

learns that she'll have to appear to be other than what she really is if she is going to survive, because what matters to those who come for the show isn't *being*, but *seeming*.

Unfortunately, the same is true for Katniss outside the arena, where the fate of her family, her friends, and even the revolution to end seventy-five years of cruel and oppressive rule by the Capitol will rest on her ability to turn in a series of convincing, if not entirely genuine, performances. Imagine that the regime that brought *your* family to the brink of starvation is now on the verge of collapse, and to tip the balance there's just one thing you must do—and do well: pretend to be something you're not. Would you have what it takes?

That's the predicament Katniss Everdeen faces. However, she almost inevitably fails when she must be a fake, even when the stakes are extremely high. The clearest example is her laughably incompetent attempt to be the inspiring face of the revolution during the first of her many "propos," which prompts Haymitch Abernathy's despairing outburst, "And that, my friends, is how a revolution dies."³

The setting for this failure couldn't illustrate the problem more perfectly: it is literally a *set*. Complete with lights, camera, and action, the fake smoke and sound effects are about as far from real combat as Octavia's dyed and stenciled skin is from Beauty Base Zero, the stylists' cosmetic jargon for a body that Katniss describes as "flawless, but natural."⁴ There's something ironic about that expression, since in this setting Katniss's inability to behave in ways that *don't* come natural to her may be her fatal flaw.

Regardless of whether she's trying to "be one of those people [Haymitch] wants me to be" while rehearsing for her interview with Caesar Flickerman or playing at being the Mockingjay in the underground studio of District 13, we can almost always count on Katniss to get it wrong.⁵ Indeed, even when she seems to succeed at something she's faking, a closer look often shows us that she might not have been fooling anyone after



WHY DOES KATNISS FAIL AT EVERYTHING SHE FAKES?

Being versus Seeming to Be
in the Hunger Games Trilogy

Dereck Coatney

For one's own advantage, it was necessary to appear to be other than what one in fact was. To be and to seem to be became two altogether different things.

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau¹

What they want is for me to truly take on the role they designed for me.

—Katniss Everdeen, in *Mockingjay*²

For Katniss Everdeen, being able to get sponsors while in the arena can mean the difference between suffering through an agonizing fire-inflicted wound and receiving the soothing medicine that enables her to keep going. Consequently, she quickly

all. Consider her fake “secret mission” to assassinate President Snow, invented to cover up the fact that she was pursuing an entirely personal vendetta. When she later comes clean, her companions admit that they knew she was faking from the start. The “girl on fire” says it best when she concedes that she’s just “not good at lying.”⁶

That’s a remarkable admission for someone whose world is so riddled with false appearances and duplicity. Under the circumstances, it’s a wonder Katniss hasn’t become a master of deception. Nevertheless, if there’s anything we can count on as much as her deadly aim with a bow and arrow, it’s her inability to mask who she really is. So why *does* Katniss fail at everything she fakes?

“It’s All a Big Show”

To understand Katniss is to understand her *authenticity*, her prominent tendency to resist showmanship and the manipulation of perception in a world where “it’s all a big show” and “it’s all how you’re perceived.”⁷ But to gain that understanding, we’ll need some special weapons that we’ll never find in an arena’s Cornucopia: the powerful thoughts of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), a Swiss philosopher who wouldn’t find Katniss’s inability to dissimulate at all surprising. In fact, within Rousseau’s thought, we will find not only an explanation of what makes Katniss so authentic but also a way to understand that what at first appears to be a defect—her inability to be fake—may be one of her greatest virtues.

Before we rush into the fray too quickly, though, let’s take a step back and discuss the broader context of Rousseau’s teaching on the “natural” condition of human beings, which he presented in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, often more simply called his *Second Discourse*. As the title suggests, Rousseau’s aim was to reveal the origin of human inequality, but in order to do that, he set out to reveal the origin of human civilization.

Rousseau began by distinguishing “natural or physical” inequality from “moral or political” inequality, the latter being the artificial product of civilization.⁸ The first kind of inequality includes the innate abilities some people possess that set them apart from others, such as the rare gift that Katniss’s father had for singing so beautifully that even the birds stopped to listen to him. The disadvantages that he faced as a poor coal miner in District 12, however, exemplify the political inequality Rousseau wanted to investigate.

Political inequality includes all of the advantages that can be directly linked to one’s status in society, such as the substantial physical advantages and training that the Career tributes have as a result of the relatively privileged positions their districts enjoy and that make them such fearsome and effective warriors in the arena. Since the natural differences among human beings aren’t great enough to account for the vast political and social inequalities that we find in society, Rousseau concluded that inequality was more a product of civilization than of nature.

Rousseau speculated that human beings in their original, precivilized state lived essentially solitary lives, without property and without laws—similar to the life Katniss lives when she escapes with Gale Hawthorne into the woods surrounding District 12. “Man’s first sentiment was that of his existence,” Rousseau wrote, “his first care that of his preservation.”⁹ Our remote human ancestors had simple needs (food, rest, shelter, the occasional sexual tryst) that each individual could easily satisfy through his or her own natural abilities, without having to depend on society.

Most important, the overriding passion that moved human beings in their original, so-called primitive state was their natural “self-love,” or *amour de soi*, as Rousseau called it. This is our instinctive love of life and desire for self-preservation, which we share with the other animals and which seems to be particularly robust in Katniss. This sort of self-love has nothing to do with the vice of “vanity,” or *amour-propre*, as Rousseau called it,

which arose later in human history and is the ultimate source of human misery, including the evils of social inequality and political oppression. As Rousseau explained:

Vanity and love of oneself, two passions very different in their nature and their effects, must not be confused. Love of oneself is a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to watch over its own preservation, and which, directed in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. Vanity is only a relative sentiment, artificial and born in society, which inclines each individual to have a greater esteem for himself than for anyone else, inspires in men all the harm they do to one another, and is the true source of honor.

This being well understood, I say that in our primitive state, in the true state of nature, vanity does not exist.¹⁰

But it certainly exists in Panem, as we'll see.

If our instinct of self-preservation, "directed . . . by reason and modified by pity," produces virtue, then Katniss must be counted as one of the most virtuous characters in the Hunger Games trilogy. Indeed, nothing defines Katniss so well as her tenacious sense of self-preservation. But even though she can be ruthless in the arena, she can also be moved by pity, as she admits after witnessing Cato's gruesome mauling by the muttations at the end of the 74th Hunger Games. Killing her erstwhile enemy, she reports, "Pity, not vengeance, sends my arrow flying into his skull."¹¹

Katniss's powerful drive to preserve herself and her sense of pity are the two traits that Rousseau regarded as hallmarks of a "natural" person, one who hasn't been entirely tainted by civilization's fall into a state of corruption. That state of corruption can be identified by the presence of vanity, something that Katniss completely lacks.

"Are You Sick?"

Vanity differs from self-love, according to Rousseau, because vanity is not a natural and spontaneous concern for one's own well-being; rather, it's a preoccupation with how one compares with others. The vain person's sense of self-worth is based on his or her standing in relation to another. Rousseau believed that vanity was a product of human civilization, since it serves no purpose for anyone living a more rustic existence.

When, for instance, Katniss and Gale are out hunting in the woods, separated from society, their success depends on the exercise of real skills: intelligence, courage, perseverance, and other virtues. Vanity won't bring down a deer, snare a rabbit, take out a wild turkey, or catch a fish. But society fosters vanity and, since your status depends largely on other people's opinions, it rewards those who are adept at cultivating the appearance (if not the reality) of being smart, beautiful, or talented.

Rousseau explained that in society, "for one's own advantage, it was necessary to appear to be other than what one in fact was. To be and to seem to be became two altogether different things; and from this distinction came conspicuous ostentation, deceptive cunning and all the vices that come from them."¹² The competition for status unleashed by vanity is, according to Rousseau, the ultimate source of inequality.

Finding someone who *isn't* vain in the Capitol is about as hard as finding fresh water in the Quarter Quell. Most of the Capitol's citizens are so caught up in how they want to be seen that they even undergo extreme body modification in their fierce competition to gain one another's attention. The chasm that separates the *self-love* of people in the districts, for whom self-preservation is a paramount concern, from the *vanity* of those who reside in the Capitol is starkly illustrated when Gale's sister Posy first encounters the green-skinned Octavia. "You're green," she says. "Are you sick?" Trying to shield Octavia from

embarrassment, Katniss remarks, "It's a fashion thing, Posy. Like wearing lipstick."¹³ Having known only natural self-love and pity until her recent emigration to District 13, Posy is understandably concerned that Octavia's skin color might be a sign of illness. Octavia, having grown up amid the Capitol's extravagance, exhibits all of the markings of Rousseau's state of corruption. Her skin is green so that it can be admired by others. She needs their esteem. And who knows? From Rousseau's perspective, maybe Posy is right. Maybe Octavia *is* sick.

The contrast between natural self-love and vanity is as consistent a theme in the Hunger Games trilogy as Haymitch's magnetic attraction to booze. It even stands out in the juxtaposition of the words *hunger*, signifying the natural urge most closely allied to our instinct of self-preservation, and *games*, signifying what social life becomes when vanity holds sway. It is deeply manifested in the differences among the citizens of the Capitol, such as Enobaria, who is said to have "no shortage of admirers" on account of her golden fangs, and citizens from the districts like Katniss, who admits that she loves "getting to be by myself at last" when she is finally relieved of her requirement to play out the "star-crossed lovers" role with Peeta Mellark.¹⁴

Katniss's very first words spoken out loud in *The Hunger Games* highlight the focus on self-preservation that is the foremost concern of everyone in her home district: "District Twelve. Where you can starve to death in safety."¹⁵ The prospect of starving in safety takes us to the heart of Rousseau's teaching that civilization alienates us from what's natural and real: while the arenas feature desolate and unforgiving landscapes surrounding rich Cornucopias, districts like 12 are just the opposite, desolate and unforgiving cities fenced off from the bountiful woods that surround them.

"As Long as You Can Find Yourself"

Katniss is struck between both worlds. Her inability to be a fake can be explained by the distinction Rousseau made between

our natural state and the corruptions of society. By nature we're moved by a concern for our vital well-being, which, guided by reason and joined to compassion for others, is the source of our virtue. Society, however, encourages us to derive our sense of worth from how others view us, which fosters a preoccupation with showmanship, gives free rein to vanity, and produces artificiality and vice.

Katniss has been shaped by an environment that puts a premium on the unaffected virtues that are rooted in her nature, yet she's forced to live in a fully corrupt society. No wonder she can't pretend to be what she's not: she's a natural human being. Nature rewards *being* good (virtuous, strong, resourceful, and courageous), just as surely as society bestows its greatest rewards on those who are most successful at only *seeming* good. To understand Katniss's failures is to understand her greatest virtues.

Perhaps nothing represents Katniss's natural virtue better than her name. Her father named her after an aquatic plant with an edible root, joking, "As long as you can find yourself, you'll never starve."¹⁶ As long as Katniss can find katniss, she can survive. But she'll never find herself in the pretentious urban environment of the Capitol or even in the double-dealing world of District 13, for she belongs to nature like her namesake, the katniss plant. She can find herself only as long as she remains true to herself. Some of the best advice she ever receives comes from Cinna, who, despite his passion for creating arresting spectacles, understands as well as anyone who Katniss really is beneath all the razzle-dazzle in which he adorns her: "Why don't you just be yourself?"¹⁷

But is that really such good advice? After all, Katniss's inability to fake becomes an increasingly costly liability for her. Her life in Panem would go far more smoothly if she could only manage to deliver a good deception now and then. For example, had she been able to convince President Snow that she wasn't going to further undermine his regime, she might have managed a return to normal life—or even better than normal, due to

the lavish rewards bestowed on all of the victors. The Capitol's iron grip on the districts would have remained as tight as ever, but much suffering would have been prevented and many lives would have been saved. Katniss would have been spared the trauma of watching Peeta suffer so terribly, and Prim Everdeen would not have come to such a tragic end.

All of this could have been avoided had Katniss been able to follow her strict orders from President Snow to conduct herself in a politic fashion on the Victory Tour. Instead, her authenticity got the best of her, rendering her unable to contain her genuine outpouring of gratitude for the families of Thresh and Rue, with all of the cataclysmic consequences that followed. Is the price for Katniss's inability to fake too high?

If the cost is too high, she has two choices: she could learn the arts of dissimulation and disguise in order to survive in a world filled with corruption, or she could run off to the woods to live an authentic existence similar to the one that Rousseau believed our primitive ancestors enjoyed. Are either of those solutions viable? As President Snow might put it, "If only it were that simple."¹⁸

Consider Haymitch. Like Katniss, he exhibits many of the hallmarks of Rousseau's authenticity, especially a complete lack of vanity that leaves him scornfully indifferent to other people's opinions. But unlike Katniss, he knows all about playing games, and he can, when necessary, play them well. "Subterfuges and deceptions," reflects Katniss upon learning of Haymitch's role in the plan to break the tributes out of the arena and transport them to District 13. "And if he could do that, behind his mask of sarcasm and drunkenness, so convincingly and for so long, what else has he lied about?"¹⁹ Could Haymitch's sarcasm and drunkenness simply be a *mask* that allows a man like him, who's not in the least bit beguiled by the falsehoods and vanity of the civilization in which he's forced to live, to survive in their midst?

What might initially seem like a form of success—participating in a corrupt world while avoiding the steep price

Katniss pays for her authenticity—may actually hide a more terrible cost, which Haymitch has been making payments on for a very long time. As tough and resilient as Haymitch might seem on the outside, the experiences in Panem that made him who he is have utterly destroyed him. Being the sole victor of the last Quarter Quell—made all the more terrible by the Gamemakers' doubling of the number of tributes—and then having to face the next twenty-five years as the sole mentor from District 12, only to watch every child he's been responsible for die, has driven him to the bottle.

It's possible that Haymitch's ability to fake was acquired as a result of the extreme measures he's taken to hide from himself and drown the memories of what he's had to do. Perhaps his ability to deceive is less an advantage than part of the high price a man like him must pay to maintain his sanity. Unlike Katniss, who must find herself to survive, Haymitch may need to do just the opposite: escape from himself.

"I'm Not Going Anywhere"

What if Katniss were to abandon civilization and flee into the woods—perhaps with Gale and their families and her closest friends—in order to escape the falsity that society forces on her? When presented with the opportunity to leave her nightmarish society once and for all, Katniss ultimately decides to stay.

Rousseau wouldn't be surprised. Indeed, as much as he decried the corrupt and unnatural state into which human beings have fallen in society, he doubted that a complete return to nature is even possible, let alone desirable. At the very least, he didn't see reverting to the primitive subsistence existence of our ancestors as a real possibility for modern men and women, "whose passions have forever destroyed their original simplicity."²⁰

In a way, this reflects the reason Katniss decides to stay. Her passions—and, in particular, her rising anger at the brutal

treatment of those she loves at the hands of the Capitol and its agents—have forever destroyed the possibility of returning to the “original simplicity” of a life in which her minimal needs and hunting ability allowed her to be as self-sufficient and independent of society as was possible for any resident of the Seam. She’ll never again be that simple, but she’s still natural and authentic enough to see just how corrupt life in Capitol-governed Panem really is.

Roger Masters, a commentator on Rousseau, wrote, “The state of nature provides a standard for judging civil society, but not a practical and generally applicable prescription for reform.”²¹ Or, as Katniss puts it, “I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to stay right here and cause all kinds of trouble.”²²

Katniss’s burning need to see justice done highlights why, even if we *could* “return” to a primitive state, that might not be the most desirable route to take—at least not if we value virtues like a sense of justice, loyalty to one’s comrades, and concern for future generations. We watch these virtues blossom in Katniss like the first dandelion of spring, which along with Peeta and his burned loaf of bread gave her hope in her darkest hour. Virtues like these can be cultivated only in society, according to Rousseau, even though in most other respects society delivers “more real calamities than apparent advantages.”²³

Just as self-love and pity are given aspects of Katniss’s nature, so too are they present in the state of nature. But moral virtue is absent until we acquire the power to reflect on our actions and resist errant impulses, capacities that Rousseau believed were gained only as a result of civilization. In our natural, precivilized state, human beings “had neither vices nor virtues,” only a spontaneous, childlike goodness or innocence.²⁴ Virtue, on the other hand, is a cultivated temperament—something Rousseau called “good with merit,” since it depends on our own efforts—that allows one to live as a free adult in society, cherishing what’s real and disdaining hollow artifice,

jealously guarding both one’s own liberty and the liberty of others.

In his *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts* (also known as his *First Discourse*), Rousseau described some of the chief aspects of modern society that he believed worked against the cultivation of genuine virtue. He explained that

while government and laws provide for the safety and well-being of assembled men, the sciences, letters, and arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened, stifle in them the sense of that original liberty for which they seem to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized peoples.²⁵

If Rousseau spoke disdainfully of “the sciences, letters, and arts” in this passage, it’s not because he thought that they’re inherently bad products of civilization. Indeed, he was a botanist, a novelist, and a composer in addition to being a philosopher. His scorn was directed at the refined and polite chattering about the latest intellectual and artistic fads that filled the air of Europe’s high-class salons, which he regarded as nothing more than an exercise in vanity and idle amusement because their primary aim was simply to *appear* cultured rather than to *be* virtuous.

There’s a big difference, of course, between the games that were played in eighteenth-century European salons and the ones we observe in the candy-colored Capitol of Panem. After all, the Hunger Games aren’t exactly “garlands of flowers.” But Rousseau would undoubtedly insist that they serve the same purpose as the amusements that posh Europeans pursued in their salons: papering over their enslavement with a festive spectacle. They are “ornaments” designed to “hide some deformity,” particularly the deformity of souls misshaped by vanity and vice.²⁶

Rousseau believed that less refined societies, like the Seam where Katniss grew up, were more conducive to both moral and physical health, despite their hardship and poverty. "It is in the rustic clothes of a farmer and not beneath the gilt of a courtier that strength and vigor of the body will be found," he noted.²⁷ This brings to mind the advantages Katniss enjoys in the arena due to her hardy outdoor lifestyle. Most important, the people outside the big cities were far more genuine. Lacking the refined manners of the "cultured" urbanite, they

found their security in the ease of seeing through each other, and that advantage, which we no longer appreciate, spared them many vices. Today, when subtler researches and a more refined taste have reduced the art of pleasing to set rules, a base and deceptive uniformity prevails in our customs. . . . One no longer dares to appear as he is.²⁸

The vices that "hide constantly under that uniform and false veil of politeness" include "suspicions, offenses, fears, coldness, reserve, hate, [and] betrayal."²⁹ Can you say "Effie Trinket"? She maintains her manners perfectly and at all times, despite her complicity in the slaughter of children. Whereas Katniss's virtue makes it hard for her to fake, what Effie *seems to be* bears almost no relation to what she *really is*.

Rousseau wrote a philosophical novel titled *Emile*, depicting the education of a young man whose virtues would shield him from the morally corrosive effects of living in a corrupt society. See how the narrator, who is also Emile's tutor, described his aim:

Although I want to form the man of nature, the object is not, for all that, to make him a savage and to relegate him to the depths of the woods. It suffices that, enclosed in a social whirlpool, he not let himself get carried away by either the passions or the opinions

of men, that he see with his eyes, that he feel with his heart, that no authority govern him beyond that of his own reason.³⁰

Could there be a better description of Katniss? Admittedly, she pays a high price for being authentic in an inauthentic world, but as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) once wrote, "One is best punished for one's virtues."³¹ As punishing as a corrupt world like Panem may be to someone as virtuous as Katniss, the alternative is much worse: to abandon her virtue and become something she's not, perhaps someone like Effie. *That's* a punishment almost too horrible to contemplate. Doomed to be punished either way, isn't it better for Katniss to retain her virtue and, as Rousseau would say, dare to appear as she is?³²

NOTES

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Roger D. Masters, trans. Roger D. Masters and Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), 155.
2. Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010), 10.
3. *Ibid.*, 72.
4. *Ibid.*, 60.
5. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008), 121.
6. *Ibid.*, 117.
7. *Ibid.*, 135.
8. Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, 101.
9. *Ibid.*, 142.
10. *Ibid.*, 221–222.
11. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 341.
12. Rousseau, *The First and Second Discourses*, 155–156.
13. Collins, *Mockingjay*, 63.
14. Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009), 212, 225.
15. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 52. It is interesting to note that the katniss plant is a member of the genus *Sagittaria*, which means "of an arrow."
17. *Ibid.*, 121.