



*“In hunger for bread,
not in thirst for revenge”:
Belly, bellum and rebellion in Coriolanus and
The Hunger Games trilogy*

by Sara Soncini

A play replete with images of food and feeding, eating and being eaten, *Coriolanus* provides the most thoroughgoing exploration of hunger within the Shakespearean corpus, marked as it is by a sharp awareness of its political and ideological underpinnings. In a striking departure from the major source for the historical narrative dramatized in the tragedy, i.e. Plutarch's account of *The Life of Caius Martius Coriolanus* in Thomas North's translation, Shakespeare emphasizes famine, not usury, as the driving force behind the plebeians' threatened uprising against the Roman Senate, thereby establishing a strong interconnection between hunger, social conflict, and political action; at the same time, by relocating the food riots at the beginning of the play he also turns hunger into the prime mover of *dramatic* action. From the very early moments of the tragedy, this emphasis on hunger as a literal, material condition is paralleled by a probing investigation of the rhetorical and metaphorical dimension of alimentary imagery and its problematic applicability, and actual application, in the political sphere.



Shakespeare's politicization of hunger, as both a material and a discursive phenomenon, has played an important part in securing and shaping *Coriolanus's* afterlife. From the late seventeenth century onwards, the play has steadily triggered a number of culturally relevant adaptations and rewritings, the most influential of which arguably remains Bertolt Brecht's unfinished version for the Berliner Ensemble in the early 1950s, not least for the spate of responses it has in turn inspired or provoked (by Giorgio Strehler, Günter Grass, John Osborne, and Heiner Müller among others).¹ This essay deals with a more recent take on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, one which provides compelling evidence of "the complex cultural work this play has been seen as able to perform" (Holland 2013: 8) but has so far rather surprisingly escaped critical attention. Possibly because she was primarily targeting a teenage readership, Suzanne Collins (who holds a graduate degree in drama) did not deem it necessary or even expedient to directly acknowledge a Shakespearean antecedent for her *Hunger Games* trilogy (*The Hunger Games*, 2008; *Catching Fire*, 2009; *Mockingjay*, 2010),² a global bestseller that has joined J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* in "a kind of publishing holy trinity" (Dominus 2011: 32) and, like them, has rapidly grown into a mass phenomenon thanks also to a series of blockbusting filmic offshoots. In the Q&A section appended to her first instalment, Collins claims that the initial idea for *The Hunger Games* came to her from the "very unsettling" blurring of the lines between a reality TV competition and actual coverage of the Iraq war while channel-surfing one evening; her father's memories of Vietnam are also credited as decisive for her choice of subject (HG, n.p.). In her sparing public pronouncements, Collins has added the Greek myth of Ariadne and the Minotaur and the historical figure of Spartacus to the conscious sources of inspiration behind her post-apocalyptic fantasy about a female gladiator who becomes a revolutionary leader. If the archetypes provided by ancient Roman history form the backbone of Collins's biting critique of present-day American society, for their part readers and critics have been quick to identify a number of literary antecedents for Collins's dystopian world, from sci-fi classics like George Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* down to more recent specimens of the genre, notably Koushun Takami's horrific tale of Japanese adolescent warriors in *Battle Royale* (1999); and on more than one occasion, Stephen King has dismissed Collins's game show satire as derivative, pointing to unacknowledged borrowing from his Bachman novels, *The Long Walk* and *The Running Man* (see e.g. King 2008). Indeed, according to Pharr and Clark (2012: 8) it is not only through her focus on the "serious" themes of hunger, war and politics that Collins manages to transcend the boundaries of Young Adult fiction; equally important, in terms of challenging the tenets of the genre, is her trespass into sci-fi territory proper through

¹ For a wide-ranging survey see Holland (2013) and, with a more specific emphasis on the German-speaking area, Montironi (2013).

² Henceforth quoted parenthetically using the following abbreviations: HG (*The Hunger Games*); CF (*Catching Fire*); M (*Mockingjay*).



the disturbing resemblance between the speculative post-apocalyptic world of her trilogy and our own reality.

Arguably, another element that even more conspicuously sets Collins's work apart from its most immediate literary cognates is the pervasiveness as well as subtlety of its Shakespearean subtext: with the exception of a rather straightforward quotation from *Romeo and Juliet*, the other references scattered across the trilogy presuppose an informed or even a specialized reader to be detected and unlocked. This is particularly true of the extensive structural borrowings from *Coriolanus*, not only because the play is one of the lesser-known within the canon, but also due to the game of hide-and-seek which Collins plays with the reader, establishing parallels that are difficult to follow through, creating chains of equivalence that are constantly disturbed and frequently prove paradoxical. Collins's intertextual strategy in *The Hunger Games* appears all the more intriguing if one considers that her dystopian critique rests to a considerable extent on a full-scale reworking of the hunger paradigm in Shakespeare's late Roman play, here re-functioned as a scathing cautionary tale about the social and political order of today's global age.

THE SHAKESPEAREAN PALIMPSEST

References to *Coriolanus* punctuate the plot of Collins's trilogy. In a totalitarian country named Panem, apparently the only remaining political system on earth, the lucky minority residing in the Capitol revel in decadent consumerism while the inhabitants of the twelve surrounding districts are consigned to a life of hardship by the ruthless government of President Snow, which exercises a relentless control over the supply of food and other vital resources. In District 12, the home of the protagonist and narrator of the trilogy, Katniss Everdeen, citizens are kept on the brink of starvation: grain is tightly rationed and a tall electrified fence prevents them from foraging for food in the surrounding woods. At sixteen years of age, Katniss has already made a habit of poaching, a crime punishable with death; after her father died in a mining accident, leaving her with a grief-stricken mother and a little sister to provide for, she soon "resolved rather to die than to famish", like the hungry rioters who open Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (I, 1, 3-4) railing against the patricians' hoarding of grain and threatening to rise up in arms against the Roman Senate. Whereas in Shakespeare the outbreak of hostilities is averted, in Collins a failed uprising against the Capitol during the "Dark Days" led to the establishment of the Hunger Games: every year two "tributes" from each district, one boy and one girl between the ages of twelve and eighteen, are selected by draw and sent to fight to the death in a "vast outdoor arena" (HG, 21) until only one victor remains; the televised Games are compulsory watching in the districts, in order for citizens to be permanently reminded of the hopelessness of rebellion and its dire consequences.



When the name of her twelve-year-old sister is drawn, Katniss steps forward and volunteers in her place. Like Caius Martius when he dashes through the gates of Corioles and gets shut in alone to face the entire Volscian army, Katniss unselfishly embarks on a suicidal mission: as a malnourished, weak, untrained tribute from a poor district she knows that her meagre chances of survival in the arena are further reduced by having to face the Careers, i.e. the well-fed, skilled volunteers from the wealthier ones. Yet against all odds Katniss, like Shakespeare's martial hero, emerges from the arena bathed in blood but victorious. The commendatory speech before the Senate with which, in *Coriolanus*, the Roman general Cominius recapitulates his mentee's early exploits as the republic's warrior could just as easily apply to Katniss's baptism of fire in the Games: Caius Martius, the consul reminds his audience, was only sixteen years old when he "fought beyond the mark of others" to repel Tarquin's advance on Rome, proving "best man i'the'field" even when his young age might have led him to behave like a woman (Cor., II, 2, 85-95); the image of his beardless "Amazonian chin" (89), used by Cominius to emphasize a still fluid gender identity, finds an almost literal counterpart in Collins's androgynous she-warrior and superb archer. For both Shakespeare's and Collins's protagonists, moreover, the political aftermath of their military feats bristles with perils no smaller than those they had to face in the war zone. Akin to Coriolanus in Shakespeare's Rome, the popular favour Katniss has gained through her battlefield conduct turns her into a perceived threat for Panem's totalitarian government. Of course, President Snow is a defective analogue for Coriolanus's political adversaries in Shakespeare, the newly-appointed tribunes of the people. The parallels are further complicated by the fact that, on one level, Katniss's triumph in the arena effectively marks the beginning of her transformation from tribute into tribune. In the arena, Katniss has not only managed to survive the competition; with the aid of Peeta, the other contestant from District 12, she has also scored a dangerous victory over the Capitol by forcing the Gamemakers to change the rules and allow two winners for the first time in the history of the Games. Katniss and Peeta's publicly televised act of disobedience – a double suicide attempt with poisonous berries – is a moment of major political change, tantamount to the one depicted in the first act of Shakespeare's play, when popular pressure compels the state's authorities to grant political representation to the plebeians through the establishment of the tribunate.

Still, for all their seeming incompatibility with her characterization as an exponent of, and advocate for, the oppressed citizens of Panem, Katniss never sheds her Coriolanus-like traits; indeed, as the story progresses new ones are added and existing ones become more evident. Within Panem, the media have become fully integrated in the situation of permanent conflict on which the Capitol's power is founded, and in the Hunger Games as its paradigmatic reproduction. As soon as Katniss volunteers to take her sister's place in the competition, she enters the world of



reality TV.³ This involves more than being subjected to relentless media exposure; as she is quickly brought to realize, her chances as a tribute are strongly dependent on her public image and her ability to shape it. In a way, Collins may be seen in this respect as seizing upon Shakespeare's frequent use of terms such as "news", "report" and "show" in connection with military heroism, literalizing their suggestion of a "'theatrical' exhibition for social and political advancement" (Pugliatti 2010: 136). Like other tributes, in preparation for the Games Katniss is assigned a head stylist and a team of beauticians who give her a complete makeover. For strategic advice, instead, she can rely on the services of a former Hunger Games veteran from her district; but Katniss's mentor, Haymitch, acts far less as a military advisor than as a Volumnia-like public image consultant bent on improving his protégé's interview skills during the events leading up to the Games and, more in general, smoothing off the brittle edges of her public persona. Once in the arena, Katniss soon understands that if she wants to survive, she has to comply with the role that Haymitch is imposing on her. In this regard, she shows greater wisdom than her Shakespearean antecedent with his stubborn refusal to play "a part that I shall blush in acting" (*Cor.*, II, 2, 145-146) – with a stroke of irony, Katniss's frequent on-camera blushing is actually rated "golden" (HG, 160) by her media-savvy prep team.

The parallels are further drawn out during the post-Games Victory Tour, when the problem of Katniss's resistance to public exposure is presented in a way that very closely mirrors Coriolanus's unwillingness to show his wounds to the Roman citizens in order to garner their votes – incidentally, Shakespeare's only other major departure from Plutarch. The second book in Collins's trilogy, *Catching Fire*, opens with Katniss panicking over the victors' ceremonial tour across the districts, a form of spectacle which she perceives as a threat upon her integrity because, not unlike the public performance in a "gown of humility" (*Cor.*, II, 3, 49) required of Coriolanus as a candidate to consulship, the Victory Tour is intended precisely as an official act of submission: during a terrifying surprise visit to her new home, President Snow has made it clear that a terrible punishment awaits Katniss and her dear ones unless she manages to convince the entire country that the suicide attempt was a rash and emotional act of love, rather than a calculated gesture of defiance. Like Coriolanus, moreover, Katniss undertakes the humiliating ritual but her wounds are never exposed in public – not because she refuses to show them, as in Coriolanus's case, but because her non-telegenic scars from the arena, as well as "those accumulated over years of hunting" (HG, 410), have all been removed while she lay unconscious recovering from the Games. Notably, Shakespeare's warrior also boasts an outstanding collection of scars from his present and past military endeavours – twenty-five historical ones, as mother Volumnia excitedly notes, plus the two newly-acquired wounds "to show to

³ The Games and the events that surround them are a crossover between the highly popular show *Survivor* and a number of other reality TV formats, including talent competitions, makeover shows and wedding shows.



the people when he shall stand for his place" (Cor., II, 1, 144-145); and when he begs to be excused from listening to Cominius's praise of his deeds before the assembled Senate, he explains that "I had rather have my wounds to heal again / Than hear say how I got them" (Cor., II, 2, 68-69).

Further on in the narrative, Katniss continues to share Coriolanus's aversion to the spectacularization of his body in the public domain. In *Catching Fire*, amidst spreading unrest in the districts, Katniss and Peeta are forced back into the arena for the Quarter Quell, a special 75th edition of the Games reserved for past victors. This time, however, they not only survive the competition but, joining forces with several other tributes, they manage to actually blow up the arena. When she regains consciousness after the explosion, Katniss finds herself on board of a hovercraft bound for District 13. According to official history, District 13 was "obliterated" (HG, 21) by the Capitol in retaliation for leading the failed uprising of the Dark Days; in fact, the surviving rebels have moved underground, rebuilding a fully operative society that now acts as the driving force behind the new rebellion. Having ascertained that "there is a world elsewhere" (Cor., III, 3, 134), to borrow Coriolanus's famous line, Katniss is however also quick to detect worrying similarities between the totalitarian regime of Panem and its supposedly democratic antagonist. To a large extent, Collins's third and final instalment, *Mockingjay*, focuses on Katniss's discomfort at playing the part of the "symbol of the revolution" (M, 11) that others have designed for her, a discomfort that again recalls Coriolanus's genuine shock at Volumnia's injunction to go back to the market-place and "mountebank" (Cor., III, 3, 133) the people's love through an insincere public performance in a last-ditch attempt to avert the banishment.

As the rebellion escalates into fully-blown war, Katniss's misgivings about her new allies are confirmed. Like Aufidius in Shakespeare, the Machiavellian president of District 13, Alma Coin, is plotting to get rid of the Mockingjay and clear the ground from a dangerous political rival. Even more tragically, a revolution fought in the name of justice and democracy seems to be leading to the reinstatement of just another brutal dictatorship capable of the worst atrocities: in the final battle, explosives placed inside supply packages are used to slaughter Capitol children deployed as human shields around Snow's mansion, as well as the rebel medics who come to their aid; Katniss later learns that the Capitol hovercraft from which the bombs were dropped, killing her beloved sister Prim who was among the rescuers, was in fact operating upon Coin's orders. The conclusive intimation that the horror story is about to begin anew comes when, immediately after the victory, Coin proposes a final round of the Hunger Games for Capitol children in the form of war reparations. At the end of Shakespeare's play, the tragic hero is quickly disposed of and the political confrontation in Rome concludes in a draw. In Collins, too, it is impossible to determine whether Katniss's final act of rebellion, her killing of President Coin, will actually bring the cycle of violence to a halt, or whether this "sweet period where



everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated" (M, 426) is simply to be understood a short lull in humankind's never-ending conflict.

While hopefully persuasive, the Shakespearean palimpsest I have sketched out above is a retrospective reconstruction that does not entirely match the reader's experience of the trilogy. It is only well into the third instalment that a valid intertextual contract is actually produced by Collins, when President Snow eventually acquires the first name of "Coriolanus" (M, 192). Disclosed in throwaway fashion, almost as an afterthought, this attribution of a Shakespearean identity is much belated and ironically misplaced onto Katniss's arch-enemy. In other respects, however, the apparent incongruity can be seen to accurately reflect the precarious identity of the protagonist of *Coriolanus*. In Shakespeare's text, the eponymous hero only obtains his name towards the end of the first act, in reward for his military exploits at Corioles. However, while speech prefixes are henceforth consistent in switching to "Coriolanus", the same is not true of the dialogue, where the tribunes, Aufidius and even Coriolanus's patrician friend Menenius take turns at challenging his status by reverting to "Caius Martius". The other Shakespearean references scattered across the trilogy tend to follow a similar retroactive pattern, triggering what might be called a Shakespearean chain reaction. Towards the end of *Mockingjay*, for example, we learn that the redheaded Avox girl who was assigned to Katniss in the Capitol Training Center in preparation for the first Games is called Lavinia. Avoxes are people whom the Capitol punishes for their crimes – in this case, an attempted escape – by cutting their tongues and turning them into servants. By naming the Avox after the similarly brutalized daughter of Titus Andronicus in the eponymous tragedy, Collins indirectly authorizes our retrospective identification of another Shakespearean citation in Katniss's earlier mention of the District 6 tribute called Titus who, in a previous edition of the Games, "went completely savage" and took to cannibalistic practices (HG, 167).

Collins's first book even offers an explicit dramatization of the belated and tortuous process whereby her characters acquire Shakespearean traits. During the televised pre-Games interviews, Peeta reveals his doomed love for Katniss, much to her surprise and dismay. After the show, Katniss rails at her partner for embarrassing her in front of the whole country, but Haymitch defends Peeta's move, explaining that the advantages that may be derived from it are not to be underestimated: for the unglamorous tributes from the poorer districts, audience favour is essential if they are to attract sponsors and receive live-saving gifts once in the arena. Katniss and Peeta's spectacular rise from dull non-entities to talent-show celebrities is framed by Haymitch in unmistakably Shakespearean terms: "You were about as romantic as dirt until he said that he wanted you. Now they all do. You're all they're talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!" (HG, 158). The recognizably Shakespearean tag sticks, becoming almost their brand name, and in the arena Katniss is deftly manoeuvred into playing along with the Romeo and Juliet scenario, particularly after the Gamemakers' sensational announcement that two victors will be allowed, if from



the same district. Katniss interprets this tectonic rule change as a sign of the power she and Peeta have gained through their compliance with Haymitch's script, only to be forcefully reminded of who really holds the strings in this reality-TV Grand Guignol when the earlier revision is abruptly revoked after all the other tributes have died. It is at this point that Katniss pushes the hidden trigger within the Shakespearean scenario in which she is trapped (and which she never recognizes as such), and proceeds to stage its tragic ending in order to deprive the Capitol of a victor and "make the whole thing blow up in the Gamemakers' faces" (HG, 402). With an ironic twist, the star-crossed lovers here are bent on dying for real but end up both alive, managing to blackmail their puppet-masters into yet another last-minute revision. Like the attribution of Shakespearean names, Collins's direct citation from the most popular play in the canon works as a sort of authorial warrant for the identification of other parallels even in the absence of overt intertextual clues. This is notably the case of the striking resemblance between Prospero's magic island and the phantasmagorical Quarter Quell arena, the brainchild of a Head Gamemaker named after Shakespeare's main source for *Coriolanus*, Plutarch, who eventually turns out to be the mastermind behind the final rebellion.

THE POLITICS OF HUNGER

Taken together, Collins's intertextual echoes work by accumulation to create a distinct Shakespearean score for her futuristic adventure fiction.⁴ The *Coriolanus* palimpsest partakes in the chorus but at the same time stands out of it not only for its extensiveness, but because of its crucial relevance to the main political issues raised by trilogy. Collins's dystopian parable follows very closely the patterns established by Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* to explore the politics of hunger and its jarring paradoxes. Panem, just like Shakespeare's Rome, is a political order based on food inequality and a state of permanent conflict. This is made clear from the very inception of *The Hunger Games*, when Collins has her protagonist relate the official narrative about the origin of the state. According to its foundational myth, the current regime "rose out of the ashes of a place that was once called North America" after a series of natural disasters left the surviving population engaged in a "brutal war for what little sustenance remained"

⁴ Rather surprisingly, the extent of the Shakespearean palimpsest seems to have escaped Catherine R. Eskin's notice in her essay dealing with Shakespeare's Second Henriad and *The Hunger Games*. By her own admission, Eskin is less concerned with establishing a parallel between the figure of Katniss and that of Prince Hal/King Henry V than with looking at "the ways an early modern and a postmodern population can be manipulated by the effective utilization of personality" (Eskin 2012: 179); and indeed, her study spots far more divergences than resemblances between Collins's trilogy and its avowed Shakespearean antecedent. Equally odd is the silence about the pervasive Shakespearean presence in the very recent collection of essays edited by Garriot, Jones & Tyles (2014), in spite of their specific focus on the interconnections between textual and cultural sites enabled by *The Hunger Games*.



(HG, 20). From the dire reality of hunger arose Panem, a “shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts” that brought peace and prosperity until an uprising threatened to once more plunge the nation into chaos. The rebellion was crushed and henceforth the Hunger Games were meted out to the districts as “our yearly reminder that the Dark Days must never be repeated” (HG, 21). In both the history of Panem and its symbolical re-enactment, the Hunger Games, the state’s power is legitimized by the protection it offers from people’s natural proclivity to predatory behaviour and cannibalistic warfare. In this way, the political rhetoric of Panem raises the spectre of past and future hunger in order to justify and enforce the dire reality of famine that its savage capitalism is currently inflicting on the districts it voraciously feeds upon.

From this point of view, Collins’s hunger-driven dystopia is remarkably consistent with the political order of Shakespeare’s Rome and the mystificatory rhetoric of the belly fable employed by Menenius in his attempt to quell the food riots at the opening of the play. Having maintained that divine will, not patrician greed, is responsible for the current shortage of grain, Menenius then proceeds to lift the plebeians’ literal hunger for bread onto the discursive realm, subsuming their material grievances into an organic metaphor which emphasizes the “transcendent nourishment” (Riss 1992: 60) of the body politic over the mundane needs of the citizens’ physical bodies. In Menenius’s fable, the rioters are recast as the mutinous body members whereas the belly is identified, somewhat unexpectedly, with the senators of Rome. The charges brought by the citizens against the voracious ruling elite are dismissed by Shakespeare’s ideologue as the fruit of physiological misperception: if they see the patrician class as a “cormorant belly” (116) that hoards all the food produced through their labour, this is due to the fact that their peripheral position in the social order blinds them to the vital importance of the digestion and distribution of food for the sustenance of the body politic; acting as a “store-house and shop”, the belly receives grain only to redistribute it as flour to the rest of the body, keeping for itself “but the bran” (141). The belly is thereby rhetorically transformed from an unproductive, all-consuming physical organ into a political organ that performs an essential regulating function within the Roman state. Although Menenius does not touch upon the outcome of the historical mutiny with which his fable famously opens – “There was a time, when all the body’s members / Rebelled against the belly [...]” (91-92) – the possible consequences of the plebeians’ failure to behave responsibly within a harmonious hierarchical order are spelled out shortly afterwards in Caius Martius’s invective, when he contends that without the Senate’s rule to keep them in awe, the citizens of Rome would “feed on one another” (183).

The organic metaphor employed in *Coriolanus* departs from the standard early modern version of the body politic in which the head or brain was identified as the centre of power, whereas the belly or stomach was usually seen as a kind of workman. By subverting the traditional political anatomy, Menenius conjures up a political order based on the hierarchical distinction between centre and periphery, rather than the far



more customary high/low opposition (Schoenfeldt 1999: 29). It is in accordance with this logic that he jeeringly identifies one of the mutinous plebeians as “the great toe of this assembly”, that is to say with the body part which, being furthest from the belly, is also the “lowest, basest, poorest” (I, 1, 150-152). The same physiological model informs Collins’s totalitarian regime. Within Panem, an all-powerful imperial centre rules over twelve surrounding districts, and the level of poverty increases in proportion to the districts’ distance from the Capitol, with the hapless residents of District 12 living in constant danger of starvation. However, whereas in *Coriolanus* the plebeians’ endemic hunger is generally presented as a by-product of proto-capitalist greed,⁵ in Collins’s 21st-century dystopia food insecurity is more expressly characterized as an instrument of political control. Panem’s districts are deliberately famished, and the dispensation and denial of food serve a precise political strategy of divide and rule. The fullest embodiment of this logic, the annual Hunger Games, are expressly designed to foster antagonism among the victims of Capitol oppression. In the arena, districts are pitted one against the other; afterwards, the winning district is showered with “gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation” (HG, 21). At the same time, by allowing only one victor, the Games also breed deadly enmity between co-tributes from the same district. The reaping system itself has been conceived as a way of sharpening social divisions: as Katniss explains, those who are eligible for the draw can choose to add their name multiple times to the lottery in exchange for a tessera, the equivalent of a meagre year’s supply of grain and oil for one person. Thus, the system penalizes the children of poorer families, who are led by hunger to avail themselves of tesserae several times over the years, and in this way significantly increase their chances of being reaped. In District 12 the system has effectively worked to sow hatred and mutual distrust between the underdog community of mine workers who live in the Seam, like Katniss and her family, and those who are only slightly better off and “can generally count on supper” (HG, 16).

Although Capitol citizens are exempt from the reaping, their vicarious participation in the televised carnage is equally central to the preservation of Panem’s totalitarian system. For district audiences, the Hunger Games are an awe-inducing display of state terror; for Capitol viewers, the ghastly atrocities of the arena are a gripping entertainment, just another commodity to be insouciantly feasted upon. As if confirming the First Citizen’s bitter complaint that “if the wars eat us not up, [the patricians] will” (Cor., I, 1, 79-80), then in *The Hunger Games* tributes are twice consumed by the Capitol’s ravenous belly, as cannon fodder and as media fodder. Shakespeare’s image of a “cormorant belly” finds its modern-day incarnation in Katniss’s description of the “camera crews, perched like buzzards on rooftops” (HG, 19) on reaping day, through which Collins denounces the predatory quality of the media

⁵ By almost general consensus (see Holland 2013: 66-67), the food riots which open the play are seen to allude to the Midlands Revolt of 1607, a large-scale popular protest against the process of enclosure and the widespread practice of grain hoarding for inflationary purposes.



eye and the equally predatory behaviour it elicits from spectators. Indeed, the utterly consumeristic attitude displayed by Capitol crowds towards the horrific spectacle of suffering and death is itself a measure of the degree to which the regime has succeeded in normalizing its brutal social cannibalism: fed with a constant stream of spectacular images of violence, the Capitol's domestic population has been effectively desensitized to its political and moral responsibilities in the perpetuation of fierce oppression. As Katniss readily observes when Plutarch glosses for her the phrase "*Panem et Circenses*", the districts' role within this depraved body politic is to "provide the bread and the circuses" (M, 249) whereby those in power placate the citizens' hunger for justice and buy their acquiescence to a violently predatory system. Trapped in a vicious circle of consumption, the districts supply the Capitol's all-devouring belly with, at once, material nourishment and the means to create political consensus around the exploitative mechanism that oppresses them.

THE CIRCLE OF CANNIBALISM

Reflecting the systematic way in which districts are turned into nourishment for the system, Collins's gladiators are often named after edibles or actions connected with human feeding that are, in turn, consistent with the *Coriolanus* trope. The sweet, delicate twelve-year-old tribute from District 11 who forms an alliance with Katniss before she is viciously killed by one of the Careers is called Rue, like the bitter herb; her name alludes to Katniss's deep sorrow at her death, but also resonates with Caius Martius's wish, in the first scene of *Coriolanus*, that Roman senators "lay aside their ruth / and let me use my sword" to crush the rebellion (Cor., I, 1, 193-194). In return for the moving burial ceremony she performed on Rue, the male tribute from District 11 rescues Katniss from certain death at the hands of a ruthless, sadistic Career called Clove, like the spice. A physically imposing boy, Clove's killer is quite appropriately called Thresh, a name that puts him in league with Caius Martius, whom Volumnia pictures slaughtering the Volsces "Like to a harvest-man that's tasked to mow / Or all or lose his hire" (Cor., I, 3, 41). Unlike her sister Prim(rose), a delicate flower prematurely reaped, Katniss was christened after a plant whose Latin name, *Sagittaria*, qualifies her as a natural-born Amazon, akin to the adolescent Caius Martius in Shakespeare's play. But the *Sagittaria* also produces edible underwater tubers which Katniss gathers in the woods to save her family from hunger, in confirmation of her father's joking reassurance that "as long as you can find yourself, you'll never starve" (HG, 60). Katniss's verified edibility literalizes, and partly disowns, Volumnia's famous protestation "Anger's my meat; I sup upon myself / And so shall starve with feeding" (Cor., IV, 2, 50-1); it is also further underscored through the moniker Catnip given her by her friend Gale, the result of an initial mispronunciation later upgraded to "official



nickname" (HG, 7) after a lynx started to follow Katniss around in the woods hoping in handouts from her game-bag.

By postulating a complementarity between predating and being preyed upon, eating and being eaten, Katniss's name and its derivative encapsulate what Stanley Cavell, in his classic study of the hunger paradigm in *Coriolanus*, has termed the "circle of cannibalism" (Cavell 1983: 7). Considering the pervasiveness of the idea of cannibalization throughout the play, Cavell dwells at length on the wolf/lamb analogy as emblematic of the paradoxical reciprocity which this idea implies. Shakespeare's Act Two opens in Rome with an edgy exchange between Menenius and the tribunes of the people before Caius Martius's victory is announced:

Menenius: The augurer tells me we shall have news tonight.

Brutus: Good or bad?

Menenius: Not according to the prayer of the people, for they love not Martius.

Sicinius: Nature teaches beasts to know their friends.

Menenius: Pray you, who does the wolf love?

Sicinius: The lamb.

Menenius: Ay, to devour him, as the hungry plebeians would the noble Martius.
(Cor., II, 1, 1-10)

This moment is remarkable for its subversion of the pattern established up till that point in the play, whereby the patricians and Coriolanus are the predators, the plebeians the victims of their voraciousness. It anticipates the metaphor of democracy as a Hydra-like beast of many stomachs used by Coriolanus to dissuade senators from sharing with the populace the corn stacked up in their storehouses (III, 1, 132-9), and the nightmarish image of Rome evoked by Menenius in connection with Coriolanus's prospective banishment, in which a city whose founders were suckled by a she-wolf turns into an "unnatural dam" devouring her own offspring (III, 1, 291-5). As Cavell observes, the reversibility that the wolf/lamb analogy announces is mirrored in the grammatical ambivalence of Menenius's question to the tribunes. Whereas a more correct "whom" would unambiguously denote the lamb as the object of the wolf's love, this form of the pronoun enables both directions, active and passive, resulting in the potential identification of both Coriolanus *and* the plebeians as the respective object and subject of cannibalistic desire.

A reworking of the wolf/lamb paradox also figures in *The Hunger Games*, where it becomes central to Katniss's action of "finding herself", her metaphorical journey of self-discovery and the insight it provides into the ultimate self-destructiveness of Panem's own cannibalism.⁶ While prepping for the Games, Katniss is both appalled

⁶ In this respect, Collins's protagonist conflates the recurring topos of cannibalism in science fiction and fantasy literature (see Westfahl, Slusser and Rabkin: 1996) with the classical pattern of the hero's quest as set out in Joseph Campbell's landmark study of literary archetypes, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949).



and delighted by the quantity and quality of food that is made available to her as a tribute. Used to battling with starvation, she stuffs herself with wolfish relish and is literally swept off her feet by a dish of lamb stew which she eats “by the bucketful” (HG, 147): a highly ironical demeanour on the part of a metaphorical lamb heading to the slaughterhouse. In the arena, Katniss continues to double as predator and prey; in the final battle she is even hunted down by a pack of mutant wolves bearing a gruesome resemblance to the contestants who have already died, some of them at her own hand. Meanwhile, Katniss’s undiminished fondness for lamb stew is more clearly portrayed as a symptom of the Gamemakers’ power over her destiny and, by extension, of the Capitol’s use of hunger as an instrument of oppression. Bestowing gifts of food is a strategy that is effectively used by Haymitch to control his mentee’s behaviour in the arena and induce her to play up the romance with Peeta: while tending her badly wounded mate, Katniss soon comes to realize that “one kiss equals one pot of broth” (HG, 348); victuals are parachuted before the entrance of the cave where they are hiding and Katniss’s first, tentative declaration of love is instantly rewarded with a basket containing assorted delicacies and “best of all, a tureen of that incredible lamb stew on wild rice” (HG, 355).

Haymitch’s manipulative tactics find a counterpart in the Gamemakers’ systematic reliance on hunger to fuel bloodshed in the arena. Whenever there is a temporary respite from hostilities, players are enticed to gather and fight through the promise of a banquet. The analogy between fighting and eating is writ large across *Coriolanus*, particularly in the first act where Martius’s hearty appetite for combat is repeatedly described through the metaphor of the battle as feast.⁷ In keeping with her intertextual legacy, Katniss initially sees the Gamemakers’ feasts as a useful opportunity to “take out a few competitors” (HG, 285); her attitude however changes during the protracted retirement in the cave with Peeta, when she waves away in indifference the Gamemakers’ invitation to a banquet at the Cornucopia in a gesture that might ironically recall yet another Shakespearean protagonist, Timon, and his abhorrence of “All feasts, societies, and throngs of men” (*Timon of Athens*, IV, 3, 20-21) during his self-imposed exile in a cave in the wilderness. The feast which Katniss attends when she is eventually ferreted out from her refuge – through the promise of medicine to treat Peeta’s septic wound – reads as a combination of the mock-banquet in the third act of Shakespeare’s gloomy problem play, where the false friends of the prodigal Athenian gentleman are served stones and water instead of the expected lavish gifts, and the Harpy scene in *The Tempest*, here restaged through the magical

⁷ By Titus Lartius and Cominius, respectively: see *Cor.*, I, 5 15-16 and I, 9, 10-11. A little earlier the group of Roman soldiers, commenting on Martius’s single-handed assault on Corioles, had irreverently ruled him as gone “To th’ pot” (I, 4, 50), i.e. ready to be cut to pieces and made into a stew. However, as the servingmen at Aufidius’s feast in Antium later remark, it was rather the Volscian general who ended up being “scotched [...] and notched [...] like a carbonado” before the gates of Corioles and might have been boiled and eaten by his Roman opponent if he “had been cannibally given” (IV, 5, 189-92).



apparition of “a round table with a snowy white cloth” (HG, 331) from the ground before the mouth of the Cornucopia, followed by the eruption of chaos when the surviving players struggle to reach the gifts they so desperately need. Through the combination of Shakespeare’s most iconic mock-banquets with the war/feast trope from *Coriolanus*, Collins poignantly denounces Panem’s degenerate version of conviviality, the way in which an opportunity for sociability through the sharing of food has been perverted into hunger-driven competitiveness and conflict.

However, if Katniss’s much-coveted lamb stew tells a story of political control through the weaponization of food and hunger, it also provides a clue about their liability to backfire. In *Mockingjay*, while on their deadly mission to assassinate President Snow, Katniss’s squad take shelter in a deserted Capitol apartment. Hunting for food, they come upon a stock of canned goods; the lamb stew that Peeta hands out to Katniss, and which she promptly eats, stirs memories of their first time together in the arena and helps defuse the tension created by Peeta’s still incomplete recovery from the Capitol’s hijacking of his memories. In its last appearance in the trilogy, the Capitol’s lamb stew has turned from an instrument of control into a source of material and psychological sustenance for the rebels’ action, a process which also applies to other victuals throughout the story. Building on an ambivalence that looms large in Shakespeare’s play, food in *The Hunger Games* is simultaneously portrayed as a means of enslavement and as the motor of political action in parallel with the development of a political consciousness.

With regard to the latter, Katniss’s story apparently corroborates Coriolanus’s allegation that “Whoever gave that counsel to give forth / The corn o’th’storehouse gratis [...] / I say they nourished disobedience, fed / The ruin of the state” (Cor., III, 1, 114-7). By her own admission, Collins’s revolutionary leader starts from a position of political indifference. Though she is open-eyed about Panem’s corrupt social order and the lies that underpin it, she is much too concerned with getting food on the table to reflect on the root causes of her predicament. Unlike the food riots that open Shakespeare’s play, Katniss’s initial form of hunger-driven disobedience, her trespass into the woods to scavenge for food, is a secretive and purely individual act with no intended repercussions in the public sphere. It is only when she is richly fed in preparation for the Games that her unruly behaviour begins to acquire a political edge: with the temporary appeasement of physical hunger comes a growing awareness of the politics of food which, in turn, generates a new hunger for social justice.

This process culminates in the sumptuous party that concludes the Victory Tour. Still unaware of the rebellion spreading in the districts, Katniss tours the banquet room in President Snow’s mansion, her attention entirely captivated by the array of delicacies heaped up on the buffet tables. Her decision to eat with restraint in order to be able to sample everything is a source of great hilarity for the members of her prep team, who suggest she and Peeta adopt emetic practices like all Capitol party-goers.



Katniss's thoughts immediately go to the emaciated bodies of District 12 children. Her disgust at the appalling divide between those who have too much and those who have almost nothing at all strongly resonates with the First Citizen's harangue against patrician opulence in Shakespeare:

What authority surfeits on would relieve us. If they would yield us but the superfluity while it were wholesome, we might guess they relieved us humanely. But they think we are too dear. The leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is an inventory to particularize their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them. Let us revenge this with our pikes ere we become rakes; for the gods know, I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge. (Cor., I, 1, 13-23)

At this stage, Katniss's reading of Capitoline superfluity is less outspokenly political and does not immediately result in a call to action; but in the third book, when she eventually resolves to fight on the rebels' side, Collins again draws on Shakespearean imagery to specifically connote Katniss's expedition to assassinate President Snow as a symbolical nemesis for the Capitol's degenerate bulimia. When Coriolanus offers his military services to the Volsces, Aufidius rejoices in the prospect of "pouring war into the bowels of ungrateful Rome" (Cor., IV, 5, 131-132) through their joint revenge. In Collins's third book, rebel forces literally make headway through the Capitol's bowels: for a long stretch of their hazard-ridden journey towards the presidential mansion, Katniss's special squad move through the treacherous underground tunnels of the Capitol's sewers, where they engage in bloody combat with Snow's human as well as mutant troops. By taking the shape of a violent purgative poured into the Capitol's corrupt body politic, Katniss's final mission reads as an apposite retaliation for the emetic practices that had aroused her indignation in *Catching Fire*.

The idea that through its corrupt forms of consumption Panem may be sowing the seeds of its own destruction is more extensively developed in connection with the perverted feeding habit par excellence, i.e. poisoning. In *Mockingjay*, when President Snow's Shakespearean name is revealed, we also learn the reason for the smell of blood that Katniss had noticed upon their first face-to-face confrontation, an odour so persistent that not even the genetically-enhanced scent of the rose in his lapel was able to cover it. Snow's rise to power was predicated on the assassination of his political adversaries through poison. To allay suspicions, he partook of the fatal foodstuffs using an antidote which, however, could not cure him from the sores in his mouth. Like his Shakespearean namesake and like Katniss, then, Coriolanus Snow too has his invisible wounds, here symbolically coextensive with the whole ingesting organ. A similar interconnectedness of mouth and wound is postulated in Shakespeare's play, most notably in Volumnia's imagistic conflation of Hector's infant mouth sucking milk from Hecuba's breasts with the wounded forehead of the Trojan



warrior spitting forth blood on the battlefield (Cor., I, 3, 43-6).⁸ In reworking this image Collins continues to emphasize the Shakespearean connection between feeding and fighting, but in *The Hunger Games* the focus is more on the inner vulnerability that Snow's food warfare has produced. Significantly, this is a vulnerability that Katniss too begins to sense after her own successful deployment of poisonous food as a weapon against the Capitol. During their conversation before the Victory Tour, Snow insists on the gravity of the situation by warning Katniss that her gesture of defiance might trigger a rebellion and eventually lead to the collapse of the entire system, with terrible consequences for all. Surprised by Snow's openness, Katniss lets slip one of her typical kamikaze remarks: "It must be very fragile, if a handful of berries can bring it down" (CF, 24). The lethal capacity of her berries, as she will later understand, rests in their revelatory quality with respect to the intrinsic weakness of Snow's regime: the Capitol derives its wealth and power from an exploitative mechanism that ultimately makes the state completely dependent upon the districts for survival. The televised message that Katniss delivers in *Mockingjay* as part of the rebels' campaign of airwave warfare, in which she exposes the all-powerful Capitol as a giant on clay feet, advances a diametrically opposed interpretation of the physiological centrality of the belly and its political meaning:

President Snow once admitted to me that the Capitol was fragile. At the time, I didn't know what he meant. It was hard to see clearly because I was so afraid. Now I'm not. The Capitol's fragile because it depends on the districts for everything. Food, energy, even the Peacekeepers that police us. If we declare our freedom, the Capitol collapses. (M, 189-90)

In Shakespeare, Menenius tries to appease the hungry rioters by holding out words instead of bread. His confidence that they will "digest them rightly" (I, 1, 145), however, proves misplaced, not least because in identifying the belly as the ruling body part the fable unwittingly legitimizes a rebellion driven by the citizens' loyalty to their empty bellies. Shakespeare's decision to allow the "materially recalcitrant fact" (Riss 1992: 64) of the plebeians' bodies to have the upper hand over the metaphysical body of the state has been taken as a signal of the waning cogency of the body politic analogy and the feudalistic model of social organization it was designed to project.⁹ In Collins's 21st-century rendition of the same narrative, Menenius's defective surrogate finds a counterpart in Katniss's poisonous berries, an equally indigestible non-food through which the young she-warrior beats Snow at his own game, laying bare the inner wound caused by the Capitol's poisonous politics of hunger.

⁸ The association between mouth and wound is further expanded in Act Two, when Coriolanus's wounds become tongueless mouths in the citizens' eyes (Cor., II, 3, 5-16). In *The Hunger Games*, this image finds correspondence in the Avox called Lavinia with her mutilated mouth.

⁹ This view is generally shared by scholars; for some early critical formulations, see Riss (1992: 71, n. 3).



PANEM ET CIRCENSES

As might be expected, the foodstuff that more thoroughly epitomizes the ambivalence of the hunger paradigm within the trilogy is the one that gives its name to Collins's dystopian regime. In Shakespeare's revision of Plutarch's account, Rome's plebeians rise up against the state not in protest against usury, but because they have no more bread to eat. Here, a country calling itself Panem deliberately withholds grain from the districts while overfilling with *panem et circenses* the gargantuan bellies of the quiescent Capitol elite. In *Coriolanus* the iniquitous distribution of food resources across Roman society is justified through the metaphor of sifting; however, Menenius's claim that the belly hoards grain in order to send out unseen nourishment to the least privileged parts of the body is instantly belied by the surrogate quality of the fable itself. Collins further expands on Menenius's devious replacement of grain with rhetoric by presenting bread as a language in its own right, a system of signification used by the government to denote and enforce social hierarchies: within Panem, each district bakes its own distinctive shape of bread, and within the same district, the well-off minority consume white bakery bread while the poor must settle with the rough loaves from the dark ration grain. The belly's action of sifting is thus retraced to the doctrine of social inequality which Menenius's alimentary metaphor in *Coriolanus* sought instead to mystify.

In light of the paradox of hungering delineated through the Shakespearean palimpsest, it is only too appropriate that bread, the main alimentary symbol of Capitol oppression, should be turned into a strategic weapon by the rebels. In the early stages of the revolt, bread is used as cipher by the undercover opposition to liaise and gain momentum; later on, during the Quarter Quell games, the rebel Head Gamemaker, Plutarch Heavensbee, devises a bread-based code to communicate with players in the arena and send them the signal for breakout. Like other foodstuffs in the novels, moreover, bread also serves as a political consciousness-raiser for the protagonist; in this case, though, the code-breaking power it is shown to possess is directed against District 13, rather than the Capitol, and concerns the very real risk that the rebels' victory might result in the perpetuation of a vicious circle of hunger and repression. With her anarchist strain, Katniss has trouble adjusting to District 13's highly functioning but tightly regimented way of life. It is above all the hard-line policies concerning the distribution and consumption of food that raise her first suspicions about this "world elsewhere". Meals are consumed in a common hall where individual allowances are measured to the gram; unfinished food cannot be taken home since this would qualify as hoarding, a capital offence in District 13. While brought forth by the need to achieve and maintain self-sufficiency, these rules sit uncomfortably with refugees and especially with people like Katniss and Gale, who are



used to risking their lives in order to provide for their families and therefore “know how to be hungry, but not how to be told how to handle what provisions we have” (M, 40). Shortly afterwards, Katniss gets a very clear glimpse of the authoritarian face behind president Coin’s putative democracy when she discovers that her prep team, brought over from the Capitol to assist with the Mockingjay’s propaganda spots, is being held captive in shamefully inhumane conditions just for taking an extra slice of bread.

On a more metaphorical level, too, District 13 shows its worrying familiarity with the Capitol’s logic of *panem et circenses*. The “Airtime Assaults” (M, 49) devised by Plutarch and his rebel think-tank involve an even greater degree of artifice than the Capitol’s reality-TV, as is made apparent when the new wounds sustained by Katniss during the Quarter Quell are erased and then artificially recreated by her production team so they will look good on camera. The same problematization of public rhetoric features in *Coriolanus*, where it is specifically articulated through the metaphorical association of language with grain. A mighty harvester on the battlefield, Shakespeare’s martial hero proves tragically unsuited for the peacetime game of politics due to his disastrous handling of public oratory. In a lame attempt at justifying Coriolanus’s aggravating proneness to shower abuse on his political interlocutors, Menenius applies the same alimentary metaphor used in the belly fable to his friend’s unfiltered language, in which “Meal and bran together / He throws without distinction” (Cor., III, 1, 323-324). As Winkler (2010: 103) observes, however, Menenius’s notion that the skilled orator employs only the most refined language keeping the coarser for himself involves an understanding of political rhetoric “as not only a careful weighing of words, but implicitly also as potentially deceiving”. Collins’s heroine, too, has trouble delivering on-camera the carefully crafted sound bites provided by District 13’s media specialist, the Capitol-trained Fulvia. The rallying cry to the people of Panem about fighting together to “end our hunger for justice” (M, 80) feels like a mouthful she cannot imagine herself saying in real life; tellingly, Plutarch’s media warfare is only effective when it features Katniss’s unscripted, random outbursts of genuine anger before the atrocities perpetrated by Capitol forces. Well ahead of President Coin’s shocking proposal to reintroduce the Hunger Games, the *Coriolanus* palimpsest leaves no doubt about District 13’s deep entanglement in a vicious circle of “bread and circuses”.

In this context, Katniss’s final decision to kill Coin proves her allegiance with the First Citizen’s call, in the opening scene of *Coriolanus*, to take up arms “in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge” (see above). This opposition, only briefly adumbrated in *Coriolanus*, is considerably expanded in Collins’s trilogy, where bread, the epitomic remedy for hunger, becomes symbolically associated with individual and social regeneration. In the past, an unexpected gift of bread from young Peeta saved Katniss and her family at their darkest hour; at the end of the story, when Katniss appears to be sinking under the overpowering weight of war trauma, the arrival of Peeta “bearing



a warm loaf of bread" (M, 434) symbolically marks the inception of her slow, painful healing process. Katniss's eventual decision to settle with a baker instead of a hunter/warrior (her first love, the rebel Gale) is expressly motivated by the recognition that for the broken citizens of this broken world, the only hope in a new beginning lies in finding an alternative to vengeance. In the epilogue, set fifteen years later, Katniss's individual investment in the healing power of bread has been sealed through her decision to have children with Peeta, a possibility she had earlier ruled out on account of the hunger and horrors they would be exposed to. The socially-regenerative potential of bread, however, is already symbolically prefigured at the beginning of *Mockingjay*, where the oven of Peeta's family bakery is described as one of the few remnants of civilization still discernible among the rubble after the Capitol's retributive firebombing of District 12.

In its association with the *Coriolanus* palimpsest, the remedial quality of bread becomes more specifically identified with the possibility of envisaging an alternative to the self-sustaining and self-consuming circle of cannibalism. In *Mockingjay*, the televised speech in which Katniss publicly denounces the in-built fragility of the system is prefaced by a retelling of the episode, reported in a flashback in the first instalment, of Peeta's life-saving gift of bread when they were kids. In its juxtaposition with Katniss's public rebuttal of the belly fable, this narrative reprise is clearly meant as an alternative foundational tale, one which champions giving over hoarding, feeding over famishing. Peeta burned his mother's loaves on purpose, heedless of the punishment he was sure to receive, in order to deprive bread of its market value and in this way return it to its primary nourishing function. (He further flouted his mother's instructions by throwing one of the loaves to the hungry girl rummaging in the waste bins instead of feeding it to the pigs in the backyard.) Katniss's "bread story" (M, 190), now consciously reframed as a political message, is a tale of human solidarity beyond social divisions, a testimonial account of a transgressive moment of sharing in defiance of a predatory capitalism which sustains those divisions and is at the same time sustained by them.

If this utopian strain finds no space in Shakespeare's tragedy, it should be noted that in *The Hunger Games*, too, the first tentative move towards a different model of society is symptomatically confined to the post-narrative space of the Epilogue. This reflects the fact that whereas Collins's post-apocalyptic society derives its plausibility from the unsettling homology between the social structure of Panem and our present world order, her bread-driven utopia is only validated by the urgent need to break away from a potentially self-destructive circle of hunger. The mobilization of the Shakespearean palimpsest is crucial in this respect. With its unabated capability to elucidate the political underpinnings of hunger as a mighty engine that perversely concentrates and distributes power, wealth and insecurity, *Coriolanus* provides authoritative backing for the novels' warning about the voracious belly that rules our global body politic and its inseparability from *bellum* and rebellion. In Collins's



futuristic take on *Coriolanus*, Volumnia's observation that she shall eventually "starve with feeding" rings a distinctly cautionary note, one which is made more compelling by our perception of the continued relevance of the Shakespearean palimpsest, and the damning evidence it provides about history repeating itself.

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