

Jennifer Gilmore

Graduate Conference Presentation

20 April 2013

Submission to Gender Performance in *The Hunger Games*

In the *Hunger Games* trilogy, Suzanne Collins initially presents the main character, Katniss Everdeen, as a heroine who refuses to conform to traditional expectations of gender. Her survival in District 12 does not depend on her presentation of herself as a female, it depends on her ability to take on a role that allows her to feed herself and her family. She usurps traditionally male role by hunting and entering the illegal market space to sell her game. As she enters into the world of the Capitol however, she becomes immersed into a culture where she is expected to “perform” gender if she is to survive (literally) once she enters the arena. To garner support and obtain sponsors, the Capitol audience expects to see her as an object of male attraction. She is forced into dresses and makeup, uncomfortable with this part of an expected gender role she has had no experience with. She becomes angry with Peeta for making her into an object of affection, thinking it makes her seem weak. She is berated by Effie Trinket for being unable to act like a “proper” woman. The result of all of this is that she begins to feel like a failure at her inability to perform a feminine role.

This idea of gender performance is put forth by Judith Butler in her novel *Gender Trouble*. Butler states, “it would be wrong to think that the discussion of ‘identity’ ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that ‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (22). The agency in the case of Katniss, is how her survival is based on the

perception of her as a woman. At home, she can exist outside of socially constructed ideas about womanhood, but when she leaves for the Capitol, she enters an area where the rules are not the same. She must craft an identity recognizable and acceptable to the people in the Capitol. Thus, as Butler states, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 33). If a person is thought to fit a gender identity, it is only because those are the results of the performance the gender identity demands. What the audience sees as an identity is in fact just a construction of what the person believes they want to see. If the results of such a performance are not the identity, but the construction of identity, what does this mean for characters like Katniss, as they try to navigate the issue of keeping a definition of self, separate from the expected performance that must be maintained in order to gain acceptance from the society for whom the identity is constructed?

The problem for Katniss, and what the audience notices at the onset of the trilogy, is that there is an expectation of what fits into the category of feminine. According to Butler, “the insistence upon the coherence and unity of the category of women has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of ‘women’ are constructed” (*Gender Trouble* 20). This requires a woman to be able to quickly and effectively read the cultural signs for what is expected of them in order to fit in. Any action otherwise posits the poor interpreter of signs as an “Other,” one who is not accepted by society. This is evidence of the problematic nature of an expected “coherence” for women. In fact, the confusion caused by the ever malleable rules can result in a “discontinuous” woman, one who cannot effectively keep up her performance, and thus the fact that gender is a performance

becomes transparent. Katniss does not initially fit into a previously defined category of feminine, and this is what draws the readers' attention to her difficulties as the novels progress.

The Hunger Games: There is a Role to Play

From the very beginning of the novel, Katniss is presented as someone who exists outside of prescribed gender roles. Even her mode of dress indicates that she is resisting a scripted female code: "I swing my legs off the bed and slide into my hunting boots. Supple leather that has molded to my feet. I pull on trousers, a shirt, tuck my long dark braid up into a cap, and grab my forage bag" (Collins 4). Most readers are liable to note that this style of dress tends to be associated with the male world, particularly because Collins appears to be making a point of indicating this when she points out that the garb formerly belonged to Katniss' father and Katniss has to hide her long hair in a cap for the outfit to be complete. According to Sarah Leigh Foster, "In fashion, masculine garb, as colorful and ornamented as women's wear during the eighteenth century, transformed into sober and modest designs that emphasized the judicious disposition of men and the frivolous inclinations of women" (12). Katniss' choice of dress, appropriate for the traditionally masculine deemed task she will be undertaking, sets her up as a character that will be resisting classification into a traditionally female gender role. It also indicates the "judicious disposition" we are expected to associate with Katniss from now on. This is what female readers admire about Katniss. Angela Hubler states, "Identification with female characters that the girls describe as 'outspoken,' 'strong,' 'independent,' 'caring,' and 'different' clearly aided them in their rejection of a stereotype of women as quiet, passive, dependent, compliant, and timid" (90). Katniss is contradictory to the frivolous urban woman the reader will encounter in Effie Trinket, and the comparison of their clothing is a discernible way to envision such a direct opposition.

INSERT EFFIE ANALYSIS HERE

Katniss quickly leans towards becoming compliant with her own gendered performance during the introduction of the tributes at the opening ceremony. As she and Peeta are presented in their chariot, Katniss reflects, “the pounding music, the cheers, the admiration work their way into my blood, and I can’t suppress my excitement. Cinna has given me a great advantage. No one will forget me. Not my look, not my name. Katniss. The girl who was on fire” (Collins 70). It is at this point that Katniss has begun to fit herself into the gendered mold that is expected of her while in the Capitol. Foster states,

to analyze gender as choreography is to acknowledge as systems of representation the deeply embedded, slowly changing rules that guide our actions and that make those actions meaningful. Not biologically fixed but rather historically specific, these rules are redolent with social, political, economic, and aesthetic values” (29)

It is impossible and unacceptable for Katniss to remain as she is, outside of female gender performance in the Capitol. Her self-preservation and constant struggle for survival has indicated to her that if she is to endure, she must role play.

Not only does Katniss role play, she submits to and enjoys the expected response for her behavior. Katniss is intoxicated by the attention she is getting. She thinks, “someone throws me a red rose. I catch it, give it a delicate sniff, and blow a kiss back in the general direction of the giver. A hundred hands reach up to catch my kiss, as if it were a real and tangible thing” (Collins 71). She desires the desiring gaze of others, who in turn want her to be desirable, as per her gender role requires. Butler explains this reaction as: “If what ‘I’ want is only produced in relation to what is wanted from me, then the idea of ‘my own’ desire turns out to be something of a misnomer. I am, in my desire, negotiating what has been wanted of me” (“Performativity” xi).

Unknowingly, she has begun to participate in gender performance. She reacts to an audience who indicate that she “fits in.”

It is not until the next day that Katniss begins to doubt the legitimacy of her performance, as it is an unfamiliar part for her to be playing. Any success she had felt while under the gaze of her admirers dissipates under the scrutiny of competitors who are aware she is putting on a performance. Katniss thinks,

The slight advantage I held coming into the Training Center, my fiery entrance last night, seems to vanish in the presence of my competition. The other tributes were jealous of us, but not because we were amazing, because our stylists were.

Now I see nothing but contempt in the glance of the Career Tributes. (Collins 95)

Katniss is aware that her life depends on her performance, and that the other tributes are aware of that as well. Butler states, “Performativity has everything to do with ‘who’ can become produced as a recognizable subject, a subject who is living, whose life is worth sheltering, and whose life, when lost, would be worthy of mourning” (“Performativity” xii). In this sense, Katniss’ performance is coauthored by those who would have her behave within a typified gender role.

Part of the problem Katniss has in keeping up an authentic gender performance is the incongruity between her mind’s need to perform for survival and her body’s unfamiliarity with the costume and demeanor that goes along with the role. Katniss’ attempt to project femininity, which in this case is inextricably tied to likeability, is constantly thwarted by the physical foreignness of the role. Katniss needs excessive wardrobe and appearance training time, a strange echo of the time she has spent with weapons and survival skills in the Training Center.

Even good-natured Effie gets frustrated with Katniss' inability to perform this part of the role effectively. Katniss says

The dress poses another problem. It keeps tangling around my shoes so, of course, I hitch it up, and then Effie swoops down on me like a hawk, smacking my hands and yelling, 'Not above the ankle!' When I finally conquer walking, there's still sitting, posture-apparently I have a tendency to duck my head-eye contact, hand gestures, and smiling. (Collins 115).

The frustration Katniss feels at her own inadequacy comes through in this moment, as does her contempt with what is desired of her. Gone by now is the girl who so happily caught roses and blew kisses.

Without the desiring gaze of the audience, the performance feels pointless to Katniss once more. She needs to feel judged in order to feel the importance of her act; "to do gender is to act with the possibility that one will be judged according to normative standards applied to one's sex category-to be accountable to that sex category" (Deutsch 109). This section of the text indicates that although Katniss has been under the spell of the gender performance, she does not yet inhabit it. According to Foster, "The separation between actor and performance implied by this approach to the analysis of gender supports a theorization of personhood as fluid and protean cultural construction, capable not only of change but also of inhabiting, perhaps even representing, multiple, distinctive cultural arenas" (2). Katniss is disconcerted by what she sees as conflicting personhoods. She needs to fit into the expected gender role to gain sponsors to survive in the arena, but she also needs to keep her socially constructed role, the one that has enabled her to survive thus far. This results in failed performance: "By the end of the session, I

am no one at all. Haymitch started drinking somewhere around witty, and a nasty edge has crept into his voice. ‘I give up, sweetheart. Just answer the questions and try not to let the audience see how openly you despise them.’” (Collins 118).

At the foundation of Katniss’ personality is a desire to succeed; to never fail and never give up. This is what causes her to begin to transition from just playing a role to actively participating in gender constructed role. She begins this shift when she begins to truly realize the attention she gets from someone who sees her in a feminized role that she herself has not created. Katniss thinks, “I hear Peeta’s voice in my head. *She has no idea. The effect she can have.* Obviously meant to demean me. Right? But a tiny part of me wonders if this was a compliment. That he meant I was appealing in some way” (Collins 93). Once Katniss begins to believe that the performance gives her power, she begins to do it without prompting from others. With only the gaze of Cinna and his three assistants, people whom previously she felt no need to impress, she sees herself in the role that has captured the want of the audience: “I am not pretty. I am not beautiful. I am as radiant as the sun. For a while, we all just stare at me. ‘Oh, Cinna,’ I finally whisper. ‘Thank you’” (Collins 121). Once Katniss falls victim to her own desiring gaze, it becomes more difficult to extract herself from the performance.

However, once in the arena, Katniss’ confusion over which role to play becomes prominent once again. When she is hurt in the arena she thinks to herself, “I can’t show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does” (Collins 179). The role necessary to existence that is familiar to her appears to take over her reasoning. Survival means what it always has in her life, and does not depend on walking in high heels or twirling in a pretty dress. Survival means pushing through pain, hunger, and weariness to get the basic tools for survival: food, water, shelter. In the arena, of all places,

it is appropriate to do what you need to in order to survive. However, this is still not all that the audience wishes from her. She is on more familiar ground in terms of what she has to do to survive, yet that survival still depends on audience participation. The audience owns her, even while she believes she can perform as she always has. Butler states, “To be a subject at all requires first complying with certain norms that govern recognition-that makes a person recognizable. And so, non-compliance calls into question the viability of one’s life, the ontological conditions of one’s persistence” (“Performativity” iv). If Katniss’ life is to remain viable to the audience, she must remain recognizable within the set of norms they have prescribed for her prior to her entering the arena. This depends on how well Katniss can interpret what is expected of her. This means compliance with the role that she inhabited before the arena. She must find a way to blend that role into her previously androgynous mode of survival. This requires that she not remain alone, and without her gender role. This requires the entrance of Peeta into her desire: for companionship which, for her, equals survival.

At the end of the first novel, Katniss is surprised to admit about herself, “I look, very simply, like a girl. A young one. Fourteen at the most. Innocent. Harmless. Yes, it is shocking that Cinna has pulled this off when you remember I’ve just won the Games” (Collins 355). She is shocked to realize how easy it is to step into the performance of gender she has become so familiar with, even while in the arena. It is also difficult for her to reconcile the two selves she perceives: the ruthless out-solely-for-survival self that won the Games, and the feminine, swooning, audience loving performer that she believes is only an act. However, both of these roles constitute her whole self. The change that even a relatively small amount of performance time has initiated ensures that Katniss will be unable to resume a role based on survival alone.

She has unknowingly begun to simultaneously inhabit both the role crafted out of necessity and the performance of gender she has been involved in.

Catching Fire and Mockingjay: Absorbing the Role into Everyday Performance

An issue Katniss faces in *Catching Fire* that affects her gendered role is the appropriation of her body for a scandal for the audience of the Quarter Quell. Wendell states, “one of the central concerns of feminism has been men’s control of women’s bodies, especially women’s sexuality and reproductive processes, through violence and coercion, law, economic relations, religion, custom, and institutionalized violence” (63). Just as Peeta dropped the bombshell about being in love with Katniss before the 75th annual Hunger Games, he does this again when he announces Katniss is (falsely) pregnant. Caesar enquires whether they’ve appreciated their time together (short though it was, and Peeta says, “Maybe I’d think that, too, Caesar,” says Peeta bitterly, ‘if it weren’t for the baby’” (Collins 256). By making the statement that Katniss is having a baby before the second Hunger Games, Peeta takes control of provider, and relegates Katniss to the role of soon-to-be-mother, by modern American perceptions the most vulnerable role of a female. A mother is typically viewed as one who cares for children and in turn needs to be cared for by her man. According to Bordo, “a dominant visual theme in teenage magazines involves women hiding in the shadows of men, seeking solace in their arms, willingly contracting the space they occupy” (746). If this is true for teenage magazines, why not for a trilogy of novels written for teenagers?

When Katniss rails against the expectations to stay in the safety of Peeta’s arms, she rails against American cultural expectations of heteronormative behavior. Peeta puts her back in her place by announcing she is carrying his child. This is merely a foreshadowing of what will come

as Katniss conforms completely to expectations for her. If Collins wanted to create a non-conformist character that defies expectations, why does Katniss give in so easily to what others want to see her as? It seems as though Collins actually ends up warning children of the dangers of being an “other,” and if this is that case, why would we not expect our heroine to eventually conform to avoid danger? Can a pop-culture audience love an “other,” or does Katniss have to give in to heteronormative gender expectations to exist in a popular trilogy? Could *The Hunger Games* trilogy have risen to such fame if Katniss remained an “other”?

At the beginning of *Mockingjay*, Katniss has been saved by the resistance and is expected to take on a new role. She is the symbol for the renegades and is recorded to encourage people to keep up hope. As she is done taping, she says

I’m beckoned over to the monitor. They play back the last few minutes of taping and I watch the woman on the screen. Her body seems larger in stature, more imposing than mine. Her face is smudged but sexy. Her brows black and drawn in an angle of defiance. Wisps of smoke – suggesting she has either just been extinguished or is about to burst into flames – rise from her clothes. I do not know who this person is” (Collins 71)

Unlike the first time she saw herself in her role as “the girl on fire,” at the presentation of the tributes, Katniss does not get sucked into the desire that others feel when they see her. She doesn’t crave the audience’s gaze, rather, she is disconcerted that they might like what they see. This is problematic for Katniss’ character, as it indicates that she might enjoy the role constructed for the purpose of a desiring gaze, and not so much the role constructed to inspire revolt. In the case of a socially constructed gender role, Bordo states, “the construction, of

course, is always homogenizing and normalizing, erasing racial, class, and other differences and insisting that all women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal” (748). As the Mockingjay, Katniss feels discomfort. She is unsure of her role again, now that there is no social construction behind it. The other characters do not seem to see a distinction between this new role and the old one, as Katniss notes, “Finnick, who’s been wandering around the set for a few hours, comes up behind me and says with a hint of his old humor, ‘They’ll either want to kill you, kiss you, or be you’” (Collins 71). Finnick voices the problem that Katniss has in identifying herself; she is unfamiliar with this new performed identity. When Katniss leaves the gaze of the Capitol for the gaze of the rebels, she needs to don a different mask, one she is unfamiliar with. The idea that she needs to reconstruct a gender performance unsettles her in the beginning of *Mockingjay*, and she seems unable to deal with these new expectations for a politically constructed gender identity.

Katniss recognizes that the makeup for her Mockingjay videos is useless and frivolous in the real world. When she visits the rebel hospital, people crowd around her, desiring to touch the symbol of freedom and hope for which their suffering is made viable. The hardest time Katniss has with her Mockingjay performance is how fake it feels to her. She does not see it as doing any real good, not like her visit to the hospital does. To her, precarity does not rest on the Mockingjay performance. In the initial Hunger Games, she played a role for survival. Now she is confused because the role does not determine her survival. It is not until she sees how important it is for others’ survival that she buys in.

However, the buy in only works until Prim gets killed. This is where Katniss loses any interest in maintaining an identity of her own, gendered or otherwise. Rather, she is content to play the role that Peeta wants her to play, just as she played the role the inhabitants of the Capitol

and President Snow wanted her to play, just as she played the role of the Mockingjay for the rebels. She gives up all parts of her character that make her resilient and strong and admirable, and does exactly what she vowed she never would do. She has children, for Peeta. She tells the reader,

It took five, ten, fifteen years for me to agree. But Peeta wanted them so badly. When I first felt her stirring inside of me, I was consumed with a terror that felt as old as life itself. Only the joy of holding her in my arms could tame it. Carrying him was a little easier, but not much (Collins 389).

Now Katniss inhabits the roles of wife and mother, by her own choice. Readers have seen her character go from resisting gender normative behavior to voluntarily participating in it. She even tells the reader that being a mother “tamed” her, as though the parts of her that resisted a scripted gender role were something to get control of, so that it could be molded to fit the wishes and desires of the tamer.

Katniss’ sexuality at the end of the trilogy is only defined insofar as it is the product of Peeta’s desire. She has been forced to perform gender for the gaze of others for so long that it is now impossible to separate her from the masculine patriarchy that demands it. If her gender performance has become an inextricable identity, belonging not to her but to the hegemonic status quo that desires it, so her sexuality is also tied to that power. Katniss has made a choice to take on her performance as self. She has played the act for so long, that it has now become second nature to her. Katniss is indistinguishable from the performance she has been participating in, and it appears at first glance to the reader that this is who Katniss really was all

along, although it is more likely that Katniss realized the performance was necessary to survive in every arena she was placed in.

Conclusion

Thus, at the end of The Hunger Games trilogy, what we have is a heroine who reinforces the idea that gender identity is a performance, albeit an important one in terms of precarity. What the audience, primarily pre-teen and teenage girls, learns from Katniss is how important it is to be considered gender intelligible. She is discontinuous throughout much of the novels, as she is constantly faced with new rules under which to construct a “personhood” as recognized by the social structure she is in. She is only able to ameliorate the pieces of her shattered identity by ridding herself of any resistance to heteronormative expectations and taking on a role expected of her by Peeta, and by the audience of the books. For are young girls not inundated on a daily basis with the many rules they need to follow to be a visibly defined feminine gender? The character of Katniss reinforces what pop culture foists upon women every day; it is dangerous to be an “Other.” In order to survive, Collins teaches us, one must conform to cultural, primarily defined as heteronormative, gender identities.