

Came for the Smut, Stayed by Consent: Desire and Consent in Sarah J. Maas's Fictional Worlds

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Published online: August 2024

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Abstract: The emergence of the romance novel over the last roughly three hundred years has garnered much debate about the literary value of both the writing and content. However, the dismissal of the genre as “low brow” has much to do with the vast number of women writers and readers, reinforcing the misconception that only work by, about, and for men is worthy of literary study. In this article, I examine the new adult and adult fantasy romance novels of Sarah J. Maas as a potential vehicle for changing attitudes about gender norms, rape culture, and consent. Directed at an audience of younger women, Maas’s work offers safe spaces for women to explore their sexuality and unlearn harmful sexual and gender scripts. The audience benefits from these fictional examples as they reflect changing values regarding the traditional expectations of women, especially those that reinforce their position as passive objects. While these novels are often described as “trash” or “smut,” I suggest that popular romances, like Maas’s, provide spaces of radical and widespread reform due to their large readership. Maas offers narratives that push back against hegemonic masculinity and dominant rape myths in favor of developing a culture of consent, especially for her new adult readership.

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Keywords: consent culture, fantasy, new adult, rape myths, romance, Sarah J. Maas, sexual violence

In the early 2000s and 2010s, young adult romance, especially those tied to the supernatural, became quite popular. Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight*, Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments*, and Richelle's Mead's *Vampire Academy* contain women protagonists in "soul mate" relationships, often with controlling men. During the same period, E.L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* emerged as a pop culture phenomenon often termed "mommy porn" for its explicit depictions of sex that many women found appealing (Roach 84). The tension between these two romance audiences resulted in the production of young adult romance with the increasing prevalence of more explicit depictions of sex found in erotic romances. This collision produced young adult romances where, as the heroines grow up, so does their potential for livelier sex. Writers and publishers had to navigate this new terrain in multi-book series as both writers and the heroines they created began to enter adulthood. For publishers, these transitions were particularly difficult to market, especially as the protagonists embraced sexuality and desire rather than controlling it, contrasting narratives of abstinence in young adult novels whose protagonists were virgins. And, even in adult incarnations like *Fifty Shades*, virginity was a defining characteristic of the heroine Anastasia Steele.

Sarah J. Maas's emergence as a fantasy romance writer coincided with these highly visible shifts in the genre that included virginal heroines. Christine Seifert notes that the tension created in many young adult romance novels centered around whether the heroine will lose her virginity, and it is this tension that is arousing to readers, a concept she terms "abstinence porn" (3). In this construction, virginity is romanticized and idealized in a way that objectifies young women. Like real porn, virginity fetishizing reduces female characters to objects whose sexual acts, or lack thereof, are the sole expression of their identities (Seifert 3). Readers can then struggle along with the heroine, living vicariously through the sexual build up toward losing one's virginity. Many paranormal narratives, *Twilight*, *Vampire Academy*, and even the television show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, draw attention to an ideal love to which the heroine is destined to lose her virginity. These narratives reinforce the cultural norm that women and girls should abstain from sex until their one true love comes along. Maas's earliest series, *Throne of Glass* (*Throne*), began as a young adult series with a virginal heroine, Celaena/Aelin; however, her virginity is not the characteristic around which much of the romantic plot hinges. Her loss of virginity is to a first love rather than a soul mate. As the series progresses over seven books, the sex depicted becomes more detailed while not to the extent of Maas's later novels.

As Maas began writing *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (*Court*), publishers struggled with marketing the series since it moved away from the young adult genre, even though the heroine, Feyre, is a young woman. Considering Maas's original positioning as a young adult writer, publishers decided to market the new series under the young adult label, even though Maas explained that the novels would have more explicit sex. She told the publisher that they could market the series as young adult; however, she would not censor the sexual content (Orlando). More recently, while reprinting Maas's work with new cover art, Bloomsbury reversed its earlier decisions, changing *Court's* designation to new adult/adult rather than young adult. This evolution continues as Maas's most recent series, *Crescent City*, is designated adult fiction. Maas's depictions of sex defined Bloomsbury's rebranding of her work.

This complicated history regarding Maas's novels reveals the necessity of the New Adult genre in acknowledging the evolution of protagonists toward adulthood, offering a

transitional designation between young adult and adult literature. Maas's work also addresses a question posed by Amanda K. Allen, "Will the emergence of 'New Adult' romance—that is, high drama romance novels focusing on characters in their early twenties and aimed at nostalgic adults, older teens, and college students come to dominate the field?" (Allen 185). The popularity of *Court* suggests that this might be the case. Unlike its earlier, young adult counterpart, the new adult genre embraces sexuality and desire for women rather than controlling it—a direct contrast to the abstinence narratives that populated young adult literature in the decades preceding *Court*.

While sex and romance are certainly important in Maas's work, the narratives often explore the inner conflicts, desires, and experiences of the heroines that are not exclusively tied to love. Like general fantasy, fantasy romances often contain significant worldbuilding alongside a larger fight between good and evil that structures the plot. The novels are mostly told in first-person; however, Maas eventually transitions to third person. Set during a time in one's life when women's sexual awakenings emerge, Maas's adaptations of paranormal and urban fantasy romance offer the perfect antidote to the abstinent protagonists common in young adult literature. In contrast, Maas's later novels explicitly depict consent as a necessary component of sexual freedom. These characters feel empowered by embracing their sexuality through consistent acknowledgement of choice.

I argue that Maas's fictional worlds depict a shift away from the popular virginal romances that predated her work and toward women's ownership of their bodies through consent culture. Focusing on her most recent series, *Court* and *Crescent City* (*Crescent*), I explore the ways Maas's narratives evolved during the course of these series to offer a vision of sexuality not predicated on purity, innocence, and virginity. They offer consensual sexual practices as empowering and imperative to fulfilling sexual lives for women, moving away from narratives that cast women's desire as shameful. Maas's writing presents patterns of resistance related to consent, thus providing commentary on ways to counteract a culture of violence and rape. Her approach reflects the post-E.L. James landscape, which allowed public conversations about "women's sexuality, consent, power, and giving voice to sexual fantasies" (Birthisel 7). Maas's depictions of sex provide a feminist vision for mainstream audiences—where the possibility of cultural revision might have a larger impact for unlearning toxic behaviors that many women internalize.

Maas, Sexuality, and Romance

Maas's novels draw on several romance genres, including paranormal (specifically fae), urban fantasy, young adult, and erotic romance. By combining these genres, she builds on a longer history of romance that responds to criticism regarding feminism and genre. Feminist critiques regarding romance stem from second-wave responses that were concerned about the ways narratives can reinforce dominant norms about gender, sexuality, and power. Hsu-Ming Teo explains that for many second-wave feminist critics,

romance novels do indeed portray contemporary ideas of romantic love accurately, but love in a patriarchal society is precisely the problem for women. Love disempowers women, making them vulnerable to abuse and

exploitation, justifying the restricted life opportunities available to them, and diverting their energies from overthrowing the system. Love encourages women to be submissive and servile. (475)

This criticism emphasizes the need for audiences to be aware of the “images of women” represented in romance novels (475). In essence, the problem with romance was that it reinforced hegemonic gender and heteronormative power structures. Most popular romances at the time depicted heterosexual romance between cis-women and cis-men that reinforced larger social structures that saw heterosexuality as the norm. Hegemonic gender roles appeared in these romances, depicting women as submissive, weak, and emotional and men as dominant, strong, rational, and controlling. To these second-wave feminists, popular romances did not challenge gendered and sexual scripts that reinforced patriarchy. However, *Court* addresses abuse and exploitation by men through Feyre’s first love interest, Tamlin. However, as the series progresses, the heroine recognizes the patriarchal structure that empowered Tamlin’s abusive nature, causing her to assert her independence and leave their toxic relationship. Feyre’s actions demonstrate the necessity of recognizing and resisting abusive structures that disempower women.

Maas’s novels better reflect positive readings of romance by scholars who saw its potential due to its broad appeal to women. Janice Radway saw romance readers as having a conflicted relationship with patriarchal social structures where reading romances “can be conceived as an activity of protest and longing for reform necessitated by those institutions’ failure to satisfy the emotional needs of women. Reading therefore functions for them as an act of recognition and contestation whereby that failure is first admitted and then partially reversed” (213). Radway centers her analysis around women’s desire for reforming patriarchal power structures. Women who read romances can both recognize oppressive social structures and contest them by acknowledging society’s dismissal of the emotional needs of women. In romances, those emotional needs are often tied to sex, especially good sex for women. Feyre’s story reflects this reading of romance as she must first recognize the patriarchal power dynamics at play in her relationship and then contest them by rejecting her romantic interest, realizing he does not meet her emotional needs. Additionally, in an analysis of earlier Harlequin romances, Ann Barr Snitow explains that these novels “insist that good sex for women requires an emotional and social context that can free them from constraint. If one dislikes the kind of social norms the heroine seeks as her sexual preconditions, it is still interesting to see sex treated not primarily as a physical event at all but as a social drama, as a carefully modulated set of psychological possibilities between people” (160). Like Radway, Snitow sees the romance novel as a contested space that can reveal to women the patriarchal social structures that disavowal their sexuality and desires. The psychological dynamics, then, become a part of the way sex is presented on the page. Maas fits into this longer history by recognizing that the romance genre is a space where women can confront social reality through fantasy. She also acknowledges the need to continue rewriting sexual scripts for women through sexually empowering romance.

Unlike the submissiveness of characters like Bella Swan and Anastasia Steele, Maas’s heroines embrace narratives of women’s empowerment based on physical strength and assertiveness. The popularity of Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* reflects a cultural shift where much of her appeal lies in her ability to combat violence by embracing attributes tied to men. Celaena/Aelin, in Maas’s *Throne* series, also taps into these dynamics through

her presentation as a skillful fighter and assassin. In looking at *Throne*, Heather Brown suggests that the arrival of this type of heroine is a result of the cultural idea of postfeminism that emerged in reaction to the gains for women achieved by the second-wave feminist movement. Brown explains that postfeminism offered messages of women's choice as empowerment; the burden is then placed on women to empower themselves by often taking on masculine roles. Brown suggests that *Throne* engages in this cultural shift by problematically expecting "women to achieve this change, rather than through social structures or perpetrators" (249). The burden of feminist change is placed on individual women and their choices in order to achieve equality rather than social reform. *Court* also participates in this dynamic as Feyre, and later her sister, Nesta, are expected to "overcome their feminine victimization by becoming physically stronger than those who oppress them" which "burdens women with the responsibility for self-protection and blames women who are unable to diminish their psychological vulnerability for their own victimization" (Brown 249). Both Feyre and Nesta fall into this categorization as they physically train, often with the guidance of men, to protect themselves, marking it as a key feature of empowerment and transformation in the face of oppressive patriarchal forces. While employing a similar trope, as Maas's series progress, women's empowerment comes from confronting and rejecting patriarchal sexual narratives.

Rape Culture and Fantasy Romance

Maas's emphasis on consent counters larger sexual myths that reinforce rape culture in the United States. Tracey Nicholls defines rape culture as "[o]ne that normalises and excuses rape, a social context in which the desire of privileged aggressors are prioritised over the comfort, safety, and dignity of marginalised populations that are seen as targets, as prey" (26), while Corine Schulze et al.'s definition expands this to describe rape culture as one that "downplays, devalues, and renders sexual violence, and its concomitant institutional features, invisible despite the very real consequences of these acts for those who experience them" (14). It is this social context alongside its representation in earlier paranormal romances to which Maas responds. In discussing *Twilight*'s glamorization of abuse as encouraging codependency, Danielle N. Borgia explains how many contemporary paranormal romances veil abusive relationships through the supernatural, noting that many "promote conservative gender roles that demand women's submission to dominant male partners, but, also to idealize and romanticize abusive relationships. Weak, dependent women who enable their male partners' abuse cannot openly be portrayed as sympathetic in the context of the US millennium" (155). Borgia explains that the vampire becomes the hero as he "attempts to suppress his dangerous sexuality" (155). Combatting submissive narratives for women requires stories that not only represent women as more vocal and assertive but also men who reject domineering behavior. Kelly Wilz indicates the importance of narratives that offer "productive models of affirmative consent, tender masculinity and women's pleasure in popular culture that work to challenge toxic dominant and hegemonic constructions" (5). Maas offers a space with "a vision of *how* our culture might look if we had collaborative and consensual examples" (5). These narratives, then, refute the glamorization of abuse in earlier texts like *Twilight* that implicitly encourage rape culture.

Maas counters the cultural narrative that a woman's responsibility is to accept violence and tame the beastly behaviors of men. The first novel, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (*Thorns*), retells the "Beauty and the Beast" fairytale in a fictional land, Prythian, that is populated by humans and faeries. Tamlin, the Beast, lures Feyre, the Beauty, into his kingdom to break the curse of Amarantha, which requires a human who hates faeries to fall in love with him. Tamlin, though, is an overly protective and controlling person whose toxic character the heroine subsequently realizes. Feyre also interacts with Tamlin's foil, Rhysand—a more progressive man, who is less controlling and prioritizes choice. Rhys, a morally grey character, is not completely innocent of manipulating Feyre by restricting her choices; however, the contrast between the two characters in the first three books showcases the toxic behaviors of men that might keep women trapped in unhealthy relationships. Feyre's relationship with Tamlin encapsulates the phases of domestic violence that reflect similar glamorization of abuse in *Twilight*. Lenore Walker notes that the first phase of abuse includes possessive and controlling behavior that causes tension between partners that can escalate to physical abuse (91). Paula Nicolson explains that controlling behavior is "a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by ... depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance, and escape and regulating their everyday behavior" (15). Tamlin engages in such controlling behavior.

In the second book, *A Court of Mist and Fury* (*Mist*), after Feyre breaks the curse, Tamlin begins isolating and "protecting" Feyre in ways that prohibit her freedom. He often surrounds her with guards, insists she dress in the fashion of the high court, no longer allows her to leave the grounds to hunt or fight, and does not involve her in courtly matters (434, 458, 464). Feyre frequently reminds Tamlin about the detrimental effects of his controlling behavior: "I am drowning. And the more you do this, the more guards... You might as well be shoving my head underwater" (445). Tamlin's response illustrates Walker's second phase of domestic violence or the "acute battering incident" where "the batterer typically unleashes a barrage of verbal and physical aggression that can leave the woman shaken and injured. The woman does her best to protect herself, often covering parts of her face and body to block some of the blows" (97). This phase is exactly the dynamic that emerges as a result of Feyre's confession when Tamlin allows "his power [to] blast through the room. The windows shattered. The furniture splintered" (*Mist* 445). Feyre creates a protective shield where "[a]round me, no debris had fallen ... Tamlin took a step toward me, over that invisible demarcation. He recoiled as if he'd hit something solid ... And I realized that the line, that bubble of protection... It was from me. A shield" (447). These scenes reveal Tamlin's manipulations of Feyre and her confused response alongside her innate need to protect herself from him overtly situate her as a victim of intimate partner violence.

Maas represents Tamlin's charming attitude and what appears to be his sincere apologies. Walker names this the "Contrition Stage" where "the batterer may apologize profusely, try to assist his victim, show kindness and remorse, and shower her with gifts and/or promises" (98). After this first violent episode, Tamlin immediately begs for forgiveness, saying, "'I'm sorry. I'm sorry... I'll try' he breathed. 'I'll try to be better. I don't... I can't control it sometimes. The rage. Today was just... today was bad ... Today, let's forget it, let's just move past it. Please.'" Feyre then conveys the rest of the scene: "I didn't fight as he slid his arms around me tightly enough that his warmth soaked through me ... 'I'll try to be better,' he said again. 'Please—give me more time. Let me... let me get through this. Please'" (*Mist* 448). Tamlin's acts of contrition here are part of a pattern where he repeatedly

asks for forgiveness for abusive behavior after a series of escalating events that eventually result in physical violence (444). Feyre's relationship with Tamlin shows different forms of abuse that are often ignored in the "Beauty and the Beast" fairytale.

Maas is not alone in revising fairy tales to better highlight some of the dark themes that reflect contemporary social issues. Jeana Jorgensen, in looking at the appearance of trauma, specifically in contemporary fairy-tale literature, including *Court*, explains that in response to increasing cultural discussions regarding violence against women, "it would make sense to see fairy-tale retellings that echo this concern with trauma and its aftermath" (5). Despite its depiction of violence, Jorgensen notes that *Court* is different in that it does not just exploit violence and trauma but rather offers a "perspective on trauma that includes reckoning with its aftermath and eventually healing from it" (13). Feyre's healing results from ending her relationship with Tamlin and working through her trauma with Rhys, who had similar experiences at the hands of Amarantha. Their happily ever after storyline reinforces the idea that it is possible to heal from trauma.

Mist retells the Hades and Persephone myth with Rhys fulfilling the common villain-to-hero trope found in many romances, beginning with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (Belyea 409). While enduring the trials that eventually remove the curse, Feyre "agrees" to a deal with Rhys, who initially fulfills the role of villain, where she must visit his court one week a month in exchange for healing a fatal injury. Their agreement results in a bond between the two characters where Rhys can feel Feyre's emotions, especially her depression and post-traumatic stress. While at Rhys's court, she begins to acknowledge her trauma and abuse. As Paula Nicholson notes, "[t]he material context of domestic violence and abuse comprises a complex interconnected set of factors, which includes the physical world and the social health and economic resources available to women who live with or leave abusers" (36). Rhys offers Feyre the social and economic freedom that she needs to eventually leave her toxic relationship. By pointing out Tamlin's controlling behavior, Rhys reminds her that if she marries Tamlin, she will be "cloistered for the rest of your life, especially once you start punching out heirs" (*Mist* 416). Rhys also reminds her that relationships should be equal: "'Tamlin isn't your keeper, and you know it.' 'I'm [Feyre] his subject, and he is my High Lord—' 'You are no one's subject'" (423). Eventually, Feyre acknowledges that Tamlin preyed upon her: "I'm thinking that I was a lonely, helpless person, and I might have fallen in love with the first thing that showed me a hint of kindness and safety. And I'm thinking maybe he knew that—maybe not actively, but maybe he wanted to be that person for someone" (491-492). Feyre, though, finds that she no longer craves protection. The stability and refuge of Rhys's court creates the space for Feyre to recognize her abuse and leave her abuser (597). Unlike Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* where the "virgin-beast" trope is romanticized in a way that "masks the truth; making it difficult to detect" (Maas and Bonomi 513), Maas draws explicit attention to abusive undertones through Feyre's interactions with Rhys.

While Tamlin overtly embodies controlling, protective, and abusive behavior, Rhys also engages in some of these traits. Under the Mountain, Rhys and Feyre trauma bond as a result of their experiences. When striking their bargain, Feyre, under the specter of impending death, has no agency other than to take the deal. However, Rhys does respond to Feyre's negotiation of better terms. The matter is further complicated by Amarantha's control over Rhys, putting him in a position of doing unlikable things to protect himself and others, restricting his agency. Removed from these conditions, unlike Tamlin, Rhys attempts

to recognize and change his behavior. When he uses her as bait to draw out an enemy without her knowledge, Feyre immediately calls him out: “You said I could be a weapon—teach me to be one. Don’t use me like a pawn” (*Mist* 592). Later that day, Rhys apologizes for his behavior and does not repeat it. Rhys can be overly protective and secretive, and when she realizes this, Feyre repeatedly tells him not to “coddle her” and assume what is best for her (597, 783). Unlike her previous relationship, Feyre has learned to stand up for herself. However, Rhys does not completely learn his lesson as later, in *A Court of Silver Flames* (*Silver*), he decides to hide aspects of her life-threatening pregnancy to “protect” her. Feyre’s recovery includes claiming her voice while highlighting that even sympathetic men reinforce problematic masculine behavior.

Maas resists gender scripts by presenting several characters that prioritize choice and agency, both sexual and not. Choice appears most often in Rhys and Feyre’s relationship and first emerges after she leaves Tamlin. Once she returns to Rhys’s court after one of Tamlin’s outbursts, Feyre has the right to leave at any point as it is beyond the boundary of their bargain. Rhys tells her that if she wishes to return, “Say the word and it’s done.” Feyre could see that “he meant it, too.” (*Mist* 470). Unlike the entrapment she experiences at Tamlin’s hands, Rhys offers her freedom by signaling a desire to abide by her choices. These scenes offer a direct contrast to the controlling behavior of Tamlin. Once they are in a mated relationship, Feyre recognizes how important Rhys’s respect for her choices is to her, making comments like: “My choice. It had always been my choice with him” (*Wings* 1027) and “my mate—the male who always presented me with a choice not as a gift, but as my own gods-given right” (1059). Feyre embraces her newfound agency and recognizes that choice is an essential right.

The rewriting of men’s gendered scripts appears through encouraging independence rather than passivity for women. Rhys often remarks that Feyre is both independent and powerful. In threatening Illyrian warriors due to their culture of disrespect toward women, he says, “And if any of you lay a hand on her, you lose that hand. And then you lose your head...And once Feyre is done killing you” (*Mist* 739). In another scene, when Feyre is cornered by Tamlin’s guards, Rhys comments, “I heard every word between you. I knew you could take care of yourself” (761). Rhys’s attitude shows respect for Feyre as a person who is in control of her own choices. Again, this is a direct contrast to Tamlin. Later in the series, when he decides to break tradition to make Feyre the High Lady of the Night Court rather than consort or wife, Rhys explains his decision: “My equal in every way; she would wear my crown, sit on a throne beside mine. Never sidelined never designated to breeding and parties and child-rearing. My queen” (892). In making this choice, he breaks with the patriarchal traditions of the Courts, seeing women as equal to and as capable as men. Eirini Arvanitaki’s analysis of Harlequin Mills and Boon postmillennial “Modern” novels notes that they “embrace a feminist message as the heroines liberate themselves from oppressive pasts...in the course of each narrative, with the patriarchy having a negative impact” (22). Maas’s series also convey similar messaging about feminism.

Trauma and Sexual Assault

The sexual assault of women sits at the periphery of Maas's tales but is rarely explicit. In *Silver*, there is a library that is a sanctuary for women who have experienced various forms of violence. Nesta's body is violated by forcibly submerging her in a magical cauldron, which Cassian notes is where "[h]er body stopped belonging wholly to her" (*Wings* 1050). A direct discussion of the sexual assault of a woman appears in *Crescent* when the evil Pollux attempts rape. This instance falls more in line with the historical definition of rape as "characterized not only by a lack of consent but also by the use of force" (Freedman 4). In the second novel, *House of Sky and Breath* (*Sky*), Pollux's excuses for his attempted assault echo those often found in rape culture myths as "a set of beliefs that trivialize rape by assuming that the victim consented to, or was responsible for, being raped" (Harris et al. 386). After his colleague reports the assault, Pollux claims that he was "having some fun" and that "the female was all over me. She said she wanted it." As the conversation continues, his colleague asks, "At what point did you not hear her say no?...The first or the tenth time." Pollux spews a common rape myth of women as sexual gatekeepers: "Some females say no when they want it" (*Sky* 248-249).[1] The inclusion of this scene draws attention to common "justifications" for sexual violence against women—mainly that women are playing games.

Interestingly, many of Maas's depictions of sexual assault revolve around men as victims/survivors and women as sexual predators. The sexual assault of men is not widely recognized. Much of this has to do with long-standing perceptions about masculinity and sex as well as specific legal definitions of rape. DiMarco et al. observe that the archetype of sexual assault creates the "perception that female sexual victimization against males is rare, that sexual victimization causes males less harm than females, and that males always want sex" (469). This archetype is further reflected, as DiMarco et al. note, in the CDC Report that "does not consider a woman forcing intercourse on a man to be rape"; instead, "being made to penetrate" is its own category that does not fall under the rubric of rape (467). Maas's novels recognize a culture of violence that is deeply tied to gender expectations. Both in the novels and in society, men often claim that their assaults were consensual or necessary.

Two women, Amarantha and Ianthe, are the primary female predators whose abusive behaviors are tolerated or excused by men. Amarantha is the dominant villain in *Thorns*. Rhys describes her abuse of him: "I was a prisoner in her court for nearly fifty years. I was tortured and beaten and fucked until only telling myself who I was, what I had to protect, kept me from trying to find a way to end it" (*Mist* 455). He also describes his interactions with her in transactional terms: "Amarantha made sure that I... serviced her" (732). As the main antagonist, Amarantha's depiction as a sexual predator falls in line with other violent and abusive aspects of her character. Ianthe, though, is a more nuanced depiction of sexual predation tied to power dynamics, especially in her position as high priestess, giving her often unquestioned authority. She attempts to assault two men in the series. In her encounter with Rhys, she sneaks, naked, into his room without his permission. When he finds her there, he asks her to leave. Instead, she attempts to touch him, but his powers allow him to resist her. He advises, "Don't ever touch me. Don't ever touch another male in my court" (559). Ianthe's behavior is not curbed as we find out later when she binds another man to a tree and makes similar sexual advances. While restrained, he tells her not to touch him, but she persists. Even after Feyre stumbles upon them and tells her to stop, Ianthe continues: "Her

hand slid lower, not for his own pleasure, but simply to throw it in my face that she could.” Like Rhys, Feyre compels her to “never touch another person against their will. You will never convince yourself that they truly want your advances, that they’re playing games” (*Wings* 985-987). Feyre’s response reveals Ianthe’s desire for power while also tying her to the justification of assault as one where the victim is playing a sexual game—not unlike the incident with Pollux. Maas presents these instances of sexual abuse and violence as ones that participate in the same power dynamics as those associated with male perpetrators.

Despite his abuse at the hands of Amarantha, Rhys insists that he agreed to those encounters and does not see them as assaults. Reed et al. observe that men were more than likely to experience “unacknowledged rape” where “the survivor uses nonvictimizing language to describe their experience” (163). Rhys often uses this language when dismissing his abuse by Amarantha as a choice. As the series progresses, the reader learns that he agrees to this toxic dynamic to protect those he loves and his court. He explains, “So I decided that to keep her from asking questions about the people who mattered, I would be her whore” (*Mist* 514). In using “decided,” Rhys implies that he made a choice, when, in reality, he is coerced. Maas even draws an explicit parallel between Ianthe and Amarantha, who “had come. And done exactly to Rhys what he’d wanted to kill Ianthe for. He’d *let it* happen to him. To keep them safe” (560, my emphasis). Rhys’s insistence on the assault as his choice in protecting others demonstrates nonvictimizing language.

Rhys’s sacrifice, oriented to hegemonic masculinity, presents him as a hero. Claire Sisco King discusses sacrificial masculinity in film, highlighting that a “beloved but psychologically wounded male protagonist gives his life to save others and find redemption for himself” and is a reflection of “American investment in the rhetoric and iconography of trauma as embodied chiefly by a stagnant, yet largely unnoticed, character type in Hollywood cinema, the sacrificial victim-hero” (2). Rhys fully embodies this figure as his experiences are deeply rooted in trauma. When he confronts Rhys about his sacrifice, Cassian indicates that he knows that Rhys “went through that hell for us, for fifty years.” Cassian then says, “You think I don’t know what happened? I know, Rhys. We all do. And we know you did it to save us, spare us” (*Wings* 1463). In this confrontation, Cassian acknowledges the narrative of sacrifice while also implying that Rhys hides his abuse. Rhys’s silence suggests his refusal to see himself as a victim—especially through his insistence that he consented. In many ways, Rhys’s response shows what studies have found as a typical reaction when men experience abuse: conflict with expectations tied to hegemonic masculinity.[2]

Rhys also experiences PTSD because of the sexual and physical violence that he endures. His encounters are “encoded in an abnormal memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (Herman 37). David DiMarco et al. note that for male victims, trauma appears as “psychological disturbances,” including “self-blame, emotional distancing...and feelings of anger, anxiety, and depression” (470). Rhys exhibits many of these symptoms in response to the violence he experienced. One dream that Rhys repeatedly has is “Where it’s not me stuck under her [Amarantha], but Cassian or Azriel. And she’s pinned their wings to the bed with spikes, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it” (*Mist* 516). His sexual experiences with Amarantha reflect his sense of helplessness. In addition, these dreams are often identical and recur (Herman 39). Rhys indicates their repetition when he tells Feyre, “I have two kinds of nightmares: the ones where I’m again Amarantha’s whore or my friends are... And the ones where I hear your neck snap and see the light leave your eyes” (*Mist* 615). While often seeing

himself as having a choice, Rhys's PTSD reinforces the idea that what he actually endures is rape. Maas's depiction of Rhys's assault also challenges rape myths that see men as aggressors in sex. His reaction to his assault showcases negative constructions of masculinity that expect men to be strong and so prevents them from getting help. Rhys's experiences reinforce the importance of consent culture for both men and women, and Maas's depictions of sexual assault contrast and thus emphasize the positive sexual relationships in her series.

Consent Culture

Maas's work incorporates broader conversations about consent that reject earlier abstinence narratives like those in *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades*. Mainstream discussions regarding sex and sexual assault recognize the power dynamics produced by patriarchal sexual roles, noting the influence of third wave feminism, which according to Jeana Jorgensen, "began to focus on explicit issues of consent and intersectionality" (5). Maas's novels reflect notable changes in discussions of consent by feminists. According to Tracey Nicholls, "[c]onsent is a psychological state; it happens in the mind of each individual, and crucially requires the person who is consenting to convey that state of mind to their partner—in words or in utterly unambiguous behavior" (50). Communication is key in sexual interactions where, ideally, partners engage in escalating consent at each stage and can withdraw consent. Some critics of consent culture look at it as a thought experiment, exploring it as a question of self and subjectivity and whether a self is constant and stable enough to ever consent (Alcoff 128-129, Greenblatt and Valens 3). While these approaches look at larger philosophical issues related to psychology and the legal system, the reality is that people are harmed in a culture that does not embrace consent. Maas's novels reveal various ways that narratives encourage consent and sexual agency. She looks at the many gender and sexual dynamics that victimize and disempower women, including rape culture, domestic abuse/intimate partner violence, and sexual assault. In fact, many of these issues are reinforced in abstinence narratives that prioritize women's sexual objectification and shame women for sexual desires outside of the "soul mate" narrative. Maas shows that consent is necessary for women's emotional and sexual well-being.

Maas explores the most well-known form of consent, direct or explicit verbal consent, through male characters that unambiguously ask. Enacting this model of consent encourages bodily autonomy and sexual agency, as Newstrom et al. explain: "When partners are enthusiastic about gaining consent for sexual behaviors they have yet to try with their partners, it forces the requester to focus on the needs and desires of their partner" (456). In *Court*, during their first sexual encounter, Rhys explicitly asks Feyre, "What is it you want, Feyre?" twice, while awaiting her agreement to the encounter (*Mist* 763). In *Silver*, Cassian asks Nesta, "You want to do this?" to which she replies, "Yes" (385). And, in *Crescent*, Hunt also asks Bryce, "You ready to do this?" and she responds, "Gods, yes" (*Earth* 782). In all these examples, the men ask for direct, enthusiastic consent from their partners before progressing. The initiator of a sexual act asking for and receiving affirmative, explicit consent prioritizes the needs of their partner.

In both *Thorns* and *Crescent*, Maas depicts forced or coerced consent that results from social and psychological pressures that ask women to prioritize sacrifice as a form of care

and protection. Tracey Nicholls explains that women are expected to “orient our lives to men” through the “pressure to take responsibility for men’s sexual desire, to manage it, and to conform to it” so much so that it becomes a “background feature of women’s lives in male-dominated societies” (28). In *Court*, social pressures encourage Feyre to marry Tamlin, and even after she leaves him, she indicates that she would return to prevent war (*Mist* 400, 633). Maas also flips gendered scripts by depicting Rhys’s forced consent to a sexual relationship with Amarantha to protect others. *Crescent* tackles this issue by showing characters’ willingness to give up bodily autonomy as an act of sacrifice, including a spy who submits to violence to maintain her cover and a lesbian archangel who agrees to mate with a male archangel to maintain order. Technically, these characters consented to these events; however, the circumstances draw attention to whether consent can be given under duress. In essence, if pressured, one cannot really consent to sex.

Male characters in Maas’s work who refuse to pressure women into sex reveal the complex, and often hidden, dynamics around consent. Fahs et al. explain that many women “engage in sexual compliance and sexual acquiescence ... because they feel they must do so, either to please a partner or because of social expectations” (228). Men like Cassian and Hunt in Maas’s recent releases do not pressure their partners, preferring enthusiastic consent. In *Silver*, Cassian does not put undue pressure on Nesta to perform additional sexual acts beyond the first. When Nesta asks why he does not, Cassian replies, “I’m taking my cues from you” (337). He gives Nesta the space and agency to continue their sexual encounters (or not). After they have penetrative intercourse, Cassian again does not expect any further sex, especially as he recognizes Nesta’s attentions are elsewhere. Nesta is curious as to why he has not pursued anything further, inquiring if the “sex was not good.” Cassian tries to be considerate of Nesta’s needs, saying, “How could I be so selfish—to demand more sex from you when you’re so invested in training?” Cassian’s use of “demand” here indicates that he did not want to pressure Nesta into sex. Her response reinforces her agency: “It’s not a demand if both sides want it” (433). Their interactions recognize the pressure often put on women for sex and suggests that men should reject a culture that normalizes men’s participation in that behavior.

Perhaps, more importantly, the characters, despite being in established sexual relationships, continue to request explicit consent regarding different aspects of sexual encounters. This move to explicit consent during sex appears most consistently in Maas’s recent novels. Cassian asks Nesta about the pacing of sex: “How do you want it?” Nesta replies, “Hard.” (*Silver* 388). In *Crescent*, Hunt and Bryce repeatedly ask for explicit consent. Bryce asks Hunt at one point: “Want to have drunk, sloppy sex?” His response: “Fuck, yeah” (*Sky* 658). In another scene, Hunt asks, “Want to get a little kinky with me, Quinlan?” Bryce enthusiastically responds, “Oh, yeah” (659). Consistently, these characters ask their partners about their comfort level with particular sexual acts rather than simply doing them. These interactions reinforce Rebecca Kukla’s conclusion that “language [can] enable pleasure, agency, and sexual possibility” (72) through invitations to engage in sexual encounters.

Maas also depicts women seeking men’s consent when they initiate sexual encounters—a dynamic that appears less frequently in popular discourse around consent. By flipping the gendered script, she challenges “problematic gender norms” where “the exclusive focus on whether a woman consented or not fails to challenge the conventions in which males ask and females answer” (Alcoff 128). While men’s consent did not appear as directly in *Throne* and *Court*, *Crescent* shows evolving depictions of consent that broaden the

discussion to include men. Bryce and Hunt's relationship is one that focuses on clear communication from the general status of their relationship to their sex life. In one scene, Hunt asks Bryce for consent, but she does not grant it, saying instead, "I want to touch you first." Hunt responds, "That's not a yes," and Bryce answers, "I want your yes" (*Sky* 232). In the rest of the scene, he consents to Bryce performing oral sex on him while also respecting the fact that she never explicitly gives him permission to touch her. This interaction shows the importance of both mutual and escalating consent between partners. Bryce also encourages Hunt's consent in their first penetrative sexual encounter. She clearly asks for what she wants: "I want you to fuck me. Will you do that?" Hunt agrees, but seeing the public space where the act would occur, he steps away from her. Bryce sees his hesitation and offers him the opportunity to withdraw consent. She asks, "No?" and he responds, "Yes" (506-508). In both encounters, the communication between Bryce and Hunt provides a counternarrative to the myth that men should be sexual pursuers. These interactions also normalize men's right to refuse sexual encounters.

The dynamic between Bryce and Hunt models clear communication as necessary and healthy. Both characters are partners who listen to and respect each other's wishes and boundaries. In moving toward a more sexual relationship, it is Bryce who desires the change in their status after Hunt respects her wish to begin with a platonic friendship. Bryce's desire for change prompts a healthy conversation about what each person wants. In some ways, by insisting that they wait for a sexual relationship, Bryce fulfills the role of gatekeeper but Hunt's willingness to respect her wishes also undermines aggressive masculinity. Bryce also wants to make sure that it is not only women's consent that matters. Bryce asks Hunt, who has said he will embrace whatever relationship she desires, "What do you want? Why is it only what I want?" Her question draws attention to the normative narrative that women are the consenters. Bryce says, "But I also want to know what you want, Hunt" (200). They best exemplify what Kukla calls "ethical" and "dialogical" conversation when "everyone involved has communicated successfully that they want to engage in it and is doing so autonomously and willingly" (92). By insisting on examining what they both want, Bryce refuses passive assent in favor of establishing relationship boundaries that are acceptable to both. The pressure to consent is no longer on one person but between two.

Maas acknowledges non-verbal consent so long as agreement is clearly indicated. Often, this form of consent emerges when characters are already in a relationship. Japa Pallikkathayil explains that "nonverbal behavior is general[ly] a clear communicator of consent only when it occurs in response to verbal solicitation of consent or in the context of an established sexual relationship" (114). Maas's characters typically fulfill both dynamics. In *Court*, once he has been in an established sexual relationship with Feyre, Rhys feels comfortable seeking sex in a nonverbal manner—"his mouth grazed over my [Feyre's] chin, as he nipped at my bottom lip." Feyre thinks, "I knew what he was asking." She reciprocates with touching, indicating her consent. Still, Rhys makes sure, asking: "If you're too tired..." Feyre nonverbally responds to his "verbal solicitation": "I answered him with a kiss of my own" (*Wings* 1359). In addition to awaiting consent, Rhys demonstrates that he does not want Feyre to feel pressured into sex by confirming consent, even if nonverbal in manner. Nonverbal consent in response to a "verbal solicitation" also occurs between Cassian and Nesta. When he wants to perform oral sex, he says, "I owe you a debt." His request is made explicit by a nonverbal cue as he "braced his large, powerful hands on either thigh." Still, he waits for her consent: "He waited for her to signal that she understood what he intended...In

a choked whisper, she said, ‘Yes’” (*Silver* 246). Their interactions demonstrate ways of nonverbal consent that are at the same time direct. These moments also refuse coercion as characters do not move forward without consent. Maas shows that consent can be sexy and resists the idea that stopping for consent precludes passion.

Maas further challenges the idea that men are not in control of their desires by depicting the withdrawal of consent. During penetrative sex with Cassian, “Nesta halted him with a hand on his chest. Just one hand, and he stopped, utterly at her command. If she wanted it to end here, it would” (391). Maas implies that with a silent signal, Nesta can withdraw consent and that Cassian would honor that decision, even in the middle of sex. A similar scene plays out in *Crescent* during an oral sex scene. In the middle of cunnilingus, Bryce says, “Hunt,” and he responds to her address: “He paused, ready to halt should she give the word. But that was the last thing she wanted” (*Sky* 311). This scene highlights what Bryce wants, and despite already consenting to a sexual act, Hunt continues to prioritize what she wants even if that might conflict with what he wants. These interactions show what Kukla describes as a “sexual invitation” where one “get[s] to change [their] mind at any time whatsoever about accepting an invitation for sex” (88). These scenes further the idea that women are entitled to say “no” at any point during sex and that men have the control to abide by their wishes.

Maas again flips gendered scripts by presenting male characters that prioritize women’s pleasure over their own. Sara Komes and Matthew A. Hoffman note that while criticism of romance novels is often directed at women’s objectification, the genre’s presentation of women’s sexual pleasure actually resists that simplistic reading, noting that “‘average’ or ‘everyday’ sex can objectify women” and that “[r]omance novels offer one way to avoid this, through ‘heroic’ love which precludes objectifying the heroine, allowing her to safely enjoy herself sexually” (40). One way that “heroic” love appears is the prioritization of women’s desire and pleasure through the hero’s focus on the heroine’s orgasm before his own. This construction is most commonly seen in initial sexual interactions where men engage in digital sex on women as an indication of their overall desire centered on her pleasure. In *Court*, as Feyre attempts to rush their first sexual encounter; Rhys responds by asking, “Just—let me touch you” in a voice that Feyre describes as a “broken plea.” He engages in digitally pleasuring Feyre, and after her orgasm, he asks for/expects nothing in return despite his own arousal, remaining “long and hard against me” (*Mist* 764-766). Feyre’s orgasm is the focus of the initial sexual encounter rather than the traditional idea that “[b]oth participants are responsible for men’s orgasm, which generally occur naturally, but neither partner is in charge of ensuring women’s sexual pleasure” (Andrejek et al. 203). To counter this narrative, Rhys finds satisfaction in simply providing Feyre pleasure. Maas’s men engage in sexual encounters, especially initial sexual encounters, where women’s pleasure and sexual wants are more important than their own.

Maas combats the rape myth that men have uncontrollable urges, sometimes reinforced in romances, by depicting their restraint.[3] Jodi Gold and Susan Villari note that “[m]en are told that they are unable to separate their desires from their actions. Once sexually aroused, or so the story goes, men must pursue sex even if forced or coerced” (2-3). Maas refutes the idea of men as sexual aggressors unable to control their actions by showing their investment in the comfort, safety, and pleasure of their partners. When performing oral sex on Cassian, Nesta realizes that “he was holding himself back. Didn’t want to ram himself into her, hurt her, displease her” (*Silver* 289). While the focus is on his pleasure in the scene,

he still wants his partner to feel safe. When first engaging in penetrative sex, Cassian is aware that his large “wingspan” might be harmful to Nesta. In first penetrating her, “[h]e halted...He trembled, holding himself barely inside her” as Nesta wondered “if she’d be able to fit all of him.” Nesta notes his “hesitation” and tries to encourage him to thrust fully inside her. Cassian resists, saying, “I’ll hurt you.’ ‘I [Nesta] don’t care’...‘I [Cassian] do” (390). Despite being encouraged to be more aggressive, Cassian is still concerned about Nesta’s comfort through his desire not to hurt her. These moments of restraint offer a remedy to hegemonic narratives of men’s sexual aggression by refusing to prioritize their own pleasure.

Romance has increasingly presented narratives about women’s ownership over their own bodies in paranormal and urban fantasy for adults. Lauren Cameron explains that romance novels in our contemporary moment present progressive heroines who “display bodily autonomy and women making their own choices when it comes to sex” (13). However, paranormal romances that include narratives where women are in thrall to or mated to supernatural men complicate this idea of bodily autonomy. This type of narrative is presented in Maas’s “fated mate” trope as one that ostensibly undermines the illusion of choice. Rather than stories of explicit consent, the mated nature of many of the pairings present “dubious consent” or “dubcon.” Milena Popova explains dubious consent as “the idea that sometimes, for whatever reason, consent is not clear-cut, not a matter of ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (6). Ashton Spacey gives a more detailed definition as a “situational context in which the consent of one, both, or all parties involved is uncertain, and/or a situation where some degree of coercion is used to facilitate an encounter” (n.p.). Spacey’s point about dubcon and coercion is important to thinking about these fated pairings related to consent. In *Court*, characters are mated, Feyre and Rhys as well as Cassian and Nesta, and it is this bond that draws the two characters together. This begs the question: is consent taken away in a narrative when the heroine is fated to the hero? That tension appears throughout *Court*, especially as Feyre and Nesta must come to terms with their mate bonds. Maas’s later series, *Crescent*, better addresses this issue of dubious consent as the main couple, Bryce and Hunt, name themselves mates, taking away much of the idealized and fated aspect of their romance. This shift is important as it pushes back against “soul mate” narratives like those found in *Twilight* whose fated nature suggests that one should “save themselves” for their one true love.

Maas offers fictional examples that counter cultural attitudes about sex wherein men have animalistic sexual desires and that women should be sexually submissive. Instead, she shows that consent can be intensely sexy, insisting that it can further both trust and desire in relationships. In addition, women have the right to sexual agency and should signal, both vocally and silently, what they want without fear of their partner’s reaction. These narratives can embolden women to articulate their sexual wants and needs in ways that can increase their pleasure as well as unlearn cultural scripts.

Conclusion

Romance novels like Maas’s, which move away from narratives of rape and ravishment, demonstrate the need to present sexual narratives where women characters are empowered and deserve respect in their sex lives. While many may dismiss Maas’s novels,

and others like them, as purely “smut,” a derisive term used for romance novels, romances like hers have the power to impact young and adult women and to educate them about sex in ways that do not emphasize virginity and abstinence. In an interview, Maas noted that she intentionally did not write Feyre as a virgin: “I wanted her to have a sexual history that wasn’t something to be ashamed of, that was something that she was in charge of; I wanted her to be in charge of her body, her passions and her desires.”

Maas’s work is sex-positive, representing healthy sexual dynamics that can also be educational. David Helkenberg studied the relationship between young adult narratives and their impact on young adult readers in exploring sexuality and found that in terms of sexual acts, these readers noted that romance narratives helped them understand different sexual acts beyond penetrative sex, which is typically prioritized due to men’s pleasure (101). Maas sees herself as part of that educational tradition as when she was growing up, she learned much about sex and relationships from romance novels and hopes that “it’s come full circle, and maybe someone’s reading my books now and it’s doing the same thing now that [those other books] did for me” (Thompson).

Maas and other romance writers are not just addressing consent but more importantly, the value of good sex for women and perhaps, good sex more broadly. Joseph J. Fischel makes a compelling argument against consent, suggesting instead that affirmative consent is not enough to address sexual violence and unequal power dynamics. Fischel recognizes that conversations about consent are actually about sex inequality, including “sexual intimidation and coercion, norms of male dominance and female submissiveness, collective disregard for women’s sexual agency and desires” and proposes instead that sex inequality is best addressed through “social transformation: political debate, public health initiatives, educational interventions, artistic productions, and creative collaborations” (16). I would suggest that Maas’s novels are just such artistic productions that have the power to encourage social transformation by offering narratives that make good, consensual, and equal sex the norm. And, considering the prevalence of abstinence narratives in not only art but also sex education and cultural myths, Maas’s novels, and romance novels more broadly, are needed now more than ever.

[1] Jozkowski et al. explain: “In the context of the traditional sexual script... men are expected to always want sex and to serve as the sexual initiators... and women are expected to be less driven by sex and thus are thought to function as sexual gatekeepers” (905).

[2] Brooks et al. conducted a study that examined the relationship of masculinity to intimate partner violence and found that men were both conflicted about and aligned with hegemonic constructions of masculinity.

[3] Angela R. Toscano identifies common rape constructions in romance novels that contribute to narrative structure.

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