditional patriarchy” (22). Both legislation and case law created a legal apparatus which ensured that mine workers would remain subject to mine owners (23). Thus we have a historical precedent, albeit under a different model, for the nonracialized oppression of miners in Panem. Unlike Panem, however, racial oppression was intentionally layered atop class oppression in the Appalachian coal mines. As Brisbin observed, “The practice of racial discrimination in the assignment of miners’ jobs and segregated housing in company towns additionally disempowered black miners” (25).

This legacy also affects us as readers. Even if we accept the hypothesis that Panem society is far less racialized than our own, we nevertheless are shaped by the racialization that permeates the society we

live in. When the books went from page to screen, racial questions proved a flashpoint. As Sonya C. Brown (2015) pointed out, “The films based on these novels ... were cast and filmed in a society very conscious of race and ethnicity” (191). Hence certain casting decisions proved controversial for many fans due to the race or ethnicity of the actors involved (191-95).

If we accept that race is a social construct, then Peeta’s whiteness becomes unstable. Although his skin tone would be the same in both his world and ours, he is only “white” in our reality. In Panem he is merely light-skinned, as in his society whiteness no longer has meaning. (This construct becomes even more unstable when we use the writings of a pair of nonwhite activists to better understand the masculinity of this light-skinned character.) Yet the story cannot be entirely independent of its audience. The marks on the page only become alive in the mind of a reader. Can a reader with a racialized imagination avoid seeing Peeta as white? Perhaps not. Even so, if the reader marks the story, the story also marks the reader. It challenges us to imagine beyond our current frame.

We encounter a similar dynamic when we consider the intersection of gender and class in Panem. As Susana Rocha Teixeira (2017) observed, “From early on, Americans compared the (fate of the) United States to Ancient Rome. In the same vein, some feared that the United States might also fall (like they believed Rome did) because of its luxury or decadence (although the latter is now doubted by experts) and ‘effeminacy’” (123). This traditional fear of effeminacy clearly influenced the depiction of the Capitol society, especially considering the trilogy’s heavy use of classical references. In contrast, according to Rocha Teixeira, Gale and Peeta offered two different forms of “heterosexual, conventional, working class masculinity” (130-31).

The decadence of the Capitol and the ruggedness of District 12, though, do not seem gender-coded for the characters within the story. As Jessica Miller (2012) pointed out, both men and women work in the District 12 coal mines, whereas in the Capitol, “both men and women ... go in for elaborate self-beautification” (152-53). Collins transmuted certain (though not necessarily all) gendered traits from our world into class traits in Panem. Nevertheless, readers will inevitably filter stories through their own life experiences, and so may instinctively re-gender Panem’s class distinctions. Furthermore, the mapping of gender traits onto class traits is only one way that gender coding manifests in the novels, as demonstrated by Woloshyn Taber, and Lane (2013).

Rocha Teixeira (2017) also argued that Gale and Peeta, as working-class hero figures, collectively represent a conservative vision of masculinity (133). Certainly, Peeta is heteronormative and provincial (in the literal sense), and we should resist treating him as the singular, correct model of masculinity. Then again, we should also resist the similar reification of cosmopolitan figures, even heroic ones like the revolutionary stylist Cinna. Both blue-collar and white-collar individuals, and both rural and urban characters offer legitimate modes of masculinity.

One might, nevertheless, still object to applying nonviolence theory to Peeta on class grounds rather than racial ones. As a baker’s son and member of the District 12 merchant class, his life is privileged compared to the mine workers’ families. Does he really count as an oppressed person, and if not, is he an appropriate object for nonviolence theory? This objection, however, would also disqualify Gandhi from consideration—a London-educated lawyer and government minister’s son from a merchant caste (Nanda 2020). Among colonized or otherwise oppressed populations, there are nearly always degrees of privilege and oppression. Within the narrative of the trilogy, Peeta’s eligibility for the Hunger Games clearly marks him as a colonized person. Keeping this in mind, we can explore with more care Peeta’s particular masculine virtue. Perhaps one of the most important, if subtle, roles that Peeta plays throughout the trilogy is to suggest in the violent, oppressive world of Panem the possibility of a nonviolent alternative.

## The Shadow of Nonviolence

The literary critic Mary Pharr (2012), speaking of both the *Iliad* and the *Hunger Games* books, argued that “epics often comprise elements of the tragic” (227). This observation is apt. Just as the tragic dimension of Homer’s *Iliad* is intensified by the shadow of peace (i.e., frequent mediation attempts, delimitation of war in Hephaestus’s etching of the cosmos, Priam’s visit to Achilles), the tragic dimension of the *Hunger Games* trilogy is intensified by the shadow of nonviolence. Peeta is the avatar of that subversive shadow. For this reason, it is easy to misunderstand his character, his role in the story, and his quiet strength. Woloshyn Taber, and Lane (2013) described Peeta as “an individual who is committed to peace and is loyal to those he loves” (153). However, they still measured Peeta’s “marginalized masculinity” against the standard of Gale’s “hegemonic masculinity,” and so the former fell short:

Peeta’s character is best defined through the feminine characteristics of peace, loyalty, love, and altruism. He is represented as a character of high moral standing and personal integrity. While it could be argued that Peeta’s character is a positive example of a marginalized masculinity (or one that is not hegemonic as represented by Gale), Peeta’s feminine characteristics in a male body establish him as weak and in need of protection. (154)

Their ultimate verdict was that Peeta “is good but weak” (154). My reading of the character is very different. To understand why, let us consider one basic idea from peace studies (and process theology): The power of influence is equally valid as or even superior to the power of coercion. When Peeta builds alliances, creates space for cooperation, shapes public sympathy, and exerts a moral influence on other characters, that is all as valid an expression of his personal power as coercive force. Those things, however, are also more subtle and less dramatic than acts of martial violence. Peeta’s moral influence on Katniss helps determine the arc and outcome of the story, but it manifests indirectly—through her actions, not his. For that reason, exploring Peeta as a nonviolent avatar requires, paradoxically, discussing Katniss at length.

The word “nonviolence” is only used once in the trilogy, but it comments on Peeta’s character and the alternative path that he represents. In the second book, *Catching Fire* (Collins 2009), Katniss and Peeta have entered the arena again. This time, however, to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the games, all of the tributes are former victors. Katniss and Peeta form an uneasy alliance with the dashing Finnick Odair, but Katniss has second thoughts after viewing the aftermath of the first day’s carnage from a high tree. Finnick, though, has anticipated her reaction:

“What’s going on down there Katniss? Have they all joined hands? Taken a vow of nonviolence? Tossed the weapons in the sea in defiance of the Capitol? ... No ... Because whatever happened in the past is the past. And no one in this arena was a victor by chance.” He eyes Peeta for a moment. “Except maybe Peeta.” (276-77)

This sentiment is immediately amplified by Katniss’ train of thought:

Finnick knows then what Haymitch and I know. About Peeta. Being truly, deep-down better than the rest of us. Finnick took out that tribute from 5 without blinking an eye. And how long did I take to turn deadly? ... Peeta would have at least attempted negotiations first. Seen if some wider

alliance was possible. But to what end? ... The people in this arena weren't crowned for their compassion. (277)

Katniss and Finnick are on the verge of attacking each other when Peeta de-escalates the situation by physically placing himself between the others, then redirecting them toward their immediate, common needs. If Katniss and Finnick display *virtus* in their willingness to engage in heroic violence, Peeta displays virtue by disrupting an impending violent confrontation.

This dimension of Peeta continues a thread from the first book, where in a rooftop conversation with Katniss he admits that he does not consider himself a contender and simply hopes “to not disgrace” himself. He elaborates, “I want to die as myself. Does that make any sense? ... I don't want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I'm not” (Collins 2008, 141). This has a profound effect on Katniss: “I bite my lip, feeling inferior. While I've been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self. ‘Do you mean you won't kill anyone?’ I ask” (142).

Katniss, in her response to Peeta, comes very close to echoing the link Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964) made between nonviolence and self-purification. In his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” King described the “four basic steps” for “any nonviolent campaign”: namely, “collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action” (78). Regarding the third, he elaborated, “Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: ‘Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?’ ‘Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?’” (78-79).

Peeta, however, immediately clarifies his willingness to kill if necessary. He will not lapse into passivity, and, like Katniss, he lacks a full conceptual framework for nonviolent direct action (Collins 2008, 142). As Gandhi (1949) acknowledged, “If the method of violence takes plenty of training, the method of nonviolence takes even more training, and the training is much more difficult than the training for violence” (61). Even so, the rejected option haunts the story—the ghost or shadow of a different path. Peeta's desire to “show the Capitol they don't own” him resonates with the civil rights movement's commitment to resisting injustice, and his genuine love for Katniss makes their eventual disruption of the games possible. Peeta does not practice nonviolent philosophy, but he seems to echo it, and this is a manifestation of his virtue.

In this scene, and indeed throughout the trilogy, Peeta reveals himself to be what Tom Jesse and Heidi Jones called “the sensitive thinker”—one of four “iterations of masculinity” that they found in contemporary young adult novels. According to Jesse and Jones, the sensitive thinker “spends a significant portion of the novel contemplating how his actions have affected or might affect those around him. He may talk freely with friends about fear and self-doubt” (114-15). That certainly describes Peeta in the rooftop scene. Jesse and Jones later add, “This type of character is critical for young adults to see, because it demonstrates that masculinity can lie within someone who deliberates before taking action, and that issues like racial profiling and police brutality can be handled with nonviolence” (115-16). As that last reference makes clear, their research focused on books in contemporary settings. Peeta indicates, though, that even when the character type is transferred to a dystopian setting, the association with nonviolence may follow.

Although the most notable act of nonviolent resistance comes from Katniss, rather than Peeta, it reverberates back and forth between the two. Katniss forms an alliance with a girl named Rue who reminds Katniss of her sister, Primrose. Unfortunately, Rue is caught in a trap set by another tribute, and although Katniss avenges Rue, she arrives too late to save her (Collins 2008, 232-35). Katniss feels helpless as she looks at the younger girl's corpse, but then remembers her rooftop conversation with

Peeta. The memory triggers inspiration. Katniss decorates the girl with wildflowers, knowing that the Capitol will have to show the body at least once when they remove it from the arena. Such a gesture of solidarity and friendship between tributes undermines the autocratic purpose of the games (236-37). In the second book, when he must demonstrate his abilities to the Gamemakers before being sent back into the arena, Peeta paints a mural of Rue covered in flowers (Collins 2009, 240).

Even in the middle of outright warfare, the rooftop conversation exerts an influence. During the third book's rebellion, Gale proposes trapping Capitol soldiers inside a District 2 mountain, leaving them to die. Katniss sides with those who would give their enemies a chance to surrender. Ultimately, the rebels leave a single exit from the mountain intact (Collins 2010, 203-9). As the injured, armed, and frightened survivors leave the mountain, Katniss argues that she and they are not truly enemies; rather, both have been manipulated by the Capitol. She finds herself, once again, thinking back to that critical rooftop conversation: "Peeta. On the rooftop the night before our first Hunger Games. He understood it all before we'd even set foot in the arena. I hope he's watching now, that he remembers that night as it happened, and maybe forgives me when I die" (215-16). Once again, Peeta affects the story through moral influence rather than martial action; through persuasion rather than coercion; through virtue rather than *virtus*.

Even Peeta's insistence that he "can't go down without a fight" has precedent in nonviolence theory, and in the writings of Gandhi, no less (Collins 2008, 142). As Gandhi wrote, "My nonviolence does not admit of running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice. ... My creed of nonviolence is an extremely active force. It has no room for cowardice or even weakness" (59). When necessary, Peeta chooses violence over "cowardly flight," but his underlying outlook resonates better with a nonviolent approach.

Despite these resonances, it may still be difficult to accept the philosophical significance of nonviolence for an overtly violent series. We receive useful guidance on this matter from literary critic Art Young (1975) in the introduction to his book *Shelley and Nonviolence*. As Young wrote, "The artistic presentation of Shelley's vision of nonviolence includes imaginatively glorifying the grandeur and courage of nonviolent action as in *The Revolt of Islam* and *Prometheus Unbound*, and realistically portraying the horror and futility of violence as in *The Cenci* and *Hellas*" (8-9). The *Hunger Games* books fall into the second category, in which violence is allowed to reveal its own perversity. This sentiment is encapsulated near the end of the third book, *Mockingjay*, when Katniss declares,

They can design dream weapons that come to life in my hands, but they will never again brainwash me into the necessity of using them. ... I think Peeta was onto something about us destroying one another and letting some decent species take over. Because something is significantly wrong with a creature that sacrifices its children's lives to settle its differences. You can spin it any way you like. Snow thought the Hunger Games were an efficient means of control. Coin thought the parachutes would expedite the war. But in the end, who does it benefit? No one. The truth is, it benefits no one to live in a world where these things happen. (377)

Collins relentlessly pressed this message in *Mockingjay*, which may be a source of the backlash against both that book and the films based upon it. As the Jungian analyst Margaret Skinner (2012) acknowledged of her own reaction to the trilogy, "Perhaps my fascination and curiosity helped me stomach the brutality. Perhaps I was just lulled into being entertained like the citizens of Panem" (107). When Katniss reveals that the Panem government turns used arenas into tourist destinations, the reader may disapprove, but we are not so far from that, ourselves—in October 2017, a *Hunger Games* theme park opened in Dubai (Collins 2008, 144-45; MacDonald 2017). *Mockingjay* forces readers to recognize that they have been complacent, entertained Capitol citizens all along.

For those who resist this realization, it is easy to attribute the resulting discomfort and bewilderment to artistic failure. Novelist Brent Hartinger (2011) did an admirable job of exploring both sides of this issue in his essay “Did the Third Book Suck?” Hartinger considered the tendency to tell rather than show, for example, one of “a number of basic writing and plotting mistakes” (182). He acknowledged, though, that this could be an intentional artistic choice meant to illustrate the protagonist’s growing sense of powerlessness (189). As for the book “telling us something difficult, something readers don’t necessarily want to hear”—Hartinger listed this among the book’s strengths (191).

Even less nuanced detractors have stumbled across legitimate insights. Take, for example, film critic Owen Gleiberman’s 2014 review of the first *Mockingjay* movie, in which he complains, “And why does Moore play the leader of the revolt like Eva Peron with a touch of Pol Pot? She doesn’t exactly inspire sympathy for the cause. Of course, I sound like I’m missing the point: it’s all about Peeta! I just wish that wasn’t the point.” Gleiberman is correct, of course, that “it’s all about Peeta”; what he fails to grasp is why. Peeta is not simply a teen romance opposite for Katniss. The story Collins tells is more complicated than that. As literary critic Tom Henthorne (2012) observed in *Approaching the Hunger Games Trilogy: A Literary and Cultural Analysis*, “Collins’s work, it seems, draws from a number of genres without confining itself to any of them” (30). Peeta is important because of what he represents, a type of masculine virtue compatible with a nonviolent future. Thus, “it’s all about Peeta” for the same reason that President Coin proves an unsympathetic rebel leader: Collins’s tale, ultimately, is neither about the glory of revolution nor the magic of romantic love, but about the horror and futility of violence and war.

### **Peeta’s Damnation and Redemption**

The above discussion reflects the Peeta Mellark of *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*. We cannot discuss Peeta’s character, though, without confronting what happens to him in *Mockingjay*. Peeta is captured by the Capitol at the end of *Catching Fire*, and we learn in *Mockingjay* that he is tortured and brainwashed while a prisoner. As another victor, Johanna Mason, put it, “Peeta and I had adjoining cells in the Capitol. We’re very familiar with each others screams” (Collins 2010, 241). Peeta’s torturers use tracker jacker venom—a hallucinogenic poison—to brainwash him. By the time he is rescued by District 13, Peeta is convinced that Katniss is a dangerous enemy whom he must attack on sight (180-81). For “the boy with the bread,” this is the ultimate tragedy; the Capitol has finally succeeded in changing who he is. His words from the first book now sound like sinister foreshadowing: “I don’t want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I’m not” (Collins 2008, 141). This is a very dark development for readers who see in Peeta the hope or glimmer of a better path.

In his book, Tom Henthorne (2012) argued that the Capitol did not start from scratch when brainwashing Peeta. Rather, they were able to tap into the latent patriarchal coding that Peeta had absorbed from his larger culture. As Henthorne wrote,

If in *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, Peeta represents an alternative form of masculinity ... the torture and reconditioning he undergoes while a prisoner of the Capitol brings out the latent misogyny that underlies patriarchy and the subordination of women.... To an extent Peeta’s malevolence toward Katniss is a result of the Capitol altering his memories.... The Capitol does not create Peeta’s feelings from nothing, however, [with] Peeta himself admitting to Katniss that he was jealous of Gale before the Games even began and that he behaved cruelly toward her once the Games were over. (59)

I largely agree with Henthorne's analysis, but it is worth taking a more nuanced look at the links between jealousy, misogyny, and patriarchy. I doubt that jealousy is an invention of patriarchy. Rather, I suspect that jealousy is an emotional raw material that patriarchy uses for the production of misogyny. Admittedly, I frame the concept of jealousy more broadly than some. The philosopher Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (1990) began his article "Envy and Jealousy" with this definition:

Envy involves the wish to have something someone else has; jealousy involves the wish not to lose something that the subject has and someone else does not. Envy and jealousy would seem to have a similar emotional attitude. Both are concerned with a change in what one has: either a wish to obtain or a fear of losing. (487)

Under this philosophical definition, jealousy is not restricted to sexual or romantic matters. Although Ben-Ze'ev acknowledged that the "focus of concern" for jealousy was "typically, a favorable human relationship" (489), he left space for other forms of jealousy and did not extend this "typical" qualification to envy. Conversely, evolutionary psychologists like David Buss have almost exclusively focused on sexual and romantic manifestations of jealousy, while rooting the emotion in our evolutionary past (159). Studies of matriarchal societies such as the Mosuo people of China have pushed back against that evolutionary claim, insisting that cultures without jealousy are possible. Eileen Rose Walsh (2005), however, argued that the perception of the Mosuo as a jealousy-free society has been partially shaped and perhaps warped by tourism industry demands (480, 482).

Also worth noting is a conversation between Walsh and a Mosuo woman named Durma, who worked in the household of her distant cousin Sona. Durma explained that, before the rise of the tourism trade, her branch of the family had been the more prosperous one, and would even supply their poorer cousins with "bags of grains and potatoes" to help them through the winter. She seemed to resent the relative change in status (469). This fits with Ben-Ze'ev's broader definitions of envy and jealousy—the desire to possess what someone else has, and the fear of losing what someone else lacks—but is entirely non-sexual. However, even if patriarchy did not create the capacity to feel sexual and romantic jealousy—either because this type of jealousy is an evolved trait, or because it is a subset of a broader category—patriarchy still exploits the capacity for jealousy in terrible ways.

Henthorne (2012) also speculated about Peeta's ontology. According to Henthorne, "in the end of the trilogy" Peeta is "a very different sort of person than he was at the beginning" (59). Following Peeta's brainwashing by the Capitol, Henthorne explained, "Katniss tries to deprogram Peeta, helping him sort out what is 'real' from what is 'not real'.... She accomplishes these things by, in effect, telling him what to think as he recovers from his earlier trauma, by defining things for him" (59-60). Peeta almost sounds like an organic android who is wiped and reprogrammed first by the Capitol, then by Katniss.

The philosopher Nicolas Michaud (2012) certainly agreed with this reading. He argued that Katniss "fights to save" Peeta, despite him being effectively a different person, because "she needs the original Peeta so much that the new Peeta is close enough for her to want to try to help him become like the one she remembers" (201-2). Michaud thought this suggested something universal about human nature, namely that "there never was an *I* in the first place, just a being who constantly passes away and is replaced by a new being, carrying with it recollections ... of what all the previous, now dead persons thought and felt" (202). In this, Michaud went further than Henthorne, who claimed that Katniss, at least—despite growth, changes, and trauma—was "very much the same person" at age eleven and age seventeen (94). There is, however, textual support for Michaud's position. In a conversation about the effect of the Hunger Games on victors, Johanna Mason asks Katniss, "The arena messed us all up pretty good, don't you think? Or do you still feel like the girl who volunteered for your sister?" (Collins 2010, 239). Katniss admits that she does not.

The proponents of Peeta as organic android make a fair case, and it is worth understanding their arguments. However, this approach also sells short his own agency, so let us consider an alternative reading. Virtue is often a quieter power than *virtus*—and we have particular difficulty appreciating the former in men. Let us posit that Peeta is able to fight off the Capitol's programming, certainly with guidance from Katniss, because he reconnects to a deep, latent pattern within himself. We find some

support for this interpretation when Peeta clarifies that, following a period of “complete confusion,” he is learning to distinguish real memories from false. He explains: “The memories they altered with tracker jacker venom have this strange quality about them. Like they’re too intense or the images aren’t stable” (Collins 2010, 301-2). Peeta’s effort to distinguish real from false memories is an internal process that is critical for his recovery. Identifying authentic memories, though, involves literally connecting to his earlier self. This suggests a stronger continuity between Peeta at the beginning and end of the trilogy than the organic android hypothesis allows. What we are calling Peeta’s masculine virtue would certainly be part of that latent pattern, suggesting that his virtue plays a role in his recovery.

The parameters of this debate can be clarified, without settling it, by considering what neuropsychologist Viviane Kostrubiec and her colleagues (2012) wrote about the psychology of learning:

When environmentally required and preexisting patterns are close enough, their influences cooperate and learning by shift is favored. When the required and preexisting patterns are far apart, they enter into competition with each other, which leads to instabilities, hence to novel pattern creation. A key lesson here is that self-organizing principles ... define how the system interacts with environmental and task requirements. The more one knows about the individual learner's intrinsic dynamics, the more one can discover about the learning process. At any rate, the individual repertoire should never be considered a random or undifferentiated state—the very idea of a “blank slate”—that can be molded arbitrarily by the learning process. (10)

Combining Kostrubiec et al.’s psychological language with Henthorne’s literary analysis, one might say that Katniss experiences “learning by shift” throughout the three books, whereas in *Mockingjay* Peeta twice undergoes “novel pattern creation.” This is certainly a fair description of what Peeta experiences at the Capitol’s hands; becoming, in Johanna Mason’s words, “the evil mutt version of yourself” (Collins 2010, 243). Where I diverge from Henthorne, then, is in how to best understand Peeta’s eventual redemption. Henthorne considered this a second act of “novel pattern creation,” but this time based on Katniss’s memories of the original Peeta. Yet if we take into account the role Peeta’s own memories play in this process, we can treat it as a resurrection of the original pattern. Even viewing the second transformation as part resurrection, part reinvention still allows for a meaningful link between the versions of Peeta we meet at the beginning and end of the series.

Regardless, Peeta can still indicate for us an alternative path. This is true, in part, because his strongest impact comes from the effect he has on Katniss. Abigail Myers (2012) hinted at this influence in her essay “Why Katniss Chooses Peeta: Looking at Love through a Stoic Lens.” Myers acknowledged that Peeta “at the end of *Mockingjay* is not the entirely earnest and trustworthy young man” that Katniss knew before. Nevertheless, Peeta who “had no control” over “what the Capitol did to him” is a viable partner for Katniss in a way Gale is not, for “choosing Gale would be an implicit endorsement of his plot with Coin that killed her sister and other young people.” Thus, “Peeta helps her survive as herself, with her values intact” (Myers 2012, 142-43). This is the same function, though, that Peeta serves for Katniss in the first two books. If Peeta can still serve this function for Katniss at the end of the story, then, implicitly, he can also do so for the reader. Furthermore, if the positive influence of women on men was, as Vickery (1998) observed, one of the hallmarks of Georgian “female virtue,” then certainly his positive influence is an aspect of Peeta’s masculine virtue (41). Finally, if Peeta’s damnation under Capitol torture suggests that hope for a better world is futile, then his redemption forcefully reasserts the legitimacy of that peaceable hope.

### Balancing Virtue and *Virtus*

Katniss builds a life with Peeta Mellark, and thus does not build one with Gale Hawthorne, the trilogy's embodiment of masculine *virtus*. Gale is a dashing, heroic figure. He promises to protect Katniss's family, then dramatically follows through by leading a party of survivors out of District 12 during the blackout that precedes the firebombing (Collins 2008, 40; Collins 2010, 7). No wonder that YA novelist Jackson Pearce (2011) described Gale as a "full-fledged knight/cowboy archetype" (210). Yet Gale's *virtus* ultimately turns toxic. He helps design a bomb intended to kill first responders, turning people's basic compassion against them. Katniss must restrain herself from "going ballistic" when she finds out (Collins 2010, 186). This type of weapon eventually kills Primrose Everdeen, the very person Katniss first sought to protect (347-50). This is Gale's fall, his damnation, and the end of his chance for a future with Katniss (367). Unlike what happens with Peeta, the story ends before Gale can experience a redemption arc. Although Gale rises in life due to his choices, his "fancy job" in District 2 has the ring of the gospel warning: "What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?" (Collins 2010, 385; Luke 9:25 [NRSV]). For a more secular reference, we could compare Gale to Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*, in that his rise to power is also a fall from grace.

Why does Collins end her story like this? It is not that all men must be like Peeta rather than Gale. After all, the inverse would suggest that all women must be like Katniss rather than Primrose. The development of Primrose, though, negates this interpretation. In their District 13 quarters, Katniss observes of her sister, "Time and tragedy have forced her to grow too quickly, at least for my taste, into a young woman who stitches bleeding wounds and knows our mother can only hear so much" (Collins 2010, 33). Primrose aspires to become a doctor, though, not a warrior (149). She does not swap virtue for *virtus*, but rather grows into her virtue.

Arguably, the same is true of Katniss and Peeta. Reading them this way, admittedly, is complicated by the marks of trauma they bear at the end of story. According to Antje Rauwerda (2016),

The ending represents not only a surrender to generic expectations but also, in terms of the series' themes, Katniss's lost fight for masculine agency within a military culture. While mothering could be an emancipatory step in which Katniss leaves militancy behind and embraces a new femininity, this potential is completely undermined by Katniss's fear and ongoing nightmares. (188)

In Rauwerda's reading, this makes Katniss an echo of her mother, whom Katniss despised for her (feminine) weakness. This would certainly undermine a reading of Katniss as growing into her *virtus*, and it opens up the possibility that Peeta is similarly undermined by his own trauma. However, there is another referent we should also consider: Suzanne Collins's father. As Susan Dominus (2011) reported in her *New York Times* article,

The lifelong repercussions of Collins's father's service in Vietnam also provided her with a perspective that fuels a key plot twist of "Mockingjay," which follows one character's struggle to recover from tortured memories of violence.... Collins said her father came back from Vietnam enduring "nightmares, and that lasted his whole life." As a child, she awoke, at times, to the sound of him crying out during those painful dreams.

It seems unlikely, then, that Collins intended the nightmares to be a feminizing detail. In fairness, that's hardly the only part of the epilogue that critics have focused on. For example, both Rauwerda (2016, 188)

and Woloshyn Taber, and Lane (2013, 156-57). have argued that the heroine's reluctant acquiescence to having children represents a capitulation to patriarchal gender norms. That is certainly a reasonable argument. Still, in this portion of *Mockingjay*, Katniss seems to be at least partially modeled after the author's father. If we perceive these echoes as feminine weakness, we may actually be imposing upon the text our society's difficulty with allowing men to acknowledge injury and vulnerability. The stoic approach to the trilogy advocated by Abigail Myers and Adam Barkman (2012) is perhaps of use here, as it allows for reading Katniss and Peeta as simultaneously damaged and virtuous. Both characters reflect the potential to grow into their respective form of virtue or *virtus*, although whether they have actually done so depends on how one interprets the epilogue. Yet if Primrose can grow into her feminine virtue, Peeta into his masculine virtue, and Katniss into her feminine *virtus*, then why cannot Gale grow into his masculine *virtus*?

Perhaps the gap occurs because Collins writes in a culture imbalanced toward masculine *virtus*. Peeta's virtue both tempers and is tempered by Katniss's *virtus*. This allows both characters to experience a more complex pattern of growth, and together they help shape their world into something less terrible than what they were born with. The same is not true of Primrose and Gale. The latter's untempered *virtus* destroys the former. Such an outcome is especially likely in cultures where masculine *virtus* is dominant, feminine virtue is submissive, and the other combinations are considered aberrant. This suggests that only in a world shaped (at least in part) by Katnisses and Peetas will Primroses escape destruction, and Gales escape damnation.

Admittedly, this less destructive world may be difficult to conceive. Even in the *Hunger Games* trilogy, despite his virtue, Peeta only casts the shadow of nonviolence. The story itself is dominated by violence. Consider, then, what theologian Walter Wink (2003) found when researching twentieth-century nonviolent movements—namely that 3.4 billion people were involved with such movements (including the beneficiaries of nonviolent revolutions) and that “most were successful” (2). Our challenge, then, is to comprehend something that already stands front of us. A better world is possible if, like Katniss, we allow the “boy with the bread” to feed our imaginations.

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