

## ‘Until the Mockingjay Sings’: The Ballad(s) of Lucy Gray and the New Intertextual Layers of *The Hunger Games*

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to explore the intertextual dimension of the most recent additions to the Hunger Games canon in order to determine whether Suzanne Collins’s 2018 novel and its 2023 adaptation merely provide readers and viewers with an opportunity to visit the past of Panem and witness the genesis of the elaborate spectacle Katniss Everdeen needs to navigate 64 years later or entail even deeper incursions into literature and cultural history. To this end, the analysis is going to identify the various sources of inspiration employed in the construction of the literary and cinematic narratives, comment on the significance of names and symbols, examine the novel’s epigraphs and the film’s settings and landmarks, draw parallels between poetry and music, history and mythology, philosophy and fiction, pinpoint connections between the original trilogy and its prequel, compare and contrast the identities of their main protagonists (Coriolanus Snow, Lucy Gray Baird and Katniss Everdeen) and comment on the extent to which the hybrid nature of Dr. Gaul’s genetic experiments reflects the increasingly intertextual nature of Panem’s cultural landscape and inhabitants.*

**Keywords:** *adaptation; Capitol; Panem; Suzanne Collins; The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes;*

### **Introduction: The General(’s Son) in His Labyrinth**

Prior to the publication of *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes*, the general public’s awareness of the intertextual scope of *The Hunger Games* was largely confined to the clamor regarding its parallels with Kōshun Takami’s 1999 *Battle Royale* and Suzanne Collins’s frequently cited disclosure of the threefold inspiration behind the fictional world of Panem: the lasting impression left by the cruel punishment – the periodical surrender of “seven youths and seven maidens” (Margolis) – Crete inflicts on Athens in the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, the popularity of gladiator games in the Roman Republic and Roman Empire and the extent to which modern-day audiences have become desensitized to televised violence. The widespread appeal of the trilogy is at least partly due to its densely woven fabric of “existing narratives, names [...] storylines, subplots, themes, and characters” (Henthorne 163) borrowed from a vast and eclectic corpus of texts, with sources ranging from Plutarch’s *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* to Stanley Kubrick’s *Spartacus*, from 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism (Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding*

*Crowd*, Émile Zola's *Germinal*) and mid-century dystopia (George Orwell's *1984*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*) to the legends of Robin Hood, Mulan and Boudica and reality television shows like *Survivor* and *Extreme Makeover*.

It is quite interesting to note that Collins's determination to confine the mythological connection to the premise of twelve boys and girls reaped from the districts (including a heroic volunteer who ends the cycle of violence) and write an updated version of the gladiator games instead of a labyrinth story did not entirely eliminate the maze from the Gamemaker's designs and the topography of the Capitol: in the second Quarter Quell, "a maze of tightly woven hedges" forces Haymitch to "circle back into the center of the woods" (CF 76) and twenty-five years later a digital version of Ariadne's thread (the Holo) guides Collins's "futuristic Theseus" (Margolis) through the minefield of pods and the "network of wide tunnels" and "hundreds of additional passages, utility shafts, train tracks, and drainage tubes" of the "multilevel maze" (M 186) sheltering the president's mansion.

In the prequel, the status of Coriolanus and Lucy Gray as alternative (and interchangeable) incarnations of Ariadne and Theseus is solidified in equal measure by the former's willingness to break the rules to help his tribute survive (not to mention the subsequent instances of reciprocal betrayal and abandonment) and by the "labyrinth of tunnels inside the walls of the arena" (*BoSaS* 169) opened up by the rebel attack, which determines the tribute's trajectory in the "maze down there" (*BoSaS* 302) and, on one memorable occasion, alters her mentor's status from observer to participant: "The tributes started up a whooping sound, rattling their weapons against the barricade as they tracked the mentors through the labyrinth. Which direction to go?" (*BoSaS* 189). The lingering specter of the Minotaur is never far behind, as Coriolanus' tortuous path to success features repeated encounters with hybrids, from rabbits "modified to have the jaw strength of a pit bull" (*BoSaS* 49) to birds capable of replicating human speech, and brief but all the more disquieting glimpses of the infinite variety of genetically modified monsters lurking in Dr. Gaul's gigantic underground laboratory: "He made a wrong turn, then another, and found himself in a ghoulish section of the lab where the glass cases housed humans with animal parts grafted to their bodies" (*BoSaS* 94).

The protagonist's elite education and constant interactions with characters from a wide variety of social spheres ensures that his narrative constitutes the textual equivalent of the "echo chamber filled with [...] wails" (*BoSaS* 94) at the core of the Citadel's maze, reverberating with canonical and popular voices ranging from Romantic poetry to nursery rhymes – "roses are red and violets are blue" (*BoSaS* 59) – and playground singing games, from Gertrude's farewell to Ophelia – "Coriolanus bowed and then presented her with the packet of popcorn balls. 'Sweets to the sweet.'" (*BoSaS* 328) – to

darkly funny lyrics “about a miner’s daughter who drowned” (*BoSaS* 286), from allusions to the “The Cremation of Sam McGee” to tantalising glimpses of the myth of Orpheus: Lucy Grey’s beautiful voice prompts Dr. Gaul’s genetically modified snakes to follow her, “as if mesmerized by the melody” (*BoSaS* 237), and Coriolanus’ brush with death in the woods beyond District Twelve brings to mind the snakebite that ends Eurydice’s life. The analysis conducted in this paper is therefore going to entail incursions down the convoluted paths of the textual labyrinth, tracing the protagonist’s footsteps across the arena, the map of the Capitol and the expanse of Panem, and identifying as many of the intertextual landmarks of his two-way journey into the past and future of the Hunger Games as possible.

### **Structure and Paratext: The Framework and Bibliography of Control**

Structure-wise, the original trilogy counterbalances the chaos and violence of its subject matter via its compelling mathematical symmetry, with each of its three volumes split into three parts (The Tributes, The Games, The Victor for *The Hunger Games*, The Spark, The Quell, The Enemy for *Catching Fire* and The Ashes, The Assault, The Assassin for *Mockingjay*), each further subdivided into the exact same number of chapters: 9, a perfect square. Moreover, not only are the headings of its nine parts identical combinations of definite article and common noun, but the descending order of the number of words in the volume titles (three-two-one) suggests the inexorable countdown to the fall of the Capitol and Snow’s demise. Published in the year marking the tenth anniversary of the trilogy’s final instalment, the prequel boasts a considerably less catchy title (the total number of words in *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* incidentally representing the sum of 3, 2 and 1) and shares its three-act structure traceable back to the Aristotelian model and so prevalent within the Western literary and cinematic canon. Its own three parts – The Mentor, The Prize and The Peacekeeper – feature 10 rather than 9 chapters each, a likely reference to its narrative premise (the Tenth Hunger Games) and a possible nod to the perfect academic scores of its main protagonist, resulting in a total of 111 chapters.

Tempting though it might be to view the only two departures from this harmonious arrangement (uncannily reminiscent of the four-tier structure of the Colosseum) as deliberate glitches in the Capitol’s matrix, chinks in Coriolanus’ armor, the fact that only *The Ballad* and *Mockingjay* feature an epilogue can be quite simply attributed to the fact that the prequel and the trilogy follow the arc of one main character each and as such only require two moments of closure, the former featuring Snow’s first premeditated murder and anticipating his ascent to power – “What all of Panem would know one day. What was inevitable. Snow lands on top.” (*BoSaS* 402) – the latter occasioning a brief glimpse into a future devoid of institutional violence, if still

haunted by nightmares: “The arenas have been completely destroyed, the memorials built, there are no more Hunger Games” (M 346). As regards the paratextual disparity to be noted between the conspicuous absence of epigraphs from all instalments of the trilogy and the profusion of references preceding Coriolanus’ first appearance, it could be pointed out that excerpts from the writings of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Wordsworth and Shelley (or indeed any other canonical novelists, poets or philosophers) might well belong in the futuristic world of an educated member of the elites but would be somewhat out of place within the fictional universe of a miner’s daughter from the “least prestigious, poorest, most ridiculed district in the country” (HG 202).

While the text and paratext of *The Hunger Games* feature no overt references to philosophy, let alone to *The Leviathan*, the yearly reminder of the chaos and destruction of the Dark Days has prompted apposite analogies between the history of Panem and the English Civil War. From such an angle, the Treaty of Treason Katniss so casually dismisses as “long, dull” (HG 27) and “dreary” (HG 33) can be viewed as a written and above all binding version of the Hobbesian social contract, “an implied agreement to which we tacitly consent whenever we live under a system of laws and enjoy the peace they afford us” (Foy 209). Much in the same way in which the almost three decades of turmoil prompted Hobbes to conclude that a government capable of maintaining order was something to be welcomed rather than defied and that living under the authority of any ruler would be “preferable to the hellish state of nature” (Foy 209), the outcome of the uprising – and the ostensible obliteration of the thirteenth district in particular – appear to have convinced the remaining twelve that even the most oppressive regimes are preferable to the chaos of lawlessness.

Not only do the Hunger Games provide constant reminders of the perils of living without strong authority figures by “artificially re-creating the Hobbesian state of nature” (Foy 210), but various facets of the English philosopher’s perspective are reflected in the ideologies of characters like Snow, Coin and to a certain extent even Gale. Far from merely representing an acknowledgement of the frequent references to Hobbes pervading critical responses to the original trilogy, *The Ballad*’s first epigraph prepares readers for an encounter with young Snow’s mentor and the assignment that ultimately singles him out as the future leader of Panem: “*Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.*” — Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651 (BoSaS 4). As the Hunger Games and the somewhat ill-advised mentorship program accompanying them unfold, Coriolanus’ views on “on what we should do with our endless war” (BoSaS 128) shift from the straightforward observation that if a war is impossible to end it must be controlled indefinitely “with the

Peacekeepers occupying the districts, with strict laws, and with reminders of who's in charge" (*BoSaS* 128-129) and nostalgic recollections of the "security that could only come with power," the "ability to control things" (*BoSaS* 143) towards the ultimate answer to doctor Gaul's most intriguing question: "What happened if no one was in control of humanity?" (*BoSaS* 230). From his "front-row seat" in District Twelve, the perfect "*stage upon which to watch the battle between chaos and control play out*" (*BoSaS* 313), Coriolanus gathers ample evidence of the ease with which "the whole system would collapse without the Capitol's control" (*BoSaS* 313) and returns home ready to present his final project on "Chaos, control, the contract. The three C's" (*BoSaS* 395) and deliver a revised version of his previous thoughts on the point of the Games:

They're not just to punish the districts, they're part of the eternal war. Each one is its own battle. One we can hold in the palm of our hand, instead of waging a real war that could get out of our control. [...] And they're a reminder of what we did to each other, what we have the potential to do again, because of who we are [...] Creatures who need the Capitol to survive. (*BoSaS* 395-396)

The initial emphasis on the "*state of nature*" and accompanying "*law of nature to govern it*" of the second epigraph, an excerpt from John Locke's 1689 *Second Treatise of Government*, and the very title of the source of the third, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1762 *The Social Contract*, might prompt some readers to view them as additional bibliography to consider while witnessing the protagonist's attempts to reach the conclusions expected of him: "What sort of agreement is necessary if we're to live in peace? What sort of social contract is required for survival?" (*BoSaS* 193). More importantly however, they also foreshadow and highlight the contrast between Coriolanus and the two characters that trust him the most, misguidedly considering him a true friend and kindred spirit. Sejanus Plinth's diatribe against the violence of the Games and the hypocrisy of the anthem might lack the scope and refinement of Locke's argument that "*being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions*" (*BoSaS* 4), but amply compensates for them in terms of conviction:

now that the war's over, they're just citizens of Panem, aren't they? Same as us? Isn't that what the anthem says the Capitol does? 'You give us light. You reunite'? It's supposed to be everyone's government, right? [...] Well, then it should protect everyone [...] That's its number one job! And I don't see how making them fight to the death achieves that. (*BoSaS* 76)

His subsequent outburst features even more conspicuous echoes of The Declaration of Independence, only to be expected in a North American dystopia featuring thirteen rebellious districts<sup>1</sup> and epigraphs belonging to the two European philosophers most likely to have inspired its wording: “No right to take away their life and freedom. Those are things everyone is born with, and they’re not yours for the taking” (*BoSaS* 127).

While mentions of literal chains and cuffs abound in the text, the true implications of the third epigraph – “*Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains*” (*BoSaS* 4) – are cemented the moment the very same Coriolanus who warns his cousin not to voice her thoughts on the Hunger Games – “You mustn’t say that to anyone but me. It isn’t safe” (*BoSaS* 258) – yet regards himself as free “to speak his mind [...] within reason” (*BoSaS* 329) seamlessly shifts from one definition of freedom – “the freedom to act however he wanted, as nature had intended. To answer to no one. To truly be rid of the world’s oppressive expectations forever” (*BoSaS* 377) – to its complete opposite prior to using his father’s compass to make a more concrete (yet no more momentous) 180-degree turn and head back south, to the relative freedom from want and apprehension: “free from the hangman’s noose. Free to go back to the base. Free to go forward to District 2. Free to rejoin the human race without fear” (*BoSaS* 388). The extent to which young Snow embodies the surrender of autonomy and authenticity suggested by the epigraph acquires additional nuances when contrasted against his (yet unborn) antagonist’s inability to dissimulate; indeed, the distinction drawn by the same philosopher “between our natural state and the corruptions of society” (Coatney 183-184) provides the perfect explanation for both Coriolanus’s choice and Katniss’ precarious position between the wilderness and the Capitol.

The penultimate quatrain of Wordsworth’s “The Tables Turned” – incidentally followed by a stanza exhorting the reader to trust one’s emotions over the science and art gathered between the covers of books – seems ideally suited to further reinforce this dichotomy. Its lines hint at the imminent consequences of Snow’s decision to turn his back on the still untouched landscapes surrounding District Twelve, rejecting everything beyond his control – “Nature running amok. [...] Nature gone mad. Genes gone bad. Chaos.” (*BoSaS* 325; 392) – and putting a definitive stop to his heart’s brief dominion over his head:

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the number of rebellious districts and the former colonies referenced in the document’s formal title, “The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,” is unlikely to be coincidental yet quite easy to miss by readers unfamiliar with the specific details of the American Revolutionary War.

“Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things;  
— We murder to dissect.” (BoSaS 4)

The fourth epigraph has the added merit of condemning the sadistic experiments conducted in Dr. Gaul’s laboratory and heralding the novel’s most haunting hypotext, “Lucy Gray; or, Solitude,” a poem belonging to the second edition of the same collection.

Delivered by Dr. Gaul’s most illustrious literary precursor, the fifth and final epigraph is the most deceptively simple, likely as it is to lure unsuspecting readers into interpreting it as a mere synopsis of President Snow’s villain origin story and a preview of the corruption of nobility and erosion of trust as a result of rejection and trauma: “*I thought of the promise of virtues which he had displayed on the opening of his existence, and the subsequent blight of all kindly feeling by the loathing and scorn which his protectors had manifested towards him.*” — Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1818 (BoSaS 4). While there is no denying that Livia Cardew’s taunts, Dean Highbottom’s disdain and Dr. Gaul’s “exploitative, vicious, mercenary” (Womack) tactics take a toll on Coriolanus’ better nature, his childhood and early adulthood are filled with considerably more displays of love, friendship, admiration and compassion than those family and society spare on Katniss, Peeta and Sejanus Plinth.

#### **‘Tunes, familiar and new’: the Songs and Names of Games of Yore**

Given its greater focus on the Capitol, *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* features an impressive array of citizens whose first names originate in classical Greek and Roman culture and, more often than not, provide at least one key coordinate of the character’s identity. For instance, Coriolanus’ musings on whether Persephone Price “had known the ingredients of her wartime stew” (BoSaS 100) evoke her mythological namesake’s association with forbidden food, Arachne Crane’s loud mouth, exhibitionism and violent end at the hands of an irate female tribute she imprudently taunted and underestimated echo the hubris of the weaver who thought it wise to challenge a goddess, while the description of Iphigenia Moss’s self-inflicted malnutrition as “the only revenge she could take on her father” (BoSaS 199) is indicative of parental abuse akin to Agamemnon’s treachery.

The associations are even stronger in the case of characters assigned the cognomens of historical figures as their first names: Coriolanus Snow’s ambition, disdain for his social inferiors – “The word *plebeian* came to mind.” (BoSaS 109) – and short-lived banishment from the Capitol recall the exploits of the legendary Roman general, while Sejanus Plinth’s rise to privilege from relatively humble origins, his friendship with a future leader and execution for

treason mirror the trajectory of Emperor Tiberius' friend and confidant. Given the “legendary grandeur” (*BoSaS* 10) and (long-gone) wealth of the Snows, it seems only appropriate that Coriolanus' stern military father bears the name of yet another general, the richest (but definitely not the most popular or even the happiest) man in Rome (Hamilton 124). In true Freudian fashion, the sinister Dr. Gaul is assigned the Shakespearean name of Coriolanus' mother in acknowledgment of the part she plays in the protagonist's evolution, and no mention is ever made of Mrs. Snow's first name, which is hardly surprising given that “the delicate scent of the rose powder she wore” and “warm blanket of security that had enveloped him each night” (*BoSaS* 60) appear to have faded away by the end of the narrative. The fact that, Dr. Gaul's influence and his own deviousness aside, Coriolanus' future is largely determined by a character called Strabo (one who had already manipulated the geographical coordinates of Panem in his own family's favor) stands out as even more significant given that more than half a century later the entire history of Panem is rewritten by Head Gamemaker Plutarch Heavensbee.

Like the trilogy, the prequel features a main female character who owes her name to British literature, yet whereas Katniss Everdeen's surname pays subtle tribute to a Thomas Hardy protagonist who chooses to remain independent rather than bind herself to someone others consider suitable (Henthorne 164), Lucy Gray Baird's first and middle name belong to one of Wordsworth's “unburied dead” (Bewell 205), a girl whose tragic demise represented the real-life inspiration behind a Romantic poem explicitly referenced within Collins's work: “We each get our first name from a ballad and our second from a color. [...] Lucy Gray is special, because her whole name came right from her ballad. Lucy and Gray” (*BoSaS* 340). While the ballads corresponding to the other Covey, a group of itinerant musicians eventually rounded up by the Peacekeepers of District Twelve, are absent from the text (but relatively easy to identify as “Maude Clare,” “Barbara Allen,” “Billy Boy,” “Clerk Saunders” / “Clerk Colvill” and “Tam Lin”), the entirety of Lucy Gray's hypotext is delivered by the Covey in the course of one of their performances at the Hob: “Every one of us Covey owes our name to a ballad, and this one belongs to this pretty lady right here! [...] It's a really old one by some man named Wordsworth. We mixed it up a little, so it makes better sense, but you still need to listen close” (*BoSaS* 330). Most of the lines correspond to the original text in *The Lyrical Ballads*, the Coveys' minor interventions being largely confined to the replacement of some of the more incomprehensibly archaic terms and attempts to recontextualize the story within the Appalachian landscape: the more generic “doe” thus takes the place of the European “roe” and the quintessentially British “Moor” gives way to turns of phrase such as “upon the mountainside” and “deep ravine” (Wordsworth and Coleridge 156-158; *BoSaS* 330-333).



Coriolanus' escalating frustration with the song's tantalizing narrative thread, compounded by recollections of "his inability to decipher the deeper meaning of a poem" (*BoSaS* 86) in rhetoric class, provides further evidence of his limited imagination and complete lack of empathy, as does his reluctance to engage in the heated debate on Lucy Gray's fate:

"Well, how else can she not make footprints?" she said. "I think she flies around and tries not to meet people, because they'd kill her because she's different."

"Yeah, she's different. She's a ghost, bonehead," said Clerk Carmine.

"Ghosts don't leave footprints, because they're like air."

"Then where's her body?" asked Coriolanus, feeling that at least Maude Ivory's version made some sense.

"She fell off the bridge and died, only it's so far down, no one could see her. Or maybe there was a river and it washed her away," said Clerk Carmine. "Anyway, she's dead and she's haunting the place. How can she fly without wings?"

"She didn't fall off the bridge! The snow would look different where she was standing!" Maude Ivory insisted. "Lucy Gray, which is it?"

"It's a mystery, sweetheart. Just like me. That's why it's my song," Lucy Gray answered. (*BoSaS* 337)

For all its naivety, this discussion foreshadows yet another Lucy's uncanny departure from her own narrative, whilst also echoing the critical observations made in the course of time on the extent to which "Lucy's ghost lingers on as an intermittent yet persistent presence among the living" (Fosso 144) as her death is "taken up and revised [...] by an interpretive community" (Bewell 205). Collins's seamless incorporation of Wordsworth's lyrical ballad within the intertextual framework of her prose provides a somewhat unexpected confirmation that "death proves not to be the end of this Lucy, less so even than for her nominal kindred" (Fosso 144), whilst the novel as a whole and indeed the entire *Hunger Games* series foregrounds the same "uneasy and unending relationship of the living and dead" (Fosso 145) pervading Wordsworth's early poetry.

Notwithstanding his unwillingness to delve beyond the literal level of the text and speculate on the implications of its ambiguous ending, Coriolanus finds himself echoing the Coveys' speculations as Lucy Gray's abrupt disappearance in the course of their elopement from District Twelve leaves him with no body, no footprints and no confirmation that any of his bullets had hit their target: "he'd wondered where Lucy Gray was. Dead in the rain? Curled up by the fire in the lake house?" (*BoSaS* 394). Having successfully completed his return journey to the Capitol, Coriolanus is finally ready to draw his own

analogies between the fates of the two girls, yet the very same “uncertainty about Lucy’s loss, with its sense of unfinished business [...] and of the limits of interpretation, that elicits such narrative from mourners and mythographers” (Fosso 145) as far as Wordsworth’s poem is concerned is dismissed with cynical nonchalance rather than mournful incertitude by a protagonist more than ready to relegate the entire episode to the erasable past:

Lucy Gray’s fate was a mystery, then, just like the little girl who shared her name in that maddening song. Was she alive, dead, a ghost who haunted the wilderness? Perhaps no one would ever really know. No matter — snow had been the ruination of them both. Poor Lucy Gray. Poor ghost girl singing away with her birds. (*BoSaS* 401)

During the weeks leading up to her presumed demise, Lucy Gray Baird’s personal contributions to the Covey corpus, which already comprises “dozens of songs [...] full of everything from the beauty of springtime to the heart-wrenching despair of losing her mama. Lullabies and toe tappers, laments and ditties” (*BoSaS* 134-135), solidify her status as ‘bard’ rather than mere performer and single her out as a human equivalent of the mockingjay:

I’m Lucy Gray Baird, of the Covey Bairds. I started writing this song back in District Twelve, before I knew what the ending would be. It’s my words set to an old tune. Where I’m from, we call it a ballad. That’s a song that tells a story. And I guess this is mine. ‘The Ballad of Lucy Gray Baird.’ (*BoSaS* 134)

Whereas Coriolanus’ musical abilities are confined to repeated renditions of the “one song in his repertoire” (*BoSaS* 325), invariably reciting rather than singing the words of “Gem of Panem” much like a jabberjay’s reproduction of human speech, Lucy Gray’s harmonies blend together life and literature, music and poetry, recalling the creativity of the bird “that combines the resilience of the blue jay with the mockingbird’s sweet song” (Thomas 55): “The mockingjay cocked its head and then sang back. No words, but an exact replica of the melody, in a voice that seemed half human, half bird. A few other birds in the area picked it up and wove it into a harmonic fabric, which again reminded him of the Covey with their old songs” (*BoSaS* 325). In addition to its important role as the “real symbol of the resistance” (Torkelson 38), “of triumph over grief, oppression, and adversity” (Thomas 55), the mockingjay also stands out as the living embodiment of intertextual creativity, of the constant adaptation and recirculation of stories and ideas across media and cultures.

The ballad Lucy Gray chooses to perform during her televised interview opens with a line inspired by Wordsworth's which reinforces her intertextual identity – “*When I was a babe I fell down in the holler.*” – and goes on to incorporate lyrics based on her own experience, which in turn reference her tainted past with Billy Taupe and foreshadow the denouement of her ill-fated romance with Coriolanus: “*Too bad I'm the bet that you lost in the reaping. / Now what will you do when I go to my grave?*” (*BoSaS* 135). Even more impressively, the song she writes for Coriolanus turns his proud family name into his defining attribute, weaves snippets of their most intimate conversations and glimpses of their respective pasts with their shared history within and beyond the arena, all the while delivering veiled but nonetheless harsh criticism of the Hunger Games:

*Everyone wants to be like a hero —  
The cake with the cream, or  
The doer not dreamer.  
Doing's hard work, It takes some to change things —  
Like goat's milk to butter,  
Like ice blocks to water.  
This world goes blind  
When children are dying.  
I turn into dust, but  
You never stop trying. [...]*

*This world, it's cruel,  
With troubles aplenty.  
You asked for a reason —  
I've got three and twenty  
For why I  
Trust you —  
You're pure as the driven snow. (*BoSaS* 374-375)*

As stated in the Acknowledgements, the poem “penned in 1799 by William Wordsworth” and “meant to be sung to a variation of a traditional ballad tune that has long accompanied tales of the unfortunate ends of rakes, bards, soldiers, cowboys, and the like” is not the only public domain text featured in the world of Panem, as the Coveys’ “wide and varied repertoire” includes “straight instrumental numbers” (*BoSaS* 286) as well as three classic American songs “tweaked to fit” their performers’ particular circumstances (*BoSaS* 417). Much in the same way in which “Minster” gives way to “village” in the case of “Lucy Gray,” the Coveys’ renditions of “Keep on the Sunny Side” and “Down in the Valley” feature no Christian references, substituting

birds for angels and “Capitol” for “Birmingham” to mirror the secular faith and geography of Panem. Maude Ivory seems particularly attached to “Oh, My Darling, Clementine,” constantly singing it on and off the stage and demanding “herring boxes like in the song” (*BoSaS* 336) to replace her too tight shoes. Not only does this song necessitate no alterations, but it also serves to conjure up a number of parallels between the trilogy and the prequel, reality and fiction, drawing bridges between District Twelve and the 19<sup>th</sup>-century history of Appalachia, between Katniss Everdeen, the little girl who caused “every bird outside the windows” (*HG* 297) to fall silent with her rendition of the valley song on her first day of school, and another miner’s daughter, one who died before having the chance to spark a rebellion.

Even more conspicuous such connections are provided by the two songs already familiar to readers and viewers of *The Hunger Games* and *Mockingjay* alike. “Down in the Meadow,” the simple lullaby Katniss sings Rue to sleep with, turns out to have been composed for an ailing Maude Ivory, and the genesis of “The Hanging Tree” reveals how insightful Katniss’s interpretation of the forbidden song of her childhood was:

You realize the singer of the song is the dead murderer. He’s still in the hanging tree. And even though he told his lover to flee, he keeps asking if she’s coming to meet him. The phrase *Where I told you to run, so we’d both be free* is the most troubling because at first you think he’s talking about when he told her to flee, presumably to safety. But then you wonder if he meant for her to run to him. To death. In the final stanza, it’s clear that that’s what he’s waiting for. His lover, with her rope necklace, hanging dead next to him in the tree. (*M* 124)

In addition to the tunes sang under uncannily similar circumstances by District Twelve’s two female victors, having been kept alive by several generations of human bards and scores of mockingjays, the trilogy and its prequel share an overwhelming array of intertextual echoes beyond the obvious elements of narrative continuity and causality. Their respective casts feature multiple pairs of matching characters: strong father figures, vulnerable mothers, sets of twins with mythological names (Castor and Pollux / Apollo and Diana), mean, ill-tempered bakers’ wives, selfless boys who make it their purpose to feed the starving (Peeta / Sejanus), justice-driven District Eleven male tributes (Thresh / Reaper), District Three participants capable of tampering with the Capitol’s technology, farm animals (Seamus / Lady), pet cats (Buttercup / Boa Bell) and unlikely wildlife friendships (Lucy Gray’s snakes / Rue’s mockingjays). The 10<sup>th</sup> and the 74<sup>th</sup> Hunger Games are presented by members of the same family (Lucretius “Lucky” / Caesar Flickerman) and in both cases the first representative of the elites that falls victim to the endless cycle of violence is

a Crane (Arachne / Seneca). In turn, Coriolanus' fears that "the odds were not in her favor" (*BoSaS* 147) and Lucy Gray's cryptic observation that "The show's not over until the mockingjay sings" (*BoSaS* 134) herald the inappropriately cheerful catchphrase Effie Trinket opens the reaping ceremony with and the ultimate end of the Games.

Both Katniss and Lucy Gray wear dresses once belonging to their mothers for the reaping ceremony, while Coriolanus repurposes his father's "old mess dress shirt" (*BoSaS* 17); the "ratty fur coat that had been her mother's" not only provides Tigris with a much-needed "security blanket" (*BoSaS* 194) but foreshadows her altered status and role in the trilogy. The red rose Katniss catches during the chariot ride matches the first flower pinned to young Coriolanus' shirt, while the long-stemmed white beauty with which he welcomes Lucy Gray to the Capitol is not only the first and least sinister such offering dispensed over the course of his career but also the perfect replica of the "magnificent white bud just beginning to open" (*M* 318) that Katniss intends to place in his lapel prior to shooting him. Lucy Gray's fondness for bright hues – "the Covey love color, and me more than most" (*BoSaS* 45) – not only ensures that her rainbow ruffles supply the missing element in the Capitol's drab attempts at *panem et circenses* but also adds further nuances of meaning to President Snow's own preferences: "The colors are lovely, of course, but nothing says perfection like white" (*M* 318). The rose garden and "the twelve ornate flights of stairs" (*BoSaS* 13) Coriolanus has to climb every day suggest that District Twelve's victors are eventually housed in the Snow family's penthouse and that, sixty-four years apart, the two protagonists spend their final night of safety on the same rooftop. Decades before the 'girl on fire' is born, Coriolanus Snow almost meets his end when a burning beam pins him to the ground in the arena. When Katniss and Peeta decide to take the poisonous nightlock berries instead of killing one another they replay "one of the great romantic suicide pacts of fiction, that of the madly-in-love [...] title character teenagers in William Shakespeare's romantic tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*" (Robb<sup>2</sup> 52) and Coriolanus resorts to the same Shakespearean phrase used by Caesar Flickerman to describe the strange tableau in the arena: "rabid boy, trapped girl, bombed out building. It suggested a tale that could only end in tragedy. Star-crossed lovers meeting their fate. A revenge story turned in on itself" (*BoSaS* 204).

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth mentioning that Brian Robb's *A Brief Guide to the Hunger Games* does not merely comment on the intertextual dimension of the franchise but also pays tribute to it via the titles of its three main parts: The Spark, The Flame, The Revolution.

The recently released adaptation weaves further threads through this intertextual tapestry, from the primrose and katniss blossoms embroidered on the bodice of Lucy Gray's ruffled dress to the accuracy with which her reaping day bow mirrors Katniss's defiant on-screen gestures in *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*. Given the discrepancy between the two female protagonists' personalities, this attempt to draw yet another connection between a charismatic performer and a sullen hunter seems somewhat forced, as does the voiceover delivery of President Snow's ominous words to Katniss: "It's the things that we love most that destroy us" (*HGM1; HGBoSAS*). Already suggested by his hardened countenance, sleek hairstyle and the deep burgundy hue of his final outfit, Coryo's imminent metamorphosis into a tyrant is confirmed by Tigris' obvious discomfort and use of his proper name instead of the affectionate nickname reserved "for old friends. For family. For people Coriolanus loved" (*BoSaS* 190) that she had "given him when he was a newborn" (*BoSaS* 10).

### **Conclusions: The World Beyond the Arena**

The real-world landmarks featured in the trilogy are geographical and geological rather than political, and Katniss knows little about the past of "the country that rose up out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America" (*HG* 18) beyond its main mountain ranges and socio-economic landscape: "In school, they tell us the Capitol was built in a place once called the Rockies. District 12 was in a region known as Appalachia. Even hundreds of years ago, they mined coal here" (*HG* 42). The prequel is by comparison rife with references to US history and culture, the darkest day in any district dweller's calendar representing by far the most conspicuous such nod: "This reaping day, like most, was shaping up to be a scorcher. But what else could you expect on July 4<sup>th</sup>?" (*BoSaS* 13). Together with Tigris' nostalgic recollection of the beautiful (and since then discontinued) military uniforms of her childhood – "Do you remember the red jackets with the gold piping?" (*BoSaS* 142) – the date hints at an alternate history in which the Redcoats overpowered the Patriots. This impression is further augmented by the British flavor of Capitol surnames (Highbottom, Cardew, Harrington, Heavensbee), the references to tea parties and afternoon teas, maids and cooks, not to mention the variety and reputation of the Snows' roses. More importantly, the "privileges that the oldest, most powerful families had earned over generations" (*BoSaS* 16) and the belief shared by most of Coriolanus' circle that the Capitol's leading citizens belong to "a superior breed" even in the absence of any evidence of "a physical, mental, or especially a moral superiority" to single them out from the "nobodies in the districts" (*BoSaS* 69) echoes the "conviction cherished by the British aristocracy" (Miller) that social prestige was the perquisite of those of noble blood.

The name and description of the other drink favored by the elites, “a concoction of watery wine laced with honey and herbs” and “an intoxicating version of the sour stuff that had sustained the Capitol through the war, supposedly fending off illness” (*BoSaS* 15), represents a poignant nod to the culture of ancient Rome, when “soldiers downed a wine derivative called *posca*, made by diluting sour wine with water,” viewed as “preferable to water because it was derived from wine, which was considered a healthy beverage” (Phillips 189). The ubiquitous cabbage soup that fills the Snows’ kitchen “with the smell of poverty” (*BoSaS* 10) so evocative of Winston Smith’s hallway in *1984* conjures up no particular cultural associations, but the food of Coriolanus’ privileged childhood and the occasional Academy feast feature typical American fare rather than the refined dishes sampled 64 years later by Katniss and Peeta: “the rows of apple pie wedges, each decorated with a paper flag sporting the seal of Panem” (*BoSaS* 30) evoke the patriotic nuances of the traditional Independence Day dessert, the impromptu feast featuring the “twenty-pound frozen turkey, compliments of the state” (*BoSaS* 142) the Snows receive on National Heroes Day brings Thanksgiving dinner to mind, and not even the Snows’ apparent ignorance of the word ‘burger’ can fully defamiliarize Lucy Gray’s last meal before being thrown into the arena, a chopped beef patty, “layered with toppings and nestled in a large bun” served with “fried potatoes and creamed cabbage slaw” (*BoSaS* 148).

As far as education is concerned, certain features of the Academy Coriolanus attends together with other “offspring of the prominent, wealthy, and influential” (*BoSaS* 13) might bring to mind the elite public schools of Britain, and Dr. Gaul’s occasional interventions engage the students in the argumentative dialogues favored by the Socratic method. On the other hand, the daunting university tuition, the additional assignments Dr. Gaul requires as part of the prize application and the very notion that “a summer with the Peacekeepers would be far more educational” (*BoSaS* 396) than one spent in the Capitol recall the relative inaccessibility of Ivy League education and the American belief in the merits of a gap year. Unsurprisingly, given the almost mystical powers ascribed to the almighty dollar, the currency of Panem bears the same name and the “freshly minted bills” hidden beneath the frame of Sejanus’ diploma are printed on the familiar “pale green paper” (*BoSaS* 318) of our present. While neither the frequently mentioned seal of the Capitol nor the country’s flag are described in any of the novels, it takes little effort to identify the majestic golden bird on the flag featured in the first four adaptations as a stylized representation of the American eagle and even less to decode the meaning of the thirteen stars surrounding it in the 2023 film. The loud objections to Reaper’s apparent “disregard for the sanctity of the national flag” (*BoSaS* 216) bring Federal Flag Desecration Law to mind, yet the fact that he wears part of it as a cape and uses several other sections to cover the

bodies of the fallen tributes recalls the flag-suited superheroes of popular culture and the casket flags meant to honor veterans.

Perhaps the most disquieting nod to American culture is the crown worn by the statue Coriolanus fixes his gaze on in the final seconds of the adaptation: less imposing and considerably more athletic than *Liberty Enlightening the World*, this woman is rendered doubly intimidating by the two swords crossed above her head, a reminder that the rule of Panem is based on (yet unbroken) chains and military control rather than light and freedom. Far from being confined to the United States, the film's settings draw considerable inspiration from the “aesthetics and architecture of restrictive systems” (Rasker) such as the Soviet Union, fascist Germany, Italy and Spain, and the resulting cultural palimpsest juxtaposes expanses of Stalinist blocks (Nicholson) with the grandeur of Nazi architecture. Coriolanus' references to “ration coupons” (*BoSaS* 13; 130) and Tigris' fond recollections of his “victory garden on the roof” (*BoSaS* 143) justify the post-war air of Capitol buildings and outfits alike, but it is even more interesting to note the “ominous closeness” between young Snow's on-screen persona and “any of the latest, deranged American mass shooters infecting the country” (Sperduto) and the uncanny extent to which Lucy Gray's embroidered flower bodice resembles the folk dress of Ukraine (Nicholson).

Growing awareness of how hauntingly our world echoes Collins's fiction resulted in an adaptation seemingly intent on moving its audiences to spend most of the running time “reflecting on contemporary headlines, mourning the generational tragedy of anger and fear begetting anger and fear” (Nicholson). At the height of its popularity, the *Hunger Games* trilogy was described as a work of crossover fiction, a “combination of existing elements that, together, becomes something new” (Henthorne 164). The four novels and five films making up the current (official) corpus constitute an infinitely more complex hybrid of mythology and history, reality and fiction, canonical literature and popular culture, poetry and prose, blurring the boundaries between various textual categories and challenging their public to fill in gaps, draw connections, examine versions of the truth, identifying and decoding as many of the clues scattered across this ever-expanding arena as possible in their quest for meaning.

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