REPARATIVE ROMANCE AND THE ECHOES OF CLASSIC LOVE STORIES IN THE *A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES* SERIES BY SARAH J. MAAS

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Abstract

The fantasy romance series *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (*ACOTAR*) has garnered a vast readership and become a recent phenomenon. I explore how *ACOTAR* constructs its romance narratives as sites of healing and reparation investigating how Maas employs romantic tropes reminiscent of Austen and the Brontës to construct a fantasy world where love serves as a personal and political act of reparation. In doing so, *ACOTAR* revises and modernizes classic narrative structures, reinforcing the genre's ability to engage with contemporary concerns about power, agency, and affective justice. I also situate *ACOTAR* within the broader discourse of postcolonial and feminist literary critique, questioning how its reparative romance model aligns with or diverges from critical perspectives on hegemonic narratives of love. While Maas reproduces some of the typical female fantasies about men, she also reconfigures these romantic ideals for contemporary readers. Ultimately, I argue that *ACOTAR*'s popularity is not merely the result of genre escapism but a reflection of how romance fiction continues to evolve as a space for reimagining love, power, and healing.

Keywords: Sarah J. Maas, *ACOTAR*, Romantasy, Romantic Fantasy, Gothic Romance.

NARRATIVA ROMÁNTICA REPARADORA Y ECOS DE HISTORIAS DE AMOR CLÁSICAS EN LA SAGA *A COURT OF THORNS AND ROSES* DE SARAH J. MAAS

resumen

A Court of Thorns and Roses (*ACOTAR*) se ha convertido en un fenómeno reciente. Exploro cómo *ACOTAR* construye narrativas románticas como espacios de sanación y reparación y analizo cómo Maas emplea tropos románticos que recuerdan a Austen y a las hermanas Brontë para construir un mundo de fantasía en el que el amor funciona como un acto personal y político de reparación. La saga revisa y moderniza estructuras narrativas clásicas, mostrando la capacidad del género para abordar preocupaciones contemporáneas sobre poder, agencia y justicia afectiva. Sitúo *ACOTAR* dentro de la crítica literaria feminista y poscolonial, evaluando hasta qué punto reproduce o cuestiona narrativas hegemónicas del amor. Aunque Maas mantiene ciertas fantasías femeninas, también reconfigura estos ideales románticos para el público lector contemporáneo. Sostengo que la popularidad de *ACOTAR* no responde solo al escapismo del género, sino a la evolución de la ficción romántica como espacio para reimaginar el amor, el poder y la sanación.

Palabras clave: Sarah J. Maas, *ACOTAR*, romantasía, fantasía romántica, romance gótico.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Romance fiction has long occupied an ambivalent position within both popular culture and literary criticism. Although it is one of the most dominant genres in the global publishing markets with a wide range of niches and a strong presence online both through self-publishing and digital publishing (Markert 2021), it continues to be dismissed as formulaic, escapist, and sometimes even as apolitical (Radway 1984, Gill 2007). Such critiques obscure the genre's ongoing evolution, particularly within the twenty-first century, where popular romance has become a prevalent site for exploring questions of identity, trauma, agency, and affect. As scholars of the so-called third wave of romance studies (Kamblé, Selinger & Teo 2021; Pérez-Fernández & Pérez Ríu 2021) have argued, contemporary romance is deeply entangled with political and cultural concerns. It revises challenging hegemonic narratives about love, desire, and gender, often in a setting that politicizes femininity (Kamblé 2023).

The recent commercial and cultural success of the fantasy romance subgenre exemplifies this shift, especially with the rise of online social reading communities, such as BookTok or Bookstagram (Niebling 2025), where books are not only advertised and recommended, but also analyzed. In these circles, the romantasy genre is exceedingly popular (Balling and Martens 2024), with titles that have become global phenomena, such as Rebecca Yarros' *The Empyrean* series or Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. Even though these book series are read by millions of people worldwide, the genre is still marginalized. As Niebling notes, "[r]omantasy, like romance, is still conceptualized in literary criticism through stereotypical apolitical understandings of 'light fiction or trivial literature'" (2).

Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses* has emerged as one of the most popular series (Grady 2024). The series consists of four novels and a collection of short stories so far. In this article, I will focus on the first three novels, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (*ACOTAR*), *A Court of Mist and Fury* (*ACOMAF*), and *A Court of Wings and Ruin* (*ACOWAR*), because they encompass the central story of the main character, Feyre Archeron. Although these books, like most of the romantasy genre, are often disregarded as trivial, the series engages directly with themes central to feminist and postcolonial inquiry, including the lingering effects of trauma, the dynamics of abusive relationships, and the pursuit of autonomy and affective justice. *ACOTAR* depicts a world in which love, be it romantic, communal, or familial, functions as a reparative force capable of confronting past wounds and envisioning transformative futures.

Furthermore, Maas engages with classical romance traditions shaped by authors such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters. Feyre Archeron's journey, from the oppressive, patriarchal dynamic with her first lover, Tamlin, to the egalitarian and restorative partnership with Rhysand, echoes canonical narratives such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Jane Eyre*. This article positions *ACOTAR* as not only a form of escapist fiction, but also as a reparative narrative that resonates with contemporary readers' experiences of trauma, desire, and social precarity. By blending fantasy world-building with classical romantic structures, the series reimagines familiar

tropes (e.g., the transformative relationship, the heroine's ascension into power, etc.) while interrogating their emotional and political implications. In doing so, Maas both inherits and revises the romance tradition, offering a narrative that speaks to ongoing cultural concerns about love, healing, and agency in a fractured world.

Drawing upon romance studies, feminist theory, trauma studies, and classical romance traditions, this paper focuses on the reparative reading of the romantasy series, *ACOTAR*. I introduce Eve Sedgwick's reparative reading, which offers an alternative to what Ricoeur (1970) describes as the hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur names Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx the "masters of suspicion" (1970, 33), noting that they treat texts with suspicion and read them with the goal of identifying secrets, demystifying, and uncovering hidden agendas that are not immediately obvious to the reader. He contrasts this attitude with the hermeneutics of faith, because faith is "the contrary of suspicion" (Ricoeur 1970, 28). Faith is placed into the text's intended meaning, which reveals itself to the reader. Felski (2011, 216) claims that suspicion is "a mode of interpretation that adopts a distrustful attitude toward texts in order to draw out meanings or implications that are not intended and that remain inaccessible to their authors as well as to ordinary readers." This attitude of interpretation is especially prevalent in literary criticism because the critics may refuse "obligations of reverence and fidelity" and "assert their right to fashion something new out of the words on the page, to reframe them in the light of their own concerns and commitments" (Felski 2011, 228-29).

Sedgwick's (1997) theory of paranoid reading and reparative reading draws upon Ricoeur's theory. Paranoid reading aligns with the hermeneutics of suspicion, and it dominates literary analysis because it defines itself by the principle of "no bad surprises" (Sedgwick 1997, 9), so the critic always engages with the text from a suspicious standpoint. Sedgwick notes that "[t]he unidirectionally future-oriented vigilance of paranoia generates, paradoxically, a complex relation to temporality that burrows both backward and forward" (1997, 10), and the critic does not want to be surprised. Instead, they seek to expose, diagnose, or dismantle the ideological structures within the text. In contrast, reparative reading offers an alternative to the critical habits of suspicion, approaching the text with an openness to its affective and imaginative possibilities. Sedgwick argues that reparative readers assemble from the text resources that nourish, comfort, or reorient, instead of simply confirming systemic harm. This is an inherently hopeful stance. Sedgwick claims that hope, "often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters" (1997, 24). This reading does not deny the realities of trauma, patriarchy, or oppression. Rather, it accounts for how readers might locate the emotional materials for survival, pleasure, or healing within a text. Reparative reading is particularly useful for genres such as romantasy, which offer narrative models of care, reciprocity, and restoration that resonate deeply with readers. Applying a reparative framework to *ACOTAR* allows us to understand its romantic and fantastical elements not merely as escapist wish-fulfillment, but as part of a broader cultural effort to imagine intimacy, agency, and emotional healing within the genre. In the

upcoming sections, I will introduce the key elements of the theoretical framework of this paper, followed by an analysis of the series.

2. TRAUMA, HEALING, AND REPARATIVE NARRATIVES IN POPULAR ROMANCE

Scholarly engagement with popular romance can be traced back to Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), which used reader-response criticism to understand women's motivation for reading romance novels, as well as the genre's entanglement with patriarchal structures. Radway frames romance as both compensatory and socially conservative in 1984, but later scholars identify more variations and diversity. Pamela Regis (2003) notices that even critics of the genre are not well-versed in the romance novel's characteristics and often only focus on the love story itself and ignore the other aspects of the narrative. She claims that the romance novel is "about women's freedom. The genre is popular because it conveys the pain, uplift, and joy that freedom brings" (Regis 2003, xiii). More recent scholarship, often referred to as the third wave of romance studies, positions romance as a politically engaged and culturally responsive genre. For example, Teo (2012) notes that modern female writers of the sheik romance subgenre portray the Muslim Other in a more positive light, thus engaging with postcolonial views. This aligns with Sedgwick's notion of reparative reading, which approaches texts as sites of possibility, healing, and world-repair, rather than merely ideological critique. In the example provided by Teo, the Muslim Other is still somewhat stereotypical, but he is also the coveted love interest, the eventual happy ending, and the source of love and affection for the female protagonist, thus altering the predominantly negative portrayal of Middle Eastern characters. Kamblé (2023) also emphasizes the heroine's evolving journey toward self-representation and rejection of limiting societal roles (e.g., motherhood vs. career). She also notes that romance "normalizes the idea that only a woman has the right to determine how and when she does physical, mental, and creative work. Just as crucially, it models how the heroine can choose to do or decline emotional labor" (Kamblé 2023, 116). Contemporary scholarship establishes romance as a flexible narrative form capable of negotiating power, identity, and agency, providing a critical foundation for analyzing twenty-first-century fantasy romance.

Trauma studies provide a crucial framework for understanding how contemporary romance, and fantasy romance in particular, represents experiences of psychological rupture and recovery. Foundational trauma theorist Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a "double wound" (1996, 4), an experience that resists full narrative assimilation and returns belatedly, haunting the survivor through flashbacks, repetition, and even bodily symptoms. Dominick LaCapra (2014) differentiates between *acting out* and *working through*. While acting out is described as a state in which "tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene" (LaCapra 2014, 21), working through is the process that enables the integration of traumatic experience into a renewed sense of self and historical continuity. I find that these concepts are relevant for romance narratives that often

center on protagonists who are recovering from some sort of violence, loss, or emotional harm.

> Women suffer at the story's beginning, in various fashions small to grand, from living in this man's world .... The woman's conflicts may include shaming or lack of knowledge about her sexuality, anxiety about weight or appearance, the threat of rape, the memory of past trauma caused by a man, an overbearing or inattentive boyfriend, full-blown domestic or sexual abuse, low self-esteem, family pressures to get married, workplace discrimination, financial vulnerability, due to an inability to earn or control an income, or solo caregiver responsibilities (often for a child). (Roach 2016, 22)

Furthermore, it is common for romance novels to depict not only suffering but also eventual healing, so trauma is not only acknowledged but imaginatively resolved as well.

I argue that Sedgwick's reparative reading offers an interpretive bridge between trauma studies and romance scholarship. While paranoid reading privileges suspicion and the anticipation of harm, reparative reading offers an experience that strengthens the reader. Sedgwick is careful to emphasize that reparative practices do not deny the existence of violence or oppression, but they respond to such realities by seeking hope. Applied to contemporary fantasy romance, reparative reading shows how narratives of love often operate as mechanisms of trauma recovery. In these texts, romantic relationships model consent, reciprocity, and emotional validation as alternatives to silencing and hiding. This also aligns with LaCapra's notion of working through, the emphasis being on communication and mutual recognition. Thus, reparative romance not only supplies the reader with an escapist closure but also articulates frameworks through which trauma can be meaningfully transformed.

3. CLASSICAL ROMANCE TRADITIONS: AUSTEN, THE BRONTËS, AND THE GOTHIC LEGACY

The romance tradition that emerges from the nineteenth century, particularly in the works of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, provides a crucial literary genealogy for understanding contemporary fantasy romance. These novels have been integrated into the literary canon as classics, and they are largely celebrated for their representations of women of the period. Today, Austen and the Brontës are recognized for their interrogation of gendered power relations and emotional dependency, and they showcase female protagonists with autonomy. Scholars emphasize that Austen's marriage plots are not merely romantic solutions but ethical structures through which women achieve moral clarity, social agency, and self-knowledge (Duckworth 2020; Knox-Shaw 2004). For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet rejects Mr. Darcy's first proposal because she views it as an insult to her integrity. This act of rejection also rejects social coercion, yet it serves as a catalyst for improvement for both the male and female characters. Elizabeth eventually recognizes how blinded

she was by her own pride, expressing that "[t]ill this moment, I never knew myself" (Austen 1894, 259), but Mr. Darcy is also required to let go of his own upbringing and his own prejudices as well. This first 'no' functions as a necessary pivot toward a self-reflection that characterizes the Austenian heroine. So, the eventual relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy is only possible because it is not based on romantic surrender, but a clear self-realization and moral clarity, which grants a happy ending.

The Brontë sisters' contribution to the romance tradition also integrates Gothic elements, such as confinement, passion, and psychological intensity, into narratives of female development. I use Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* to briefly explain this stylistic change, as some of the plot points in her novel are present in Maas's *ACOTAR* series as well. If Austen provides the social and ethical blueprint for the romance tradition, Charlotte Brontë introduces the psychological intensity and the Gothic interiority that define the genre's evolution into contemporary fantasy. In *Jane Eyre*, the heroine's development is inextricably linked to her navigation of a Gothic space. Mr. Rochester's Thornfield Hall is a "creepy-cozy dialectic" (Kreisel 2016, 103), a space that psychologically represents the characters, viewed by Rochester as a dungeon and a sinister, haunted place, whereas Jane often describes it as modern and beautiful (Brontë 1994). Jane leaves Thornfield Hall when her integrity is threatened. This gesture exemplifies a refusal of love that compromises selfhood. Hoeveler (1998) also notices that within Gothic romance, love is often staged as both danger and possibility, requiring the heroines to navigate environments structured by male authority and emotional volatility. The Byronic hero, dark, wounded, morally ambiguous, plays a central role in Gothic romance, yet his desirability is often counterbalanced by his potential for domination and destruction. Contemporary romance rewrites this figure by retaining his emotional depth while revising his relationship to power. As Teo notes, modern romance demands that the hero relinquish control and embrace relational equality: "American heroes who ensure that when the heroines fall in love with them, intense sexual desire is balanced with growing friendship, shared interests, shared ambitions, and shared humor" (Teo 2021, 471).

Collectively, scholarship on popular romance, feminist theory, trauma studies, reparative reading, and classical romance traditions establishes a critical framework for reading *ACOTAR* as a narrative invested in emotional repair and ethical intimacy. I aim to approach the series as a text that negotiates questions of power, agency, and healing through both genre conventions and intertextuality. By mobilizing romance as a reparative structure, *ACOTAR* aligns with long-standing feminist and Gothic romance traditions while responding to contemporary cultural conditions shaped by precarity.

4. SPACES OF CONFINEMENT AND RESTORATION IN *ACOTAR*

Romance, and romantasy in particular, operates as a complex narrative form in which the romantic arc is embedded within broader structures of world-building, political organization, and social hierarchy, often supplemented by elaborate magic

systems in fantasy contexts (Teo 2018; Kamblé 2023). While the central theme of romance novels is the romantic arc, it is often woven together with elements of complex world-building, political systems, social orders, and, in the case of fantasy romance, magic systems (Teo 2018; Kamblé 2023). *ACOTAR* exemplifies this perfectly: while it draws heavily from fairytale and classical romance traditions, it also situates the text within a critical postfeminist framework that emphasizes consent, agency, and emotional self-awareness, while simultaneously reproducing and negotiating traditional gender hierarchies (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009). The main character of the first three novels, Feyre Archeron, is forced to cross the limits of the Mortal Lands, leave behind her family that relies on her for survival, and join her first love interest, Tamlin, in his manor in the Spring Court. Her first brush with the High Fae is against her will. She is roped into a complicated political game between the villain, Amarantha, and the High Lords of the seven Courts of Prythian, something she knows nothing about. Tamlin takes control of Feyre's life in order to save his own people from Amarantha's wrath. At first, he appears to be a liberating figure, someone who would help Feyre out of all of her troubles, the poverty, the real threat of starvation, etc. "Tamlin's jaw tightened. 'Your family is alive and well-cared for. You think so low of faeries that you believe I'd take their only source of income and nourishment and not replace it?'" (2023, 62). However, Feyre quickly learns that what may seem like a lifeline is slowly chipping away at her autonomy, revealing the limits of romance predicated on paternalistic protection.

Much like Mr. Rochester's Thornfield Hall, the Spring Court manor is both a luxurious estate and a space of imprisonment for Feyre. At first, as a human being, she is unable to see all the faeries who inhabit the space. She is essentially a captive in this land where anything could harm her. The Spring Court estate is described as "veiled in roses and ivy, with patios and balconies and staircases sprouting from its alabaster sides. The grounds were encased by woods, but stretched so far that I could barely see the distant line of the forest. So much color, so much sunlight and movement and texture" (2023, 47). The seasons never change in the Spring Court, it is always suspended in spring, a symbol of new life and fertility. This is the location where Feyre is confined to the most traditional gender roles. Elements of Gothic romance permeate the text in *ACOTAR*: a monstrous male figure is the captor of a woman of lower social standing, danger lurks around every corner, there are locked doors and secrets, fairytale elements that configure Feyre as a blameless victim, etc. As Hoeveler (1998, 9) explains, the "typical female gothic novel presents a blameless heroine triumphing through a variety of passive-aggressive strategies over a male-created system of oppression and corruption, the 'patriarchy'." The space itself is defined by patriarchal rule, the manor functions as a site of hypervisibility and simultaneous erasure. Tamlin's surveillance is framed as a form of protection, yet it also mirrors the Gothic trope of the "raving, lustful, greedy" (Hoeveler 1998, 10) patriarch who commonly abuses his power to restrict the woman. By eventually sealing Feyre in the manor, Tamlin completely strips her of her identity and agency. The climactic moment of entrapment, when Tamlin magically seals Feyre inside the manor, crystallizes this problem.

> He'd locked me in. He'd sealed me inside this house.
> I hurtled for the nearest window in the foyer and shoved it open. A cool spring breeze rushed in – and I shoved my hand through it – only for my fingers to bounce off an invisible wall. Smooth, hard air pushed against my skin.
> Breathing became difficult.
> I was trapped.
> I was trapped inside this house. I might as well have been Under the Mountain; I might as well have been inside that cell again– (2020a, 123)

This act of confinement triggers Feyre, who suffered the trauma of being locked up in a cell Under the Mountain. She suffers a panic attack, acts out (LaCapra 2014), her uncontrolled power melts "the ring off my finger until the golden ore dripped away into the void, the emerald tumbling after it" (2020a, 124). This moment is not only a clear rejection of Tamlin's love but also a refusal of a relational model that prioritizes control over consent and emotional survival, aligning with Gothic romance traditions in which the heroine's escape from confinement is a necessary precondition for ethical and reparative forms of love (Hoeveler 1998).

ACOTAR centers Tamlin as the only love interest, even though there are moments even in the first book that raise alarm bells. Tamlin is often coercive and abusive, even blaming Feyre for his uncontrollable behavior due to the influence of Spring Court magic that urges him to find a partner during the Calanmai celebration. "This explanation is characteristic of some fantasy texts in which the hero's actions are excused because of the influence of supernatural forces beyond his control" (Little & Moruzi 2021, 85), essentially providing an explanation for rape.

Feyre's departure from the Spring Court in *ACOMAF* closely parallels the Brontëan romance tradition, particularly Jane Eyre's decision to leave Rochester when their relationship threatens her moral autonomy. Jane's decision to leave is ethically necessary because "[f]or having left Rochester, having torn off the crown of thorns he offered and repudiated the unequal charade of marriage he proposed, Jane has now gained the strength to begin to discover her real place in the world" (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, 364). Feyre's escape functions in a similar way. By leaving Tamlin, she rejects a socially sanctioned but emotionally destructive form of love, thus prioritizing survival over romantic endurance. Her decision disrupts the patriarchal logic that frames male control as care and female suffering as devotion (Gilbert & Gubar 2000, Hoeveler 1998). Feyre's escape is therefore not merely narrative progression but ideological rupture: her decision disrupts a patriarchal model of romantic love that equates male control with care and positions female suffering as a form of devotion, which is identifiable in nineteenth-century romance (Gilbert & Gubar 2000). In contrast, as bell hooks argues, "[w]hen we understand love as the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist" (2000, 5).

5. CONSENT, AGENCY, AND THE BYRONIC HERO

If the Spring Court operates as a Gothic site of confinement, Velaris, the capital city of the Night Court, emerges in *ACOMAF* as a reparative space and a model of alternative governance, structured around consent, collective care, and forms of affective justice that extend beyond the realm of romantic love. While the Spring Court is known as the last bastion against Amarantha's wrath, the Night Court is perceived as a place of nightmares, ruled by Rhysand, the cruelest High Lord. However, this myth is proven false as soon as Feyre sets foot in the Night Court. "The city had been built like a crust atop the rolling, steep hills that flanked the river, the buildings crafted from white marble or warm sandstone. ... No monsters. No darkness. Not a hint of fear, of despair. Untouched" (2020a, 142). Not only is Velaris safe from the war that devastated the rest of Prythian, but it is also a place where Feyre feels free, mainly because within this environment, she is also encouraged to articulate her desires, test her abilities, and reclaim aspects of herself that trauma had rendered inaccessible. Moreover, Rhysand's approach to intimacy contrasts sharply with Tamlin's. Rather than positioning himself as a protector, he consistently emphasizes Feyre's agency, repeatedly asking for her opinion, and, perhaps most importantly, once they officially become a couple, he creates a position within the Night Court that makes her equal to him, ruling as High Lady next to the High Lord. Rhysand explicitly reframes their relationship in terms of equality, declaring Feyre to be "my equal in every way," one who will "wear my crown, sit on a throne beside mine. Never sidelined, never designated to breeding and parties and child-rearing. My queen" (2020a, 620). The insistence on equality is not only symbolic, it marks a shift from hierarchical to negotiated power, thus reconfiguring romance as a partnership also grounded in shared authority rather than paternalistic protection.

Little and Moruzi read Feyre as the typical postfeminist heroine who does not understand that "she merely exchanged one form of captivity for another" (2021, 88). They also point out that "Feyre remains stereotypically feminine in her desire to remain protected by a powerful man. Although in many ways Rhys is a more positive male protagonist, as he encourages Feyre to expand her knowledge and power and persistently teaches her to read and control her magic, her first-person narration fails to acknowledge her subordinate position" (Little & Moruzi 2021, 87). However, this is a typical paranoid reading (Sedgwick 1997), grounded in an understanding of feminist progress as absolute independence, an expectation that romance as a genre complicates. As Kamblé (2023) suggests, the romance heroine's development lies not in rejecting relationality, but in gaining the authority to determine the conditions under which intimacy and emotional labor occur. Feyre's relationship with Rhysand can thus be read not as submission, but as a negotiated form of agency. As romance scholars have long noted, the romance narrative does not aim to produce autonomous subjects detached from relational structures, but rather imagines forms of intimacy that are ethically and emotionally sustaining (Regis 2003). An example of this is found in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), where Elizabeth Bennet's story does not culminate in self-sufficiency and the rejection of romantic attachment, but in a partnership that preserves her moral judgment and agency, while allowing

for emotional reliance. Both Elizabeth and Darcy have to undergo changes to accommodate each other. Austen's narrative makes it clear that the problem within their relationship is not dependence itself, but dependence structured by coercion and inequality. Similarly, in *ACOTAR*, Feyre does not simply substitute one captor for another. She leaves a partner who does not consider her his equal and, in Rhysand, finds a romantic relationship that also works as a negotiated partnership.

Feyre's relationship with Rhysand also demonstrates a very different way of dealing with her trauma, aligning with Dominick LaCapra's concept of working through (2014), which describes recovery from trauma not as a return to autonomy untouched by loss, but as a gradual integration of her traumatic experience into a renewed framework. Velaris, and Feyre's role within the Night Court, thus function as sites where vulnerability, dependence, and power are reconfigured into a form of intimacy that enables survival and ethical continuity rather than repetition of harm. It is important to note that *ACOMAF* does not depict this process of working through as immediate or unresisted. Even after her removal from the Spring Court, Feyre continues to exhibit somatic and affective symptoms of trauma. She vomits frequently, suffers from insomnia, and she is unable to paint, which is the main form of self-expression for her. These bodily responses indicate that her trauma has not yet been mediated. Her body registers what her narration initially cannot articulate. In LaCapra's terms, Feyre remains caught in a mode of acting out, where repetition and avoidance coexist with the desire for recovery. Velaris provides the material and relational conditions that enable a shift toward working through. Unlike the Spring Court, which demands silence and a grin-and-bear-it attitude, the Night Court is a space where vulnerability and agency are normalized. Rhysand cultivates an environment where Feyre can choose to improve herself, train, learn, rest, or even talk about her trauma if she wishes. This environment allows resistance itself to be absorbed into the healing process. Feyre's gradual return to painting and speech does not occur because trauma is overcome, but it is given space to exist. Thus, Feyre is able to practice working through. LaCapra points out that this process "should be understood as an open, self-questioning process that never attains closure and counteracts acting-out (or the repetition compulsion) without entirely transcending it, especially with respect to trauma and its aftermath" (2014, xxiii). Importantly, Rhysand's role in this process is not that of savior but of facilitator. He neither positions himself as Feyre's sole source of stability nor interprets her trauma on her behalf. On the contrary, he challenges her to push beyond her limits (e.g., he sends her into the cottage of a dangerous immortal being, the Weaver, to fetch her ring, using her new magical abilities), and refutes allegations by other High Lords that it was a political ploy to name her the High Lady of the Night Court. "'I made her High Lady,' Rhys said simply, lowering his hands from my face but not leaving my side, 'because I love her. Her power was the last thing I considered" (2020b, 441).

Rhysand's characterization deliberately invokes and revises the Byronic hero archetype central to nineteenth-century romance. Like Rochester, Darcy, or Heathcliff, Rhys is marked by darkness, secrecy, and brooding, which is also represented in his looks. "His short black hair gleamed like a raven's feathers, offsetting his pale skin and blue eyes so deep they were violet, even in the firelight" (2023,

189). The Byronic hero is usually consumed by guilt over sins he committed (Hoeveler 1998), appears to be morally grey, and, ultimately, is revealed to be redeemable (Crawford 2014). Rhysand leans into the myth of cruelty that surrounds him and the Night Court, but through his romantic connection to Feyre, it is revealed that his public-facing personality is a front to protect himself and his Court. Comparatively with the Inner Circle, a tight group of friends, he is laid-back and friendly. While Tamlin remains the villain, Rhysand's true self is revealed to be kinder and more progressive. Furthermore, he is interested in Feyre's desires and her consent. "Maas's novels reveal various ways that narratives encourage consent and sexual agency" (Speese 2024), particularly showcasing Rhysand plainly asking for consent verbally. "What is it that you want, Feyre?" (2020a) is asked by Rhysand multiple times and he only proceeds when she answers him. Moreover, Rhysand explicitly refuses to use his power of mind-reading to coerce or influence Feyre. He is known as "the most powerful High Lord in history" (2020a, 148), who can turn his enemies into a blood mist with his mind, without lifting a finger, yet he places himself on equal footing with Feyre, and the imminent danger of his power is never a threat to her. Thus, romantic fulfillment becomes inseparable from ethical behavior, reinforcing the series' reparative logic.

6. CONCLUSION

A Court of Thorns and Roses should not be read merely as escapist fantasy romance but as a reparative narrative that meaningfully engages questions of trauma, agency, and ethical intimacy. By situating the series within the traditions of popular romance, trauma studies, and classical Gothic romance, I have argued that Maas's work participates in a long-standing literary conversation about the conditions under which love can function as a site of healing rather than harm. Through a reparative reading, *ACOTAR* emerges as a text that does not deny violence, coercion, or psychological harm, but instead foregrounds the labor of recovery and the relational structures that make such recovery imaginable.

The contrast between the Spring Court and the Night Court crystallizes this argument. While the Spring Court reproduces Gothic patterns of confinement, surveillance, and paternalistic protection, the Night Court and Velaris offer a counter-space organized around choice, communal care, and respect. Feyre's movement between these spaces mirrors her gradual transition from acting out toward working through trauma (LaCapra 2014), a process that remains uneven and incomplete, as trauma is not something that can be undone, only integrated into one's healing. The series does not frame healing as a return to unmarked autonomy, nor does it present romance as a cure-all. Instead, recovery is shown as relational, negotiated, and sustained through environments that allow vulnerability without coercion.

Maas uses classical romance tropes, such as the Byronic hero and the transformative love plot, which in turn align *ACOTAR* with Austenian and Brontëan traditions while adapting them to contemporary concerns. Feyre's relationship with Rhysand does not signify a retreat into dependency, but rather a reconfiguration of

interdependence grounded in mutual recognition and shared power. Against paranoid readings that often equate feminist progress with absolute independence and a rejection of female fantasies, I argue that romance as a genre has always envisioned fulfillment through ethical attachment. Just like Elizabeth and Darcy or Jane and Rochester, Rhysand and Feyre establish their relationship as one of mutual healing and change.

Finally, the popularity of *ACOTAR*, amplified through digital reading communities such as BookTok[1], underscores the cultural resonance of reparative romance in a moment marked by precarity. Of course, there are plenty of aspects of the series that are worthy of criticism, such as the alpha male personalities of the male characters, the messy and underdeveloped political system, and the romanticization of extreme power imbalances, but there is also value recognized by millions of mostly female readers. The series' appeal lies not in its denial of harm, but in its insistence that love, when structured around consent, agency, and care, can offer readers imaginative resources for survival and hope. In this sense, *ACOTAR* exemplifies the ongoing evolution of romance fiction as a genre capable of engaging critically with the emotional and ethical demands of contemporary life, reaffirming its relevance both within and beyond the literary canon.

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[1] BookTok has had a significant impact on contemporary publishing, particularly in the romance and fantasy romance markets, where reader-driven promotion has contributed to the commercial success and renewed visibility of titles such as *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. As recent scholarship notes, BookTok not only functions as a marketing mechanism but also as a participatory interpretive space in which readers collectively engage with themes of trauma, desire, and emotional healing (Balling and Martens 2024; Niebling 2025).

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