Lotteries and Scapegoats: Literary Antecedents and Influences on The Hunger Games

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When a series of novels becomes widely popular, readers are drawn to it partly because it reminds them of other stories they have known. As we enter a book’s fantasy world, such as Oz, Middle Earth, or Hogwarts, or a futuristic society such as the Community in Lois Lowry’s The Giver or Panem in The Hunger Games trilogy, part of the fun of walking around in that new place—or terror, more often, when imagining ourselves in Panem—involves comparing it with other places and events we have known, real or imaginary. In doing so, we learn more about the literary and legendary or historical traditions that the books we are reading grew out of, and marvel at the ways that a successful author creates something new by transforming patterns we have seen in works of the past. Author Jane Yolen wrote, “Stories lean on stories, art on art. This familiarity with the treasure-house of ancient story is necessary for any true appreciation of today’s literature” (Touch Magic 15). It is especially true with fantasy and science fiction that the strangeness of their imagined societies, creatures, or inventions must be anchored to the familiar, to help us believe in the story we are reading.

Intertextuality is a term postmodern critics have used since the late 1960s for the variety of ways that texts interrelate. When we hear someone say in an advertisement, “May the odds be ever in your favor,” we recognize that quotation as an intertextual link with The Hunger Games. We can find intertextuality in an author’s choice of names, quotations and direct references to other texts, characterization, similar images or events, passages that echo or parody older texts, or general patterns or archetypes that books in the same genre seem to share. For example, two traditions that influence the fate of Katniss and Panem appear in both ancient and modern literature and culture: lotteries that determine who will die and scapegoats that are sacrificed in the belief that this action will
protect others or avenge a wrong. Both occur in biblical passages (although casting lots was used for other kinds of decisions as well), such as God’s command to Moses in Leviticus 16:8: “And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the LORD, and the other lot for the scapegoat” (*The Holy Bible*). While a text can be anything that uses words or other forms of communication, this chapter focuses on the intertextuality of books linked to The Hunger Games series, as well as myths and legends from ancient oral traditions.

Although the postmodern concept of intertextuality allows us to explore connections among texts without direct knowledge of an author’s intentions or influences, some literary critics analyze what authors have read and experienced and said about their own works. Suzanne Collins has discussed her favorite books and sources of inspiration in several interviews, and the publisher’s Hunger Games web site contains a discussion guide with a page on “Historical and Literary Connections” (Rockman). These sources and other published articles refer to more pre-texts (previous texts related to The Hunger Games) than this essay can discuss. Moreover, readers sometimes find links between texts that authors were not aware of, and as readers, our own interests are likely to guide us through the labyrinth of intertextual threads we might want to follow by comparing stories we read. For example, this chapter has sections on books about Appalachia and the Holocaust, although literature about mining districts, genocide, or totalitarian regimes in other places would work as well.

References to the ancient world appear throughout the trilogy, as Barry Strauss discusses in “The Classical Roots of ‘The Hunger Games,’” especially in the many Capitol residents with Roman names and obvious similarities between the deadly “games” in Panem and contests in ancient Roman arenas. Collins explained,

In keeping with the classical roots, I send my tributes into an updated version of the Roman gladiator games, which entails a ruthless government forcing people to fight to the death as popular entertainment…. Panem itself comes from the expression “Panem et Circenses” which translates into “Bread and Circuses.” The audiences
Characters who are most responsible for the decadent spectacles of The Hunger Games have names from historical literature about ancient Rome. Cinna, the stylist, transforms Katniss physically into the influential “girl on fire” and the Mockingjay figurehead. Caesar is the flamboyant pre-game interviewer. Plutarch replaces Seneca as head Gamemaker because Seneca is executed when the president, named Coriolanus, is dissatisfied with Katniss’ first Hunger Games. Career tributes Cato, Brutus, and Enobaria are vicious fighters in the Games.\(^1\) During the Victory Tour in *Catching Fire*, the party in President Snow’s banquet room is much like a traditional Roman banquet, with wealthy guests reclining on couches, extravagant decorations and entertainments, and such an excessive display of foods, gluttony, and drinking that Katniss is sickened by the waste of food.\(^2\) As Emily Gowers explains in *The Loaded Table*, Roman literary sources depicting lavish feasts don’t reveal that most Romans actually “lived at subsistence level.” Nevertheless, these banquets are “lingering souvenirs of Roman civilization” and “part of its mythology,” although some writers, such as Plutarch, disapproved of focusing on bodily needs and pleasures rather than the life of the mind (Gowers 3).

Amalia L. Selle’s chapter in this book compares Katniss and Spartacus, as the legendary rebellion of Greek slaves led by Spartacus was a major influence. Collins told *The New York Times Magazine*, “Katniss follows the same arc from slave to gladiator to rebel to face of a war” (Dominus). When asked about her favorite books as a child, Collins began, “I’ve had a lifelong love of mythology, so I’d have to top the list with *Myths and Enchantment Tales*, by Margaret Evans Price,… and *D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths*” (“Suzanne Collins on the Books”). In both books, Collins would have read about proud and independent Atalanta, the fastest runner on earth, who “stood poised like a graceful white bird about to fly” before a race with her suitors (Price 88). Katniss, who competes with men and is
represented by bird images throughout the trilogy, is also associated with Artemis (named Diana by the Romans) in her love of hunting and extraordinary skill with bow and arrow. In *D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths*, Artemis “wanted to remain forever a wild young maiden hunting through the woods.” After she turns an admirer into a stag for invading her private glade and his dogs kill him, she is seen as “a cold and pitiless goddess” (D’Aulaire 44). Although Katniss is not pitiless, she is hard on her male admirers as well as enemies. These same traits of skilled hunter and rebel also connect her with a later English folk hero, Robin Hood. According to legend, he led a band of outlaws in Sherwood Forest, poaching to steal game from the rich and provide food for the poor. Katniss preserves her love of hunting freely in the woods with her friend Gale as long as she can through the trilogy, but society forces her into such absurd and brutal types of hunting in artificial landscapes that all the killing and treachery nearly destroy her spirit.

Collins identified Theseus, a Greek hero who defeated many monsters, as a major influence on *The Hunger Games*, observing,

> The myth tells how in punishment for past deeds, Athens periodically had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete, where they were thrown in the Labyrinth and devoured by the monstrous Minotaur. Even as a kid, I could appreciate how ruthless this was. Crete was sending a very clear message: “Mess with us and we’ll do something worse than kill you. We’ll kill your children.” And the thing is, it was allowed; the parents sat by powerless to stop it. Theseus, who was the son of the king, volunteered to go. I guess in her own way, Katniss is a futuristic Theseus. (“A Conversation”)

This myth thus informed the structural outline of Collins’ trilogy. Powerful rulers in the Capitol punish the districts for a past rebellion by forcing them to send a prescribed number of their children at specified times into the arena, where unpredictable conditions are as confusing as King Minos’ labyrinth. All but one are condemned to certain death while their families and neighbors watch, and Collins adds an additional layer of horror by requiring these young scapegoats to kill each other as well as sending strange invented
creatures to complicate their battles. The mythological Greek labyrinth is built by the extraordinary inventor Daedalus, while incredible futuristic technology enables Panem’s Gamekeepers to trap the tributes in a variety of cruelly inventive ways. Only an exceptional hero such as Katniss, volunteering like Theseus to take her sister’s place as tribute, can break the Capitol’s sadistic tradition by saving Peeta as well as herself and later exploding the whole arena with her arrows at the climax of the Quarter Quell, with help from brilliant technicians such as Beetee, “an older inventor” (Collins, Mockingjay 11). To help Theseus escape with the other young victims and go on to further adventures as a reforming hero, the princess Ariadne also persuades Daedalus to devise a plan to get Theseus out of the labyrinth using a ball of string. Thus a love story affects the outcome, and Ariadne’s price is a promise of marriage that Theseus is not destined to fulfill, just as Peeta and Katniss use their love relationship, with both real and artificial aspects, to thwart their rulers’ plans. Lars Schmeink’s chapter in this volume discusses other dimensions of Theseus and the labyrinth.

Many of the Roman references overlap with Shakespearean intertextuality, as William Shakespeare wrote plays about Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, and other historical characters who are alluded to in Panem, adapting ancient material from Plutarch’s Lives and other sources. Barry Strauss, Adam Pulford, and other critics have discussed many names in the Capitol that come from Julius Caesar. In Panem, the rival presidents Snow and Coin are betrayed by their own people and killed, like Julius Caesar after he seized power to become a dictator in ancient Rome. Catherine R. Eskin devoted an essay to The Hunger Games series and other history plays by Shakespeare: “The PR Wars: The Hunger Games Trilogy and Shakespeare’s Second Henriad.” She discusses trilogies by Collins and Shakespeare as they involve political intrigue, propaganda, war, and problems of leadership. Shakespeare explored some of the same issues in Macbeth and Richard III as well (Rockman).

Some readers think Peeta and Katniss resemble Shakespeare’s star-crossed lovers Romeo and Juliet, especially at the end of the first Hunger Games, when they threaten to eat poison berries and