Into the Woods: Freedom and the Forest in The Hunger Games

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As a recent NPR story noted, "authoritarian regimes have proliferated all around the globe, and human rights crimes abound. Just a generation after so many walls were brought down, it is hard not to feel that the world has plunged back into darkness" (Simon). In its 2022 report on *Freedom in the World*, Freedom House reported that the number of free societies around the world declined steadily over the past two decades; more than a third of the world's population now lives in countries rated as "not free" while only 20 percent live in "free" countries (Freedom House). In this moment, exploring the limits of obligation in the face of repression, and the liberty of those who live under autocratic regimes, takes on renewed importance for students of popular culture.

Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* trilogy provides readers with "a cautionary tale about what human society could easily become. It depicts a world where children are slaughtered for entertainment, power is in the hands of nearly untouchable tyrants, and workers starve as the affluent look on and laugh" (Dunn and Michaud, 3). The *Hunger Games* focus on the character of sixteen-year old Katniss Everdeen, who lives in Panem, a nation formed from the remnants of the territory formerly known as North America. In this dystopian future, a repressive government ("the Capitol") rules with an iron fist over the inhabitants of twelve distinct districts. The Everdeens live in

District 12, the poorest and most remote of the twelve districts that constitute Panem. "District 12," as Katniss quips, "is pretty much the end of the line. Beyond us, there's only wilderness" (Hunger Games, 83). Katniss lives in the poorest and most remote of the twelve districts – District 12 – in an area known as 'the Seam.' Her father "was blown to bits in a mine explosion. There was nothing even to bury" (Hunger Games, 5). District 12 "is pretty much the end of the line. Beyond us, there's only wilderness" (Hunger Games, 83).

Each year, the Capitol hosts an annual spectacle – the Hunger Games – as a visceral reminder of the all-encompassing power of the government over its citizens. After a violent uprising against the Capitol was defeated, a "Treaty of Treason" established an annual ritual to punish the districts for their transgression. Each year, districts host a "reaping" ceremony where two tributes – one boy and one girl – are selected by lottery to participate in the Games, where they will fight to the death until only one tribute remains. After her sister's name is drawn, Katniss springs up to take her sister's place. Tributes are whisked off to the Capitol for training before they are placed in an ever-changing artificial created by the Gamemakers. As Katniss recalls, "taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while we watch – this is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their mercy. How little chance we would stand of surviving another rebellion" (Hunger Games 18).

This dystopian environment challenges readers to consider when, and under what circumstances, individuals can defy the power of the state. This dilemma is evident in the Hunger Games as Katniss struggles to feed herself and her family. The heavily wooded environment surrounding District 12 forces Katniss to confront the meaning of freedom and the limits of obligation in a regime that exercises absolute power over its subjects.

The dilemmas raised by her frequent forays into the forest raise basic questions about the nature of liberty. The writings of Thomas Hobbes – a 17th century English political philosopher – provides a theoretical framework to analyze Katniss's actions, both in her home district and in the violent setting of the arena. The origin of Panem reflects the long and bloody English Civil War that shaped Thomas Hobbes's pessimistic view of the human condition (Foy). The Hunger Games trilogy**,** "revealed an outsize imagination for suffering and brutality" (Dominus). This dystopian setting embodies Hobbes's description of the "state of nature" where individuals face a life that "is solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes). "However awful the butchering of other human beings might seem to Katniss, Hobbes insists that there's at least one thing that's considerably worse – to die at the hands of another. Because a violent death is the worst possible evil, all other considerations, even our ordinary intuitions about right and wrong, should take a backseat to the fundamental imperative to stay alive" (Foy 212-13). In this view, "political legitimacy depends not on how a government came to power, but only on whether it can effectively protect those who have consented to obey it" (Lloyd and Sreedhar).

Previous applications of Hobbes's political philosophy to the *Hunger Games* largely focus on the manufactured environment of the televised arena, where tributes seek to hunt down and kill one another in order to survive. This setting captures the "state of war" of all against all that pits all twenty-four tributes against each other in a violent struggle to the death. Hobbes argues that individuals enjoy a basic equality in the state of nature based upon their ability to kill one another. In this anarchic setting, "there can be no rules limiting what the tributes can do in their pursuit of victory without a 'common authority' to enforce those rules or bind the tributes to their agreements" (Foy 211). The forested setting is a zero-sum game designed to eliminate the weak until only the strongest and most cunning competitors remain. In this setting, all's fair – deception, trickery, brute force – to achieve the desired end. From a Hobbesian view, the actions of the tributes

are justified, because they were selected and commanded by the Capital to participate in the annual spectacle. As Hobbes argues, "whatsoever a subject… is compelled to do in obedience to his sovereign, and doth it not in order to his own mind, but in order to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his sovereign's" (Lloyd and Sreedhar). Thus, from a Hobbesian view, the Capitol can conscript the tributes to fight and die in the arena, for "effective government – whatever its form – must have absolute authority" (Lloyd and Sreedhar). As Hobbes writes, while critics of such power "may fancy many evil consequences, yet the consequences of the want of it, which is a perpetual war of every man against his neighbour, are much worse" (Hobbes 156).

Nevertheless, Hobbes is an early advocate of basic political rights. Despite his impassioned defense of the sovereign's absolute power, Hobbes argues that individuals may refuse to do certain things. For example, despite the sovereign's power over the people, individuals retain a right to self-defense. In addition, persons ordered "to abstain from the use of food, air, medicine, or any other thing, without which he cannot live" have "the liberty to disobey" (Hobbes 164). This exercise of what Hobbes terms the "true liberty of subjects" is at the root of Katniss's decision to disobey the Capitol's prohibition against entering the thick woods surrounding District 12. Her actions illustrate the enduring tensions between individual liberty and obligation in Hobbes's thought. Indeed, Hobbes grants individuals "seemingly broad resistance rights in cases in which their families or even their honor are at stake" (Lloyd and Sreedhar).

In both *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire*, Katniss flouts the law to provide for her needs and her family. Daily life in District 12 is tenuous; malnutrition and starvation are commonplace. Desperate to feed their families, many parents signed their children up for "tesserae" that qualify families for supplemental rations of grains, oil, and other foodstuffs by adding entries into the Hunger Games lottery each year. After her father's death, Katniss struggles to put food on the table for her mother and young sister, Prim. To do so, she must find food in the deep woods surrounding

her home district. Doing so, however, risks punishment. The forest that encircles her home in the Seam is forbidden territory, enclosed by an electrified chain link fence. "Trespassing in the woods is illegal and poaching carries the severest of penalties" (Hunger Games, 5). Fear deters most residents from harvesting the bountiful supply of fish, game, and plants beyond the fence. Before his death, her father taught Katniss to hunt for game and to forage for food in the woods to supplement the family's meager wages and rations.

Hobbes's right of nature confers "the blameless liberty to do or refrain from doing whatever one can to preserve one's life" (Strauss and Cropsey, 401). As a desperate teenager facing starvation, Katniss is unawed by the rules promulgated by her sovereign. As Hobbes notes, it is just for a person to resist an executioner, and no one can be compelled to "do any act that is so shameful that it would result in his being so miserable and despised that he would grow weary of his own life" (Strauss and Cropsey, 408). The Capitol's strict control of the woods surrounding District 12 evokes the English enclosure movement of the sixteenth century where such wooded spaces were "privileged" tracts of land reserved for use by the nobility (Scott, 278). Teeming with forbidden fruit and game reserved for the pleasure of the ruling class, the forests of England remained off limits to the common people. In a similar fashion, the thick forest beyond the electrified fence are filled with animals, fish, fruits, and fresh greens beyond reach of those who stay within the confines of the district. For Katniss, the risks of punishment pale in the face of the threat of starvation. As she observes, "the woods became our savior, and each day I went a little bit further into its arms. I was slow going at first, but I was determined to feed us. I stole eggs from nests, caught fish in nets, sometimes managed to shoot a squirrel or rabbit for stew, and gathered the various plants beneath my feet" (Hunger Games, 51). By breaking the law, her actions embodied the 'true liberty of subjects', for in Hobbes's view, "the right to self-preservation remains inviolable" (Strauss and Cropsey, 408).

The consequences of violating the Capital's rules are swift and severe. In *Catching Fire*, Katniss's childhood friend and hunting companion, Gale Hawthorn, is caught red-handed after violating the law against poaching. "Gale's wrists are bound to a wooden post. The wild turkey he shot earlier hangs above him, the nail driven through its neck. His jacket's been cast aside on the ground, his shirt torn away. He slumps unconscious on his knees, held up only by the ropes at his wrists. What used to be his back is a raw, bloody slab of meat" (Catching Fire, 104-5). After allowing Gale to be removed from the square, the Head Peacekeeper Romulus Thread who presided over his flogging warned "the next time he poaches off the Capitol's land, I'll assemble that firing squad personally" (Catching Fire, 108).

In addition to finding food, Katniss finds freedom in the forest. The woods are a place of refuge where she can roam freely, finding scenic overlooks and cool lakes to gain a needed respite from the hardscrabble daily life in the Seam. In this verdant forest, Katniss embodies Hobbes's notion of what it is to be free. Liberty, or freedom, reflects an individual's ability to act upon "those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to" (Hobbes, 159). Entering the woods, Katniss left behind the dusty roads covered with coal dust for cool, crisp streams and fragrant, flower-filled meadows. As Katniss recalls, "In the woods waits the only person with whom I can be myself. Gale. I can feel the muscles in my face relaxing, my pace quickening as I climb the hills to our place, a rock ledge overlooking a valley. A thicket of berry bushes protects it from unwanted eyes. The sight of him there brings on a smile. Gale says I never smile except in the woods" (Hunger Games, 6). In *Catching Fire*, Katniss thought of "Gale, who is only really alive in the woods, with its fresh air and sunlight and clear flowing water (5). Although they only met together to hunt in the woods on Sundays, Katniss noted that "it's still the best day of the week." For Katniss "the woods have always been our place of safety, our place beyond the reach of the Capitol, where we're free to say what we feel, be who we are" (Catching Fire, 24). After the destruction of District 12

in *Mockingjay*, Katniss visited "our rock ledge overlooking the valley. Perhaps a little less green than usual, but the blackberry bushes hang heavy with fruit. Here began countless days of hunting and snaring, fishing and gathering, roaming together through the woods, unloading our thoughts while we filled our game bags. This was the doorway to both sustenance and sanity" (Mockingjay, 125).

Freedom, however, is fleeting in the forests surrounding District 12. Panem operates as a surveillance state. Although Katniss seeks the solitude of the forest, she is acutely aware that no matter where she goes, the Capitol can (and often does) track her every movement. In Suzanne Collins' world, the forest has eyes. Muttering to herself in the woods outside of District 12 on the morning of the Reaping, Katniss "glance[d] quickly over her shoulder. Even here, in the middle of nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you" (Hunger Games, 6). In *Catching Fire*, Katniss "continued on through the cold, misty woods, breaking a path that will be unfamiliar to Gale but simple for my feet to find. It leads to the lake. I no longer trust that our regular rendezvous spot offers privacy" (Catching Fire, 90). After Gale's violent punishment for poaching, Katniss decided "once I'm under the chain link, I cover my tracks until the trees conceal them for me" (Catching Fire, 133).

In the dystopian setting of Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen grows up in the woods. The woods provide shelter, resources, and a supportive environment where she learns to climb, forage, hide, hunt, and track. These skills and the strength of character she develops in the forest transform her from a downtrodden teenager to a huntress that is a force to be reckoned with in the televised spectacle of the Games. Despite her lack of formal training and conditioning, "again and again," Manohla Darghis observes, "Katniss rescues herself with resourcefulness, guts, and true aim" (Darghis). In her quest to provide for her family and friends, Katniss is an unwitting participant in an informal, yet intensive training program that prepares her for the challenges she will face in the arena. Her archery skills – honed with her father and later used to hunt for game – not only

impressed the judges, but also enabled her to feed herself after the career tributes seized the rations from the cornucopia on the first day of the Games.

Darghis (2012) writes that "unlike those American Adams who have long embodied the national character with their reserves of hope, innocence, and optimism, Katniss springs from someplace else, a place in which an American Eve, battered, bruised and deeply knowing, scrambles through a garden not of her making on her way to a new world." Similarly, Lana Whited describes (327) Katniss as "a heroine firmly drawn in the tradition of Eustace Conway: skilled in archery, brave and self-sufficient. Katniss is a new-age Robin Hood." Katniss adapts the hunting skills she learned from her father in the woods surrounding District 12 to the necessary work of killing her fellow tributes.

The woods are a crucible for Katniss Everdeen. Suzanne Collins' use of the woods as a proving ground harkens back to a long tradition in European literature. For young protagonists, "the forest is the place of trial in fairy stories, both dangerous and exciting. Coming to terms with the forest, surviving its terrors, utilizing its gifts, and gaining its help is the way to 'happy ever after'" (Maitland, 8). A majority of Grimm's fairy tales, for example, are located in the forest. "Forests are places where a person can get lost and can also hide – losing and hiding, of things and people, are central to European fairy stories" (Maitland, 7). In a similar vein, the forested environment in the Hunger Games trilogy is where Katniss Everdeen discovers the true meaning, and limits, of freedom. As a teen struggling with food insecurity, she takes charge of her own destiny. As Lara Whited (327) observes, "it is difficult to imagine her allowing (or needing) anyone to provide for her. In the arena, she takes care of District 12 male tribute Peeta, not the other way around." Although the odds are not in her favor, in the forest Katniss finds her freedom. Both in District 12 and in the violent setting of the arena, she exercises what Isaiah Berlin terms *positive liberty*. For Berlin, "the 'positive' sense of the word 'liberty' derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the

instrument of my own, not other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object… a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role." In choosing to enter the forest to fish, gather greens, and hunt for fowl, she controls her fate. Without the bounty of the forest, her family would starve. In the woods, Katniss also learns self-reliance and control. Although the Capitol forces her to enter the arena, she retains control over her own life – and that of her fellow tribute from District 12, Peeta Mellark. At the conclusion of the 74th Hunger Games, Katniss faces a painful choice – alone with Peeta in the arena, she engages in a final act of defiance by challenging the authority of the sovereign. Pulling a handful of poisonous nightlock berries from her pouch, she forges a suicide pact to deny the Capitol a single victor. Although she endures the "artificial chains" of the arena, Katniss ultimately exercises what Hobbes describes as her "true liberty." She defies the command of the Gamemakers to end the Games by killing her fellow tribute. Her action embodies Hobbes's notion of freedom, for this abhorrent act is one of the things, which though commanded by the sovereign, [s]he may nevertheless, without injustice, refuse to do" (162).

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