

“I blushed at my own boldness”: Representation of the female protagonist in a romantic context in a young adult fantasy novel *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

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Leeni Ahonen

University of Jyväskylä

Department of Language and Communication Studies

English

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract Nuorten aikuisten kirjallisuus, usein young adult -kirjallisuus, on suosittua myös aikuisten parissa, mutta ennen kaikkea sen tulisi tarjota nuorille mahdollisuuksia samaistua. Nuortenkirjojen romanssit kertovat nuorille rakkaudesta ja seksistä sen, mitä vanhemmat ja oppikirjat eivät. Jos sukupuolen ja seksuaalisuuden kuvaukset ovat yksipuolisia tai ongelmallisia, ne voivat vaikuttaa nuoriin lukijoihinsa negatiivisesti. Koska naiset lukevat enemmän etenkin romanttista kirjallisuutta, nuortenkirjojen vajavaisesta naiskuvasta ja ongelmallisista romansseista kärsivät tytöt.</p> <p>Tutkimus keskittyy selvittämään, miten romanttisen nuorille suunnatun fantasiakirjan <i>A Court of Thorns and Roses</i> naispuolista päähenkilöä representoidaan. Tutkimuksessa tutkitaan naispäähenkilön hahmoa ja narratiiveja, sekä kirjan keskeistä heteroromanttista suhdetta. Suhteen analyysin lisäksi tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan verbien mentaalisten ja materiaalistien prosessityyppien sukupuolijakaumaa. Analyysimetodina on kriittinen diskurssianalyysi ja feministinen kriittinen diskurssianalyysi.</p> <p>Tutkimuksessa todettiin, että naispäähenkilön representaatioissa on vaikutteita aikuisten rakkausromaanien naishahmoista, mutta myös nykyaikaisten young adult -sankaritarien piirteitä. Päähenkilöiden välinen romanttinen suhde ei ole tasapuolinen. Tätä olisi voinut korjata naiskuvan laajentaminen, sillä se on teoksessa hyvin yksipuolinen.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Young adult literature, often abbreviated as YA, is a global phenomenon. Books mainly targeted at teens from ages 12 to 18 are widely read by both teens and adults, and with highly successful movie adaptations such as *The Hunger Games* and *The Fault in Our Stars* they are more popular than ever. However, even with a large part of its readers being adults, the books are primarily written for teenagers.

With a new wave of stories aimed at younger people, often most likely inspired and influenced by the third and fourth waves of feminism, female characters are in the spotlight. Even though technically not YA, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* introduced Hermione Granger as Harry's sidekick in the late 1990s. In 2008, Suzanne Collins released *The Hunger Games* with the tough and smart female lead Katniss Everdeen, who becomes quite a rebellious character throughout the series. Female characters are no longer required to play the role of a damsel in distress.

However, physically strong or intellectual female characters do not necessarily make a story feminist. Toughness is often paired with submissive and jealous character traits and other stereotypically feminine ideas of gender (Garcia 2013:77). When combined with love triangles or dominating or even abusive relationships, the results can be problematic.

Many popular young adult books contain romance, whereas pure romance novels are often seen as aimed at an older demographic. It needs to be noted that romance readers are increasingly younger, but in 2015, the average age was 42 (Nielsen 2015). Therefore, it is possible to assume that young adult novels offer the same kinds of experiences but more appropriate for younger readers and, of course, with more relatable characters.

*A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas is a young adult fantasy novel that deals heavily with romance. The basic premise is that Feyre, a human girl, is kidnapped by a male fairy Tamlin because Feyre accidentally killed another fairy that was disguised as a wolf. Feyre essentially follows the legacy of previous "strong female characters" yet manages to also play the role of a romance book heroine. The depiction and representation of a female protagonist in a book written by a woman primarily for women is at the center of this study.

## 2 YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE, GENDER AND ROMANCE

In this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical framework for the current study. First, I will briefly introduce my analytical framework, critical discourse analysis (CDA), briefly branching into feminist critical discourse analysis. Representation will also be defined and discussed. In the second section, I will discuss female characters in young adult literature, and some research related to the topic. Lastly, as the novel in the center of the analysis is heavily romantic fantasy, I will very briefly discuss heteroromantic romance in young adult literature, as well as some notions regarding romantic fiction in general.

### 2.1. Studying gender representation with Critical Discourse Analysis

Before going further into the study of girls and women in fictional settings, especially in the context of young adult literature, an explanation of the main analytical framework is needed. My analysis of the book utilizes methods of critical discourse analysis. Discourse analysis as a whole studies how language is used to create meanings and is focused on description of language use. Language is always social and affects the world as the world affects discourse (Pietikäinen 2009). What critical discourse analysis adds to it, is the notion of critique. It can be understood in different ways, but there tends to be a clear ideological purpose behind CDA. The approach proceeds further than merely describing language use, often attempting to make a change in the subject of critique. A special interest in power, dominance and hierarchy is characteristic to CDA. In its simplest form, CDA is used in the study of social inequality expressed or validated by instances of language use (Wodak 2001).

Rather than a complete theory, Critical Discourse Analysis is more like a common perspective, since it can be applied multiple ways and to various topics. There is no one complete toolset that can be applied to all material, but rather general ideas and questions relating to, for example, the context of the text and close inspection of the contents, especially what is not included. Various methods from other fields are used as well (Wodak 2001). One of the areas CDA is often used in the analysis of is representation, such as in the case of this study.

Representation, in its simplest form, means literal representation, presenting an image of a particular gender, race, or minority. Representations help renew, create and produce views of gender. As representations are created by an author of some kind, they cannot be an entirely

truthful image of reality (Paasonen 2012: 39-48). Contrary to popular opinion, representations create their own versions of reality, rather than simply reflecting the truth. These versions are born of different choices that always depend on the goals the creator intends to meet, and of course, the identity of the creator. In studying representation, then, the focus is on these choices: What is seen as important and what is not, what is said directly and what indirectly, what is included at all, and perhaps most importantly, what is left out (Fairclough 1995). All of these questions and their answers stem from ideology, and when it comes to ideology, the unsaid is often the default. In other words, both producers and consumers of these representations are often unaware of their implicit beliefs. Thus, CDA is used in attempt to see these unsaid parts of texts as well (Fairclough 1995).

As gender representation is the topic of my study, I have also taken some inspiration from the more specific field of feminist critical discourse analysis. Feminist CDA combines the basic idea of CDA and feminist scholarship into one approach. With the explicit feminist stance, a critical feminist view of genders and their roles and relations is employed, as well as the intent to change them (Lazar 2005:1-28). Although feminist CDA wants to affect the texts written, the researcher does not categorize representations as suitable or bad, but rather focuses on multiple ways of empowerment, at least when studying fiction (Tapionkaski 2007:5-6).

CDA tends to be used in analyzing pieces of news and other non-fictional items. While critical discourse analysis is commonly used in the study of gender representation, it is generally not the approach utilized in studying literature. As Tapionkaski (2007) points out, not everybody approves of studying literature with linguistic tools. However, she is also surprised that CDA is traditionally not interested in fiction, more specifically, children's literature, seeing as it should be a great tool in analysing what is essentially "an institutionally constrained form of socialization". While young adult literature is not aimed at readers quite so young, this remains a relevant argument for analysing all kinds of texts with CDA.

Tapionkaski's 2007 paper on using feminist CDA combined with narrative theory in studying children's fantasy fiction, an unusual combination, is a major influence for this thesis, although the subject in this case is young adult literature. She states that different researchers have seen gender representation in fantasy either as very conservative and stereotypical, or as a possibility for playing with the conventions. Tapionkaski (2007:3) also argues that although

fiction may be an unusual subject for CDA, there is no reason feminist CDA could not be used, as identities are constructed in this specialized instance of language use. Lastly, Tapionkaski reminds that one should not only pay attention to the language, but also think about the content.

## 2.2. Girls in young adult literature

Female characters in general tend to be quite extensively researched. Therefore, it is not surprising that studying gender in young adult literature is hardly a new area of study. One example of a middle grade or young adult book series often studied for its gender representation is the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. One of the main characters, Hermione, is a hardworking and good student, but perhaps her character is also a little too close to a questionable stereotype of an academic high achiever girl. Even though the girls of Hogwarts are magical and powerful in their own right, the books have been criticized for their very different depictions of boys and girls. Mayes-Elma (2006:89), for example, mentions that when girls break the rules, they are punished more severely than boys. Mayes-Elma also argues that the books carry a questionable message about its female characters; “girls should stand up for themselves, but only up to a point and certainly not at the expense of boys” (Mayes-Elma 2006: 118).

Books aimed at younger readers and their female characters have evolved quite a bit from the era of Harry Potter. Especially the trend of dystopian fiction brought readers female protagonists that had no choice but to be strong. A notable aspect of modern YA is pointed out by Garcia (2013:77) in his book focused on teaching literature that while the heroines of YA novels may be physically strong and even more intelligent than the male characters, they tend to be riddled with jealousy and other seemingly weak qualities. The problem is that while neither physical strength nor jealousy and other “feminine” personality traits are bad or should not be included, they are not currently utilized to reach their full potential, all the while ignoring the possibilities for generally positive “feminine” traits. As Tapionkaski (2007) states, multiple ways of empowerment are more ideal rather than producing one female stereotype repeatedly. This could mean, among many other examples, creating more caring and kind characters with physical strength.

These representations have the power to affect readers and their lives. Even if one does not read, movie adaptations carry the same representations, sometimes interpreted somewhat differently. Moreover, as no one has absolutely no connection to others at all, even someone who does not actively consume fiction can come into contact with someone else's worldview that has been affected by fiction.

It is commonly thought that fiction mirrors reality. Many readers in fact recognize the 'voices' of characters in their lives even in contexts where they are not reading (Alderson-Day 2017). It seems possible though, as not all cognitive processes are active, that there must be ways in which these characters influence readers even when one does not recognize it. People perceive the world through stories (Talbot 1995:5).

In the US, where *A Court of Thorns and Roses* was first published, women read more fiction than men (National Endowment for the Arts 2015). Then, it is not surprising that a large number of YA novels are primarily written and read by girls and women. In a study conducted on a book database and review site Goodreads, it appeared that readers prefer books written by an author of the same gender (Thelwall 2017). Thus, it is possible to come to the conclusion that male readers would not be as keen on reading romantic fiction by female authors as female readers. Then, as discussed previously, the effects of, for example, questionable gender representations would affect women more than men, because men are not consuming those stories in such numbers.

*A Court of Thorns and Roses* has not been extensively studied previously. For the sake of simplicity, I will from now on use the abbreviation *Acotar* when referring to the novel. Some previous studies of Sarah J. Maas' work include Hansson (2016), comparing *Acotar* to two other popular pieces of YA romantic fantasy literature, and Cuadrado (2016), drawing parallels between works by the medieval author Geoffrey Chaucer and those of Sarah J. Maas. Similarly to the previously mentioned notion of Garcia (2013), Hansson concludes her study stating that the works, *Acotar* included, may have female characters that are strong on the surface level, but often succumb to stereotypical gender roles and old conventions. One example is passivity in romantic contexts. However, the works cannot be deemed anti-feminist either. Hansson connects the prevalent stereotypes to the texts being a product of a society where some believe that gender equality is already accomplished. Finally, they



conclude that strong protagonists are needed in the field where sexist and post-feminist ideas still exist (Hansson 2016).

Cuadrado (2016) examines the themes of forbidden love, ‘insta-love’ (love at first sight), and love triangles in their comparison between Chaucer and Maas, as well as comparing the modern and medieval women in the aforementioned authors’ works. Cuadrado says that these elements are reused time and again even in the current era; in other words, the western world is still entertained by these stories and characters. Cuadrado concludes that while the stories may be entertaining, especially younger readers also need representations of healthier relationships.

Possibly the most important idea from these papers in the context of this study is that people have enjoyed perhaps problematic characters and relationships way before modern times, but that does not mean that one does not need “good” representations as well. One idea that often goes unnoticed is that the “traditionally feminine” is seen as somewhat worse than traditionally masculine, which is why I do not completely agree with Hansson. However, unbalanced romantic relationships and lack of independence are a major issue in *Acotar* and many other novels, and those issues I would like to address in this study.

### 2.3. Romance in YA and beyond

As problems in gender representation are often related to how one gender is portrayed in relation to another, romance is another terrain where critical analysis is needed. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is a heavily romantic fantasy story because it places a love story in a more central position than the rest of the plot. Therefore, it is useful to take a brief look into gender in young adult romantic fiction. This section focuses solely on heteroromantic love, as Maas’ fantasy world is completely heteronormative.

Neither the romance nor the plot in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* are in any way new. Supernatural love interests have been popular since *Twilight*, and there have been YA books about fairies both before and after *Acotar*, such as *The Darkest Part of the Forest* and *The Cruel Prince*, both by Holly Black. An element of royalty is also present, as Tamlin and other High Lords rule their courts. It has also been a popular part of YA for quite some time. In 2012, for example, *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer contains the trope of the female lead being secretly royalty, and *The Selection* by Kiera Cass includes a prince looking for a partner in a

dystopian version of the television show *The Bachelor*. As discussed earlier, the majority of young adult literature tends to be aimed at girls, or at least is read by more girls than boys. As girls are stereotypically thought to be interested in romance, it is not terribly surprising that many books aimed at them in fact include romance.

In a world where especially adolescent sexuality is still often an unsightly topic from which mostly possibilities of disease and pregnancy are covered, it is important to for a certain level of educational value to remain when covering sexuality in young adult novels. As well as being entertaining, young adult novels in fact act as important sources of depictions of love and romance for adolescent girls. They offer different models for relationships and also depict sexual activity in a way that offers information adolescents would not get elsewhere. Female protagonists of YA romance novels are, if not role models, then similar to a friend to the reader (Day 2013). All in all, I would argue that unbalanced power relations in these depictions could have the power to negatively affect young relationships. If books always depict over-possessive or even violent boyfriends, it could make some girls more accepting of such behavior. However, it is good to note that in romantic fiction overall, female characters have become less dependent (Talbot 1995:113).

According to Talbot (1995), romance novels offer what she calls participation in “ultimately successful heterosexuality”. By this she means that the heroines of these novels get their way while being feminine. In romantic fiction it is the norm to include a happy ending. Talbot mentions a reader-response study by Radway, in which romance readers thought that a happy ending must be included in order for the novel to depict a romance and not just a love story. The story needs to develop slowly as well (Talbot 1995:75-116). Although these expectations may have somewhat shifted since, Mills & Boon still describes the kind of male and female character types they want in new manuscripts for their Modern Romance imprint as “a hero who will command and seduce” and “a woman strong enough to tame him” (How to write modern romance (n.d.)). Talbot also notes that romance novels are often focalized through the female main character and feature her struggling to control herself.

### 3 THE PRESENT STUDY

#### 3.1 Research Aim and Questions

The aim of this study is to find out how women are represented in the young adult novel *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. In my study I will attempt to answer the following question:

- How is the female protagonist represented through the romance in a young adult novel *A Court of Thorns and Roses*?

As mentioned before, representations are never a completely accurate reflection of reality (Paasonen 2012: 39-48). Representations are formed by choices made by the author. The research question will be answered based on the female main character, especially in contrast to her male love interest in the story. I will briefly address other female characters in the novel in this section, as Feyre's positioning among other women and her attitude towards them is a significant part of Feyre's character. However, the limitations of this paper prevent me from looking into them further.

#### 3.2. Data

The data of my study consists of a relatively new but popular young adult fantasy novel *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas. The novel acts as the beginning to a trilogy of the same name. The book is also often labeled as "new adult", but as the genre of new adult is not established enough, and even the publisher's website has placed the novel in the "Teens" section, I have chosen to remain with the popular young adult categorization.

I chose this particular novel because of its popularity and because of the author's decision to create a seemingly tough female lead for a very romantic fantasy novel. As noted previously, even if female leads in romantic fiction have become less dependent, the genre is hardly known for its strong representation of women. It also needs to be noted that it is not possible to choose a perfect representative of the genre of young adult fantasy novels. As the novel has, for example, been on the New York Times Best Seller list, it is safe to call it quite popular and possibly influential (New York Times 2015). The data was collected by reading through the book once completely and then by focusing on smaller sections, especially analysing chapters 25 and 27. By analyzing smaller sections as well, I was able to study the

novel on a more linguistic level alongside broad, more general analysis. Chapters 25 and 27 were chosen because the chapters are in the point in the story where their relationship is particularly in focus.

*A Court of Thorns and Roses* is an American novel published by Bloomsbury USA Childrens and was released in 2015. The novel tells the story of a 19-year-old human girl Feyre in a world where fairies exist but live separated from humans. Feyre hunts to keep her starving family fed, and one day she mistakenly kills a fairy disguised as a wolf. Another fairy, Tamlin, forces her to come live with him in the kingdom of the fairies. Once there, Feyre begrudgingly begins to develop feelings for Tamlin despite her deep hatred of the fae.

As the scope of this thesis is small, I have chosen to focus on the main female protagonist, and her relationship with the male protagonist. However, it needs to be noted that the number and significance of female characters in the novel is noticeably small. Whether this is because of the romantic nature of the book or because of Feyre's later discussed distaste of women and femininity, it is quite interesting. In *Acotar*, the most notable female characters are Feyre, her sisters and the female villain Amarantha. All the other female characters are either mothers, servants, or otherwise quite insignificant, with one exception being Claire who is a girl brutally tortured to death by Amarantha. Amarantha is also the most powerful woman in the book, and arguably the only woman that does not have to explicitly depend on anyone, as Feyre's sisters need Feyre for her hunting skills, the servants need Tamlin as an employer, and Claire obviously is not able to save herself and is killed. Out of these women, Feyre is somewhat friendly with one servant, but with most girls she dislikes or is jealous of. The lack of friends highlights Feyre's dedication to and dependence on Tamlin.

### 3.3. Methods

I have chosen to analyze the novel using methods of Critical Discourse Analysis and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis. As CDA does not have one constant set of questions for analysis, but a general framework, there are a variety of items I could have possibly looked at, but the major aspects that need to be kept in mind are the context and the choices of what is included and what is not. In writing a story, the author has the choice of what to include, and what to leave out. For example, if a story only contains a certain type of person, minorities have been left out, or if female characters are systemically depicted somehow differently than male

characters, a choice has been made. Context means, for example, the tie and place of publishing, relationship with ideological movements, genre, audience, and so on (Tapionkaski 2007:9-10).

Tapionkaski's (2007) paper on applying feminist CDA to children's fantasy fiction is my major inspiration, alongside Talbot's (1995) book chapter introduced earlier. Tapionkaski states that feminist CDA should not be used in an attempt to point out good or bad gender representation but rather focus on "multiple possible gendered identities or gendered discourses in texts, and on the multiple possible ways of empowerment" (Tapionkaski 2007:5-6). In a more practical manner, I will briefly be looking at the context, as well as both the language and the content of the story. The focus will be on the characterization of Feyre and her romantic relationship. I will analyse two chapters and especially their usage of verb process types further.

A prominent feature of romance literature is intense focalization on the female lead and her struggle for self-control. These features can be seen when studying process types of verbs to which the characters or their parts are the subject. Women in romance literature tend to have more mental process types, and even their material processes are often used to refer to mental phenomena (Talbot 1995:82-84). These process types are derived from Halliday's systemic functional grammar. To summarize one idea from the theory, material process types change the flow of events somehow and mental processes involve senses or events happening inside one's mind that do not have an effect outside that mind (Halliday & Matthiessen 2013: 224-259). Therefore, material process types are important because they allow the characters to affect their surroundings. More simply put, a character with mostly mental process types will spend a lot of time seeing, feeling, and being an object of more active characters.

## 4 ANALYSIS

I will present my analysis in four main sections. Firstly, I will very briefly explain the context, as it needs to be remembered during further analysis. Secondly, I will discuss Feyre's characterization and her narrative arc. Thirdly, I will move on to Feyre and Tamlin's relationship. Lastly, I will discuss verb transitivity in two chapters, relating both with Feyre's characterization and her romantic relationship.

### 4.1. Context of the novel

*Acotar* is a fairly modern novel. It has not been a subject of many studies, as with most YA novels or even novels that are not classics or literary fiction. The novel belongs in the genre or rather, demographic of young adult. Its focus is on romance and the setting is a fantasy world. Therefore, its genre is romantic fantasy. The book was published by Bloomsbury, which is not a big romance publisher. Despite that, the book has aspects borrowed from the romance genre, as I will be discussing later. As *Acotar* is modern work by a relatively young female author, it is possible that traces of fourth wave feminism could be seen in the novel. A major theme would then be empowerment of women, of course with an intersectional viewpoint.

*Acotar* is technically a retelling of the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*, which can mostly be seen in Tamlin's animalistic behaviour and the fact that he and his court are stuck with masks attached to their faces. The plot does not follow the original story for the most part, with the exception of Feyre being kept captive by Tamlin. Therefore, some of the more disturbing qualities of the plot are partially justified by this.

### 4.2. Feyre's characterization

Feyre is uneducated, poor, and used to an extremely rough life. In the beginning of the novel, Feyre is used to hunting for impoverished, previously wealthy, family because of a promise to her deceased mother. Her father cannot provide for his family due to his badly injured leg, and her sisters Feyre describes as being spoiled and not yet accustomed to their living standards. She, unlike her older sisters, never learned how to read, because the family lost their wealth before she was able to. Essentially, Feyre is the force carrying her family forward. She knows the woods are dangerous, yet she has no choice but to hunt. She loves to

paint but can hardly ever afford the supplies. All information the reader learns in the beginning about Feyre is designed to make her deserving of the reader's pity.

Her main feature personality-wise is her stubbornness. Feyre often does what she is explicitly told not to do, which often leads her to trouble. She is aware of her own personality, especially in the later sections of the novel: "[Feyre is covered in] thorns. Prickly. Sour. Contrary. (p 245)" She is very jealous of Tamlin, as I will discuss later.

Feyre does not align with Talbot's (1995:82) description of a typical romance heroine completely, but she does have similar elements. According to Talbot, they are beautiful, young, lively, vulnerable on the inside, struggling for self-control and hope of marrying someone of higher status. Feyre initially has no interest in romance, nor does she think of herself as beautiful. However, she does occasionally struggle for self-control and is somewhat vulnerable at times. Later on, she is very invested in her relationship with Tamlin even to the point of risking her whole life in order to save Tamlin.

All in all, Feyre is represented as a woman who does what she must, but the characterization is simultaneously riddled with stereotypical character traits. Feyre is jealous, stubborn and seems to change her personality somewhat after meeting a love interest. As mentioned in the background section, female characters often resort to stereotypical gendered behavior even when they are strong on the surface. "Strong" seems to be a keyword for physical strength or other skills and stereotypically masculine, emotionless behavior. This mold is accompanied with jealousy, and other "weak" traits resulting from, for example, insecurity, which is very much true for Feyre as well.

The first piece of information regarding Feyre's outward appearance in the book highlights her simultaneous lack of interest in her looks and her family's insufficient wealth: "The snow crunched under my fraying boots. (p2)" This part of her character, and the evolution of her attitude toward femininity, is discussed in the next chapter.

#### 4.2.1. Dislike of femininity and then finding it

Throughout the novel, Feyre actively dislikes femininity. Early in the book, Feyre states the following about her sisters: "They most likely were chattering about some young man or the ribbons they had spotted - - when they should have been chopping wood. (p 8)" From this

statement and others like it one can presume that Feyre sees romance, taking care of one's appearance, and appreciating aesthetically appealing elements as unnecessary. She only has space for survival in her mind. However, she does like to paint, which brings me to question whether she innately dislikes beautiful things after all.

There is a questionable element of Feyre finding her inner femininity and for example, finally agreeing to wear a dress for Tamlin. This narrative of 'becoming pretty' for a man is uncomfortable, if not problematic. After a certain event leading Tamlin to harass and grope Feyre in a disturbing manner, Feyre decides to finally give in and wear a dress to "try it out, at least" (p 201). It clearly is a great effort to Feyre, as she is ready to go back and change before meeting Tamlin. After she is called beautiful by Tamlin, Feyre's thoughts are the following:

Though his bruise still marred my neck, I *had* looked pretty. Feminine. I wouldn't go so far as to call myself a beauty, but... I hadn't cringed. A few months here had done wonders for the awkward sharpness and angles of my face. And I dared say that some kind of light had crept into my eyes—*my* eyes, not my mother's eyes or Nesta's eyes. *Mine*. (p 202-203)

For her, it seems that there is a continuum from sharp and angled to pretty, and possibly to a beauty. Feyre's inner monologue suggests that the time she spent with Tamlin alongside sufficient nutrition made her prettier, and only then does she wear a dress. It seems unlikely that Feyre would ever choose to wear a dress for herself, thus, the purpose of the dress is to appeal to Tamlin. In the narrative, it seems to be suggested that a woman will choose to become feminine for a man eventually. I would not go as far as to say that the intentional message is that all women will and should do this, but I do find the implication problematic. The problem is that Feyre is framed as a strong woman that dislikes feminine clothes, and then she meets a man and suddenly comes to realize that she in fact does want to wear these clothes, at least for the man she likes, as if Tamlin cures her of her practicality and unfemininity. It is at least suggested that all women will do this, and a woman can never actually prefer to wear neutral or masculine attire. This is precisely where the stereotype of the strong female character and the romance heroine collide in an awkward manner.

Feyre is a white, abled seemingly heterosexual young woman who is not a racial minority in her community, but she is impoverished. Therefore, one could argue that Feyre's disapproval of feminine things could be explained and justified completely by her family's insufficient wealth. As there is little to no diversity in the world of the novel, I disagree. All characters



seem to be white and there is no indication of anyone being anything other than heterosexual, it seems unlikely that the rough living conditions of Feyre's family are an intentional representation of poverty, but rather a device for telling the story.

### 4.3. Feyre's relationship with Tamlin

Tamlin is described as tall and handsome, but his face is covered by masquerade mask, which obviously is a nod to *Beauty and the Beast*. Feyre technically falls for his personality and not his face, but Tamlin's physique is reminiscent of male love interests in romantic literature and beyond. Tamlin is an authoritative figure due to his status as a high-lord. Personality-wise, he is quite serious and not very sociable. Essentially, he is tall, powerful, and popular because of his position.

To completely understand the power Tamlin holds over Feyre, it needs to be stated again that in the beginning of the novel, Tamlin essentially kidnaps Feyre. Even when Feyre no longer dislikes Tamlin, he has very much removed Feyre from her own home and placed her in a situation where she is a helpless human among fairies, some of them malicious. As Feyre is obviously no threat to some of the stronger fairies especially, it is clear that Feyre needs Tamlin to survive. Tamlin does not want or allow Feyre to do anything dangerous, and Feyre does not often have a chance to negotiate when Tamlin demands that she stay in her room, for example. There are only a few instances where Tamlin actually trusts Feyre to survive on her own.

It also needs to be noted that Feyre has few friends in her new home, and most of the men she meets at least flirt with her, if not outright attempt to assault her. It is all in all an unstable, if not even unsafe environment. As discussed earlier in the present study section, Feyre's only female friend is a servant. There is an element of Tamlin overly protecting Feyre and forbidding her from getting too close with anyone, but of course this is also because of the fact that some aspects of Prythian are legitimately dangerous for Feyre, even if Feyre is stubborn and often believes she can survive anything. Ultimately, Feyre is very dependent on Tamlin, which is common for romance, but in a fantasy novel where Tamlin quite literally kidnaps Feyre, the effect is even more problematic, and more akin to a case of Stockholm syndrome than legitimate romance.

Even though Feyre may be painted as a strong character on the surface, she is also depicted as believing in traditional gender stereotypes: “I sashayed over to him, my faerie lord, my protector and warrior, my friend, and danced before him. (226)” The fact that protector and warrior appear before friend on the list tell a lot about the novel’s gender representation in general. This also relates to earlier discussion on Feyre’s co-dependency. The same character who was hunting her own food in the woods is now content with needing a “protector”. Feyre’s earlier situation was in no way ideal, but the novel seems to carry the idea that “masculine” traits appear when the situation demands it, but they will leave when they are no longer needed, as though a female character could never provide for herself even in a romantic relationship.

Returning to what makes a good romance, Acotar follows the rule for a happy ending for the couple, even though the road to it is difficult. After Feyre and Tamlin formally begin their relationship, Tamlin and his power are taken by Amarantha and Feyre needs to save him and his lands by surviving through three extremely difficult trials. During the last trial, Feyre dies and is resurrected by Tamlin and the other High Lords. Amarantha is killed and Feyre and Tamlin get their happy end. So, technically, Acotar fits at least those standards for romance. Therefore, it is interesting to look at the two protagonists in the light of romance literature.

A recent Mills & Boon description of a suitable heroine emphasizes the fact that the heroine should be able to tame the hero. As Tamlin is described as a beast both figuratively and literally seeing as he can shapeshift into a wolf, he does need some taming occasionally. In a sense, one could almost argue that Feyre is also tamed by Tamlin, as she is the one becoming more feminine and submissive. Feyre is also increasingly jealous over Tamlin. He is constantly surrounded by other people and even the villain, Amarantha, wants him for herself. Aside from Amarantha and a certain ritual, there are not actually any women attempting to seduce Tamlin. Feyre seems to think otherwise: “I didn’t let myself think too much about what I would do if Tamlin had a flock of beautiful faeries lining up for him. (p. 221)” There are few actual reasons for Feyre to feel jealousy outside her own insecurities, yet she hangs onto Tamlin with all her might. Next, there is a certain event in the book relating to Feyre’s jealousy and the central relationship that I must discuss.

### 4.3.1. Fire night

Before Feyre and Tamlin begin dating, there is a certain celebration in the book. It involves a ritual to replenish the lands with magic in which that the High Lord, Tamlin, to allow particular magic to enter him and become “the Hunter” and to find his “Maiden”. Feyre reacts with disgust and brief jealousy for the woman who was chosen: “Well, he’d certainly taken his time with the ritual, which meant the girl was probably beautiful and charming, and appealed to his instincts. I wondered whether she was glad to be chosen. Probably.” (194-195). When the ritual is done, Feyre is wandering in the house and meets Tamlin, even though she was warned beforehand to avoid Tamlin that night. This whole story arc functions in the novel only to induce jealousy in Feyre and to start the central relationship. Jealousy by itself is a common problematic element in aforementioned strong female characters, but it is perhaps the least troublesome element in the scene. The following extract from when Tamlin and Feyre meet after the ritual is included to highlight the peculiar quality of their relationship.

I cried out as his teeth clamped onto the tender spot where my neck met my shoulder. I couldn’t move – couldn’t think, and my world narrowed to the feeling of his lips and teeth against my skin. He didn’t pierce my flesh, but rather bit to keep me pinned. The push of his body against mine, the hard and the soft, made me see red – see lightning, made me grind my hips against his. I should hate him – hate him for his stupid ritual, for the female he’d been with tonight... (196)

It is quite peculiar that this scene is one of the first romantic scenes, or at least scenes depicted in a romantic light, in the novel. Tamlin bites Feyre and pins her down, which are usually acts of violence at least without consent. These harsh and violent deeds are painted in a romantic and sexual light. Tamlin is under the influence of some magic and doing whatever he pleases. Feyre is not able to physically resist Tamlin, but her thoughts are clearly conflicted. There is an element of struggle for self-control in the way she battles between going with the flow and how she should feel, because of the earlier events of the day. She is jealous of the bizarre situation from earlier all the while being a participant in an even more bizarre scene. By drawing a parallel between the ritual with a crudely named “female” and Feyre’s own situation with Tamlin, it becomes clear that Feyre’s standards toward relationships are not extremely high. It definitely does not help that the whole ritual is framed with extremely uncomfortable imagery of a man taking whichever woman he chooses. While there may be mutual attraction in Feyre and Tamlin’s relationship, there is also a serious lack of consent and healthy communication.

This scene is unusually rough even for the often controlling and cranky Tamlin, but what is notable about this is that the next morning, they hardly acknowledge the seriousness of the events of last night, and essentially begin dating. “He even brought me a bouquet of white roses from his parents’ garden”, Feyre narrates. This almost brings to mind an abuser attempting to make up for their previous misbehaviour. It would probably not be acceptable for a contemporary young adult romance to include a drunk significant other attempting to assault the main character, nor would the main character most likely be fine with the situation. It is interesting, however, that in this fantasy story, it is very much romanticized.

#### 4.4. Analysis of process types

In order to demonstrate the relation of Acotar to romantic literature, and to further study the character of Feyre and her relationship with Tamlin, I have chosen two chapters, 25 and 27, to analyse in depth. I decided not to include chapter 26 because of the lack of relevant content happening in the chapter. In chapter 25, another event, the summer solstice, is held, and Feyre and Tamlin sneak out to spend time with each other. In chapter 26, Amarantha’s minion Rhysand comes to visit Tamlin. In the following chapter, Tamlin is convinced that Feyre needs to leave Prythian, as she will be in danger if she stays. Because the limited scope of this paper, I have chosen to focus on mental and material process types only.

Below, I have compiled the results of the quantitative analysis, as well as a small sample of my findings alongside a quotation from the novel.

*Table 1: Material and mental process types*

Character	Material	Mental	All types
Feyre	159	109	334
Tamlin	156	24	237

As the novel has a first-person narrator, it is not very surprising that the story is focalized through Feyre. However, it is apparent that Feyre’s actions are not as limited as those of a traditional romance book heroine. She seems quite active and physical. Feyre in fact had

more material processes than Tamlin, although this may in part be explained by the fact that there were brief sections where Tamlin was not present. In order to compare proportions, I have included a column for all process types in total, including not only mental and material processes. Feyre has more because she is the main character as well as the narrator for the story. Because of this, it can be assumed that her larger number of material process types is not completely due to the fact that she is in some way significantly more active than Tamlin.

With the aforementioned issue of Feyre’s numbers being not completely trustworthy in mind, it seems that Tamlin is very active and does more than thinks. Feyre is also quite active, but often merely looks and feels. The most notable difference is that Tamlin had very few mental process types. Of course, the narrator cannot see his from his perspective, but it also signals that Tamlin does not often merely look, he has to go and touch as well. There seems to be a trend of Feyre being more passive in romantic scenes. She touches Tamlin as well, but she always waits for Tamlin to touch her first. Feyre is active on the surface level, but traditional ideals of male dominance come into play. In the following section, a qualitative and closer look at a sampling of the data follows. The section also plays as an example of how I conducted the previous section.

(1) “What?” I asked, and put a hand on his chest, preparing to shove myself back. (2) But his other hand slipped under my hair, resting at the back of my neck.

(3) “I’m thinking I might kiss you,” he said quietly, intently.

(4) “Then do it.” I blushed at my own boldness.

(5) But Tamlin only gave that breathy laugh, and leaned in.

(6) His lips brushed mine—testing, soft and warm. (7) He pulled back a little. (8) He was still staring at me, and I stared back as he kissed me again, harder, but nothing like the way he’d kissed my neck.

(9) He withdrew more fully this time and watched me.

(10) “That’s it?” I demanded, and he laughed and kissed me fiercely. (229)

*Table 2: Example of data for this study*

<b>Line</b>	<b>Feyre</b>	<b>Tamlin</b>
1	Put (material)	

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	Preparing to shove (mental)	
2		Slipped (material)
		Resting (material)
4	Blushed (material)	
5		Gave that breathy laugh (material)
		Leaned in (material)
6		Brushed (material)
		Testing (material)
7		Pulled back (material)
8	Stared (mental)	Staring (mental)
		Kissed (material)
		Kissed (material)
9		Withdrew (material)
		Watched (mental)
10		Laughed (material)
		Kissed (material)
<b>Total</b>	<b>4 (2 mental, 2 material)</b>	<b>14 (2 mental, 12 material)</b>

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In this section it can be seen that Feyre has moments where she hardly has any material or even mental process types. Tamlin, in comparison, has a whole list of process types. As mentioned above, Tamlin often takes the more dominant role in romantic situations. Feyre, too, touches Tamlin and kisses him, but she always waits for Tamlin to make the first move. What this section shares with other similar romantic scenes in the novel is that Feyre is often the object and Tamlin is the actor.

Whereas Tamlin is kissing and leaning in, Feyre's main material process is blushing, which is a bodily reaction that has an emotional or mental element, therefore it is not comparable to Tamlin's processes. In the narration, Feyre even claims she "blushed at her own boldness", which even seems to contradict Feyre's character at other points in the story. I find it quite bold that she kills a wolf she suspects is of fae origin, or that she dares to attend a fae celebration with questionable rituals. In contrast, I struggle to see how giving consent to kissing would be bold in any way.

Tamlin, however, does not seem overly interested in how Feyre is feeling. "I'm thinking I might kiss you", he states, as if he can do such things on a whim, without taking Feyre into consideration at all. Tamlin is very much in control of the situation, even if Feyre is not completely submissive. The traditional gender stereotypes apparent in romance literature are deep in the foundations of *Acotar's* romance, despite Maas' attempt at creating a strong female lead.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was analyze how the protagonist of a young adult romance novel is represented especially in a romantic context. Feyre is quite dependent on Tamlin and has few other relationships. She has issues regarding other women and femininity yet becomes ‘more feminine’ for a man. Feyre tames a beast, but then again, I question whether there should be a beast in a romance at all.

Analysing verbs and their process types revealed that Feyre and Tamlin are almost as active in numbers, but in romantic scenes, Tamlin takes the lead. The intense focus on Feyre and the fact that Feyre has more mental process types suggest that the book in fact has elements similar to romance novels. It is not necessarily a bad thing, but these elements are often paired with traditional and stereotypical gender roles and expectations, even when there is an attempt to write a strong female lead. This can be seen in the romance as well, as especially Tamlin fits the image of a traditional romance male lead. I cannot call the central relationship completely equal when Tamlin has so much power over Feyre, even though it is mostly because of the situation and not because of actions. However, I think the problem lies mostly within the fact that abusive actions are romanticised.

It is apparent that *Acotar* attempts to be purely entertaining. It does not seem likely that Maas is intentionally telling her readers to, for example, endure a relationship with a glaring imbalance of power, but there are undoubtedly harmful elements in the story. Not only is Tamlin quite controlling, Feyre’s attitude toward other women hardly makes the story feminist. If women in the fantasy world were not so few in numbers and insignificant, Feyre’s weaknesses would not be so significant. Even though *Acotar* is only one novel, it reflects issues existing in other stories as well, therefore these conclusions can possibly be relevant to these other similar fictional stories.

Ultimately, Feyre is an interesting combination of traditional romance heroine traits and toughness of a modern YA heroine. This combination is executed in a way where it reads rather like a stereotypically strong female character dominated by a man in a romantic relationship because of choices Maas has made as the author. Especially when written by a female author by a mostly female and young audience, its possibly unintentional messages about women, femininity and romance may be harmful. Returning to the context, I do not



think that *Acotar* is especially empowering to women, at least with the intersectional aspect of fourth wave feminism kept in mind.

Because this study is very limited both in its pages and its scope, it offers only a brief look into the novel. Other characters beside Feyre could be studied further, as well as many of the plot elements. Especially looking at the male characters could be interesting, and not only in *Acotar*, but other novels as well. As romance is a genre that is left relatively untouched by academics, many interesting works remain to be studied. More modern YA novels could be studied especially in regard to their gender representation and romance, as well as gender in adult romance.

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