



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

**Love at First Fight: How the Enemies-to-Lovers Trope
Shapes Narrative Structure and Gender Implications
in Rebecca Yarros' *Fourth Wing***

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Author: Núria Pedrós Peró

Supervisor: Sara Martín Alegre

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres

Grau d'Estudis Anglesos

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Abstract

Blending romance and fantasy, romantasy's growing popularity within online book communities has increasingly attracted critical attention. Its overreliance on tropes, recurrent plot devices, and a disregard for building strong narrative structures has caused scholars to start examining not only the cultural phenomenon it represents but also the ideological assumptions that underpin it. This dissertation explores how Rebecca Yarros' *Fourth Wing* (2023), uses the enemies-to-lovers trope as the central element of its narrative construction, consequently embedding gendered ideologies that sustain traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. To examine this phenomenon, this analysis draws upon Janice Radway's model of romance as a comparative framework for understanding current trends in the genre. Furthermore, Judith Butler's theory of gender as a performative construct built upon repetition illustrates the danger of the reiterative use of tropes that perpetuate gender stereotypes.

The findings reveal that Yarros uses the central romantic tension between her protagonists to determine the novel's pacing and progression, overriding the political and fantasy plotlines, which function largely as scaffolding, sustaining the conditions of their romance. The analysis further demonstrates the significant gender implications this centrality entails: To maintain the tension required by the trope, Yarros presents a heroine who is consistently emotionally and sexually subjugated to the hero's inability to be emotionally forthcoming, while framing her submission as romantic devotion rather than structural imbalance. Ultimately, the dissertation concludes that the enemies-to-lovers trope functions as a vehicle for patriarchal gender ideologies, which go largely unquestioned precisely because of their deep embeddedness within romantasy.

Keywords: *Fourth Wing*, Rebecca Yarros, Romantasy, Enemies to Lovers, Trope, Genre, Gender

0. Introduction

In recent years, the term ‘romantasy’ has become central when discussing contemporary literature. Romantasy, a portmanteau that blends the genres of fantasy and romance, narrates stories that work as a “gateway for avid romance readers to venture into the realm of fantasy literature” (Moldrem 2). Romantasy is thus set in a fantastical setting, and “revolves around the relationship between two central characters (...) having an initial conflict that leads to romantic entanglement” (Moldrem 2). The genre is also often defined as literature created and written by and for women, its stories often featuring a seemingly empowered heroine whose love interest is a “male who respects female values” (Niebling 5). The genre’s recent popularity is largely attributed to its presence on social media platforms, particularly within book communities on Instagram and TikTok, respectively called Bookstagram and BookTok.

TikTok is a social media platform based on a hashtag system and short-video format that allows for “book-related content [that is] easily digestible, fostering engagement through reviews, recommendations and discussions” (Tristany and Khusyairi 1). As McAlister and Cuthbert note, BookTok’s reach has been notably impactful on the modern book market, to the point where “marketing material for books will often reference (...) TikTok” by stating “TikTok made me buy it” (7). These platforms have become key in popularising romantasy and have redefined how readers discover and consume fiction as it allows them “to share likes and engage around books within a sociotechnical landscape” (Balling and Martens 2).

To facilitate this engagement, romantasy works, like other popular genres, are often classified according to tropes, also known as “recurring plot devices, character archetypes, and themes that are written consistently enough to become recognizable by readers and warrant their own name” (Niebling 8), creating a simpler way for readers to

“find exactly what they are looking for” (Matthews et al. 2). Nevertheless, controversy around the overreliance on trope classification has started to arise as tropes have become a key marketing strategy for publishing industries. While representing a straightforward system to classify romantasy tales, tropes often revolve around heteronormative romantic prototypes, such as the ‘enemies-to-lovers’ trope, which this dissertation focuses on. The limited representation of gender and sexual identities caused by the established and seemingly unmodifiable pattern followed by these tropes makes it difficult for romantasy to be a more inclusive genre. Criticism has also been raised regarding the underlying messages that these gendered prototypes transmit to the readers: The very familiarity and predictability that make tropes accessible can carry with it gender conventions that ultimately appear not as changeable constructions but rather as the sole way relationships are currently structured.

The popularisation of trope usage has positioned romantasy novels at the centre of female contemporary reading culture, and it is precisely because of romantasy’s widespread reach and its predominantly female readership that the ideology behind the tropes demands critical attention. This dissertation emerges from that conviction and attempts to reveal the patriarchal subtext that bleeds into these superficially feminist spaces, using one of the most influential and commercially successful romantasy novels to illustrate it: Rebecca Yarros’ *Fourth Wing* (2023).

Rebecca Yarros (b. 1981, Washington D.C.) is an acclaimed American author who skyrocketed to fame after publishing *Fourth Wing*, her debut in the romantasy genre and the first book of her ongoing saga *Empyrean*.¹ After becoming a sensation on

¹ The *Empyrean* saga currently comprises three published novels: *Fourth Wing* (2023), *Iron Flame* (2023), and *Onyx Storm* (2025). Among Yarros’ previous notable works are her contemporary romance novels *The Last Letter* (2019), *In the Likely Event* (2023) and *Variation* (2025).

BookTok and acquiring worldwide recognition, Yarros has become one of the genre's most influential figures.

Fourth Wing, a fantasy novel set in an imaginary land, follows Violet Sorrengail, a young woman who is forced by her mother Lilith, the commanding general of Navarre's army, to enrol in Basgiath War College and train as a dragon rider in the Riders Quadrant,² despite Violet's inclinations towards becoming a scribe, like her late father. Lilith is a figure of institutional authority who prioritises the kingdom's military above anything else: After the gryphon-rider kingdom of Poromiel initiated a rebellion against the kingdom of Navarre, six years before the events in *Fourth Wing*, dragon riders became essential to ensure the protection of Navarre. As Lilith's daughter, Violet must comply with her destiny and join the military forces of Navarre, as her sister Mira did before her. In Basgiath, Violet encounters the "separatist kids" (14), children of the rebels who supported the Poromiel kingdom and who are marked with an identifying "shimmering mark that starts at the end of their wrist" (14).³ Among them, she meets Xaden Riorson, whose father led the rebellion against Navarre and was executed by Violet's mother, not before killing Violet's brother Brennan, creating a feud among both families.

Despite Mira's warning against befriending Xaden, now a senior wing leader at Basgiath, Violet finds herself inevitably drawn to him. When Violet bonds with two dragons, one of whom is mated to Xaden's dragon, their proximity inevitably grows and, with it, romance starts to blossom. Violet soon realises that there is more to Xaden than his cold demeanour: Before dying, Xaden's father begged for the lives of the rebellion children to be spared as long as they were conscripted into the Riders' Quadrant, and

² In Basgiath, cadets are split into either the Rider, the Infantry, the Scribe, or the Healer's Quadrant, depending on their desired training.

³ From now on, the term "marked cadets" will be used to refer to the children of the rebellion who bear the mark as a consequence of their parents' uprising against Navarre.

Xaden, as the eldest, must ensure they are true to their word. Finally, after being sent to a task designed to push cadets to their limits, Violet's world takes a turn after discovering the truth behind the Poromiel rebellion that her mother had concealed from Navarrians: Poromiel has been under the attack of venin, dark wizards kept at bay only by the magic shield powered by dragon magic for years, and Navarre has deliberately ignored them to protect themselves from taking collateral damage. Xaden reveals that he has been collaborating with a covert resistance, which forces Violet to confront a harsh reality: Standing beside Xaden and loving him means betraying her government, her mother, and all she has ever believed to be true.

The cultural impact of *Fourth Wing* as one of the most popular books on BookTok, along with its record-breaking sales, makes it a particularly revealing case study to analyse how romantasy works structurally and also what ideologies it carries. Previous studies have regarded how tropes in romantasy have influenced the publishing industry; however, limited attention has been given to *Fourth Wing* as a cultural artifact that reveals current trends and the limitations of the genre, despite its popularity among women of diverse age groups.⁴ This TFG asks two interrelated research questions in order to properly evaluate to what extent the enemies-to-lovers trope aligns with the belief that tropes contain embedded gender ideologies. Firstly, this dissertation examines how and to what extent the trope of the enemies-to-lovers shapes the narrative structure of *Fourth Wing*, from a Literary Studies point of view focused on genre. I argue that Violet and Xaden's tension drives the pacing of the plot, overtaking significant historical and political narrative arcs which function as decorative elements, stretching the plot to preserve the trope. Secondly, using feminist Gender Studies, I aim to explore what gender

⁴ See 1.1, page 7.

ideologies this structural centrality carries, if any. I also inquire in what ways the novel's deployment of the trope reinforces rather than challenges patriarchal gender norms. I argue that there is a dissonance between the individual portrayal of the heroine and the dynamics that emerge when she interacts with the male protagonist, reinstating her in a patriarchal emotional and sexual hierarchy that the novel frames as romantic ideal rather than an example of gender inequality.

In search for textual evidence that sustains my assertions, I conduct here a close textual analysis of the novel to illustrate both the structural operation and the gender implications that building the plot of the novel around the enemies-to-lovers trope entails. In order to support my arguments, I have drawn from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender is not a biological given, but a social construct built upon performative repetition, to argue how the pervasiveness of the enemies-to-lovers trope naturalises binary constructions of masculinity and femininity in romantasy. Janice Radway's conception and exploration of the romance has been used as a comparative point between romance fiction in the 1980s and the genre as it exists today, as it retains a striking relevance for understanding contemporary romantasy.

This dissertation has been organised into two main sections: One focused on genre and the second on gender, each comprising a theoretical framework and an analysis of the primary source. In the first section, I initially expand on the notion and origins of romantasy and its tropes, focusing on the enemies-to-lovers trope by explaining the three stages that compose it. Then, I analyse how this trope is developed in *Fourth Wing*, and how it essentially organises the structure of the plot, positioning itself at the heart of the novel. In the second section, I start by describing the performativity of gender which is naturally embedded in the genre of romance, and the gendered implications of such conventions. Finally, I use *Fourth Wing* to reflect on how the centrality of the enemies-

to-lovers trope perpetuates and reproduces patriarchal gender dynamics in both masculine and feminine characters.

1. Romantasy: Tropes and Dragons

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Despite its current popularity and the newness of the term ‘romantasy’, which has only been coined in recent years,⁵ the concept of a genre merging fantasy and romance, “has been around for a long time” (O’Sullivan 1). However, identifying the first novel deemed to be romantasy has caused a divergence of opinions, given that some subgenres of fantasy revolving around paranormal romance have existed before and now serve as sources of inspiration for romantasy authors, such as the myth of Hades and Persephone (Horáčková 14), despite not being considered romantasy themselves. Other subgenres featuring stories with magical elements and romantic qualities, such as ‘Romantic Fantasy’⁶ or even ‘Young Adult’ also complicate the attempt of drawing a line between classifications (McAlister and Cuthbert 6) as it is true of fantasy blockbusters like Cassandra Clare’s *Mortal Instruments* novel series (2007-2014) or Tahereh Mafi’s *Shatter Me* (2011) which are currently regarded as forerunners of the genre (O’Sullivan 24). However, during COVID-19, TikTok emerged as “an important source for connection and entertainment” (Balling and Martens 1) which, led by Sarah J. Maas’ series *A Court of Thrones and Roses* (2015-2026),⁷ allowed for the emergence of bookish sub-communities, among which BookTok, formed by the words ‘book’ and ‘TikTok’,

⁵ The Urban Dictionary registers a first usage in 2008. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=romantasy>

⁶ Romantic Fantasy, while featuring strong romantic subplots, relies predominantly on fantasy novel conventions (McAlister and Cuthbert 3).

⁷ Publishers Bloomsbury have claimed that they coined the term ‘romantasy’ to commercially “identify the genre [Maas] was spearheading” (Creamer).

came to be formed. With these readers' communities, the term 'romantasy' blossomed into the trend that it is today.

TikTok has become a pathway to a new model of literary consumption due to its accessible and vast well of user-tailored content. Due to the app's extended reach, the intended audience of recent romantasy books is no longer a teen audience, as it was the case with Young Adult books (McAlister and Cuthbert 6); instead, romantasy is now widely consumed by adults as well: Females aged between 13 and 34, followed by females aged between 35 and 54 are the predominant readers' groups of BookTok, as Balling and Martens establish (13). These groups, frequently "prioritise emotionally intense or dramatic narratives," which has come to "spark concerns about the diversity of literary culture" (Tristany and Khusyairi 1). These concerns lie in the platform's algorithm, which favours engagement over diverse content, which has caused some romantasy authors to start "following a specific writing style and a familiar plot that has been written and become popular before" (Tristany and Khusyairi 2), especially after observing the success of Sarah Maas's *A Crown of Thorns and Roses* (2015), to guarantee maximum viewership. To ensure this effect, books on BookTok are often promoted by means of literary tropes.

These tropes, which, as noted, are recurrent repetitions in both character and plot which are regarded as a convention of the genre (Palmer 7), are not exclusive to romantasy, as they are a familiar territory for readers to offer them a starting point of interest in a story (Palmer 3). In fact, despite the relative newness of both TikTok and romantasy, these classifications are not new within the genre: Janice Radway's classic study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984, 1991) demonstrates how romance fiction has long relied on recognisable patterns and subgenres to create a sense of familiarity for the reader. Although Radway's original research was

conducted in 1984, and must be considered within its historical context, her findings remain relevant in understanding the continued importance of predictability in contemporary romantasy. Through a series of interviews with a group of female readers from Smithton, Tasmania, Radway shows how for these women, romantic stories served as a gateway to an alternate reality where the presence of tropes gave them a sense of control over the story which they could not find in their households (17) given that their relations and character circled around domestic work (89). While more than 40 years separate Radway's work from the appearance of TikTok, striking similarities can be noted between the Smithton women and current readers of romantasy: As Dos Santos notes in her thesis, "the linguistic devices, plot choices and reliable endings are practices that ensure that reading will be marked not as 'work' but as 'pleasure' (...) and that is, in fact, their (the reader's) goal when reading romance" (23). What has changed is not the presence or absence of tropes, but rather their visibility and circulation: Digital platforms enable readers to actively share and seek out these narrative patterns within like-minded communities and, most importantly, name them systematically.

However, this increasing codification of tropes also reveals some of their limitations. As Matthews et al. argue, romance publishing and the romantasy community "have a particularly responsive relationship to its readership, attentive to sales trends and reader responses on social media" (2), which creates the impression that if authors were to "challenge or defy these expectations" they could "leave readers feeling betrayed" (2). While tropified dynamics provide emotional security, Matthews et al. encourage reflecting on the dependence and restriction that an overreliance on repetition and familiarity may generate, as tropes may perpetuate restrictive conventions and discourage

more subversive narratives.⁸ Among the most prominent tropes circulating in these spaces are ‘friends-to-lovers’, ‘love triangle’, or ‘enemies-to-lovers’, which stands out as one of the most structurally recognisable examples.⁹

The trope of enemies-to-lovers, which will be referred to as ‘ETL’ for the entirety of this dissertation, is one of the most predominant in both romantasy and the contemporary book industry. According to Moldrem, it “has been a staple in romance literature for decades, epitomised by Jane Austen’s classic, *Pride and Prejudice*” (13). The love story of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy blooms from initial animosity to later affection, adhering to a structured formula that often involves “conflict, tension, and banter, showcasing the evolution of their relationship from dislike or rivalry to understanding and love” (Dos Santos 10). The effectiveness of the ETL trope thus relies on the presence of several key narrative elements that structure the transition from hostility to intimacy. Drawing on Moldrem’s analysis, this progression can be understood through three main components: The establishment of enmity, the gradual destabilisation of that animosity, and the narrative conditions that allow for that emotional transformation.

Firstly, the enmity between protagonists must be clearly established and grounded in a conflict that is sufficiently strong to sustain tension throughout the initial stages of the narrative, which might stem from personal vendettas to broader socio-political conflicts. As Moldrem notes, such high-stakes contexts mean that “protagonists are driven by purposes greater than themselves, fuelling their initial enmity” (10). Contrary

⁸ Colleen Hoover in *It Ends With Us* (2016), for instance, mobilises familiar tropes such as the “bad boy” and the “happy ever after”, only to subvert them by revealing the male protagonist as an abuser (Matthews et al. 3). This revelation caused a certain deception among the readers who “still sought that happily ever after” (Matthews et al. 3).

⁹ For an extensive listing on existing tropes, refer to TV tropes, containing the largest repository of tropes: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Tropes>

to fantasy, this conflict should not function to irredeemably vilify the love interest, but rather to create the conditions for emotional complexity and later reinterpretation (5).

Secondly, the trope depends on a gradual destabilisation of these initial perceptions. The early revelation of enmity plays a crucial role, as it allows the narrative to explore how first impressions are challenged over time, a process enhanced by a single-perspective narration, usually that of the female protagonist, which restricts the readers' understanding and aligns it with that of the protagonist (Moldrem 7). This process encourages a re-evaluation of the supposed enemy, shifting them from antagonist to potential partner. The crafting of the relationship can be further complicated by adding complementary tropes which are also central in romantasy, such as 'forced proximity', which intensifies physical intimacy, or 'fated mates', which emphasises the emotional connection between characters by linking them to an unwavering magical bond. (Horáčková 22).

Finally, romantasy introduces specific narrative conditions that facilitate this transition. Moldrem notes how, unlike fantasy, romantasy blurs the lines between the demarcations of good and evil (3). As a result, the enemy is not simply an external threat but also a figure of attraction that allows for conflict and intimacy to coexist. The integration of complex world-building into both the origins and the development of the relationship creates what Moldrem describes as a "seamless and interconnected narrative" (4) that differs from romance tropes. In the end, the mutual revelations between the characters lead to a real understanding and perception of their nature, which usually culminates with a sexual encounter or with the beginning of a romantic relationship, as well as with a resolution of the subplots introduced in the second stage of their relationship.

1.2. Analysis of the Enmity and Narrative Hierarchy

Through a close reading of the novel, this section traces how these concepts operate in *Fourth Wing* and the reproduction of the three stages outlined by Moldrem characteristic of the ETL trope: The establishment of enmity, its gradual destabilisation, and the conditions that allow for emotional transformation, demonstrating that the ETL trope is not incidental to the novel's structure but rather constitutive of it, using the political plots to help construct the romance between the protagonists.

Firstly, I focus on how the enmity between Violet and Xaden is built by observing the reasons that construct it and what role the political context plays in its development. Violet is first introduced along with her mother, General Lilith Sorrengail, and her older sister Mira. On Conscription Day, when it is decided whether she will gain access to Basgiath War College, Violet encounters several marked cadets. Mira warns Violet to avoid one in particular, Xaden Riorson: "His father was the Great Betrayer. He *led* the rebellion" (15, original emphasis). This distinction creates a well-established reason for their future enmity, grounded in previous military conflict (Moldrem 10). However, as asserted, romantasy needs an initial spark that will later result in the pursuit of the relationship, so when Violet encounters "the most exquisite man [she] has ever seen" (Yarros 20) among the other students, a quick physical attraction is established before she understands this is Xaden. The immediate revelations of their family names cause Violet's perception to shift, feeling fragile while "the shining onyx of his eyes transformed to cold, unadulterated hatred" (21).¹⁰ This brief encounter holds the weight of generations and creates an immediate and biased opinion on both characters. At the same time, it is observable through this interaction how Yarros uses the political context

¹⁰ This narrative structure in which attraction precedes the revelation of the beloved's identity as an enemy, mirrors the dynamic seen in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), where both protagonists fall for each other before discovering the other belongs to the rival family.

to ignite the relationship between them; the political feud between their parents sets the ground for their enmity and, consequently, its resolution. It is then when Yarros introduces two standard romantasy subplots to move the trope forward: On the one hand, Dain Aetos, Violet's best friend, is introduced as a potential love interest, establishing a latent 'love triangle' trope.¹¹ On the other hand, Violet enters Xaden's wing after he demands it, thus forcing a gateway for the 'forced proximity' trope to be created, despite their mutual wariness. Nevertheless, Violet's lingering initial attraction becomes a recurring motif that hinders her and Xaden's complete enmity.

Despite not knowing whether Xaden's feelings are reciprocated due to the restricted focalization through Violet, the reader can infer that the enmity is more complex than it seems: Xaden's position as wing leader grants him repeated opportunities to act against her, however, Xaden limits himself to verbal threats, warning her he will be "handling her when the time is right" (Yarros, 92). His consistent restraint suggests that his hostility, however performed, does not translate into an urgent desire to harm her. Nevertheless, these threats still create a hierarchy between them that situates Xaden at a higher position than Violet, characteristic of the initial stage of the ETL plot. Notably, as mentioned, it is the political history between their families that provides the very foundation of this hierarchy, suggesting that the novel's fantasy context functions largely from the outset as a generator of romantic conflict rather than an independent narrative concern.

The second stage of the trope begins when the destabilisation of the enmity is introduced by an apparent disruption of the power balance. As Dos Santos notes, this stage usually occurs when situations arise that force the characters to interact or work

¹¹ Dain Aetos' role within the narrative of *Fourth Wing* will be further explored in 2.2. See page 22.

together, creating opportunities for deeper understanding (37). Having secretly witnessed how Xaden organises clandestine meetings among the marked cadets, not to conspire but to protect them and advise them on the tasks they will have to surmount, Violet faces a version of Xaden that contradicts her initial perception entirely: “Damn it, I don’t want to find a single thing about Xaden admirable, and yet here he is, being all annoyingly admirable” (Yarros, 89). When Xaden discovers her, rather than betraying him to her mother, she grants that she will keep his secret. This moment is significant on two levels: Violet demonstrates political conscience and critical thinking, distancing herself from her mother’s authority, while Xaden is forced to revise his perception of her as an extension of the enemy. Given that their enmity is set on political grounds, the revelation that the political setting is more complex than it initially appeared gradually dissolves the hostility between the characters. Violet’s perception of Xaden continues to shift as she realises her political misinformation has led her to ignore the harsh conditions which the rebel children have had to overcome. The power hierarchy established in their first encounter superficially begins to erode, not through confrontation, but through an unexpected alignment of values.

The structural conditions for this emotional shift are consolidated through the introduction of the ‘fated mates’ subplot. When Violet bonds with a dragon that is bonded to Xaden’s dragon,¹² the narrative enforces their proximity through an external magical logic: “mated pairs can’t be separated for long, or their health diminishes; they are always stationed together” (199). This makes their proximity justified: From that moment onwards, Xaden aids Violet in sparring to strengthen her, which also provokes a physical proximity between them, enforcing the ‘forced proximity’ trope. As their interactions

¹² Bonding in *Fourth Wing* refers to the symbiotic connection that is established between a rider and their dragon once the dragon has evaluated if the cadet’s values align with their own. Once bonded, the dragon can channel raw magic into their rider, and they are able to communicate telepathically.

intensify and Violet uncovers her signet¹³ and creates a deeper bond with her dragons, Xaden acknowledges the shift in their relationship as well: “at some point you and I are going to start to trust each other, Sorrengail” (255), marking a breach in their enmity. This turning point serves to move the ETL trope forward, rather than the plot. Nonetheless, Yarros deliberately prolongs the tension between them by introducing ambiguity around the authenticity of their desire; when they kiss for the first time, Xaden abruptly breaks away: “I can’t. (...) I refuse to act on desire that isn’t yours” (300). His withdrawal is not a rejection but a deferment since he is unwilling to act until he is certain Violet’s feelings are her own and not a product of the dragons’ mated bond channelling through them. This moment marks the climax of the destabilisation stage: The enmity has been dissolved, but the transformation cannot be completed until the ambiguity is equally resolved.

A later series of events allow the emotional transformation to be completed, bringing Xaden and Violet closer to a full understanding of their connection. Violet’s squad is made to fly to Navarre’s frontline outposts; however, Xaden is obliged to join them, given that their dragons cannot be separated for longer than three days (358). It is during this arc that Violet’s perception of Xaden is shown to have permanently shifted, as she openly defends the marked cadets in front of her sister:

“The Tyrrish rider who remained loyal to Navarre during the uprising were promoted, not punished, and the riders who turned against king and country were killed or executed. And just like my grief for Brennan’s loss was directed at Xaden that first day at the parapet, there will be more than one rider who misdirects their own anger at marked riders.” I clear my throat. Mira’s gaze meets mine (...) “*Don’t fuck with my friends*” (362, original emphasis).

¹³ A signet is the unique ability “that results from each unique bond between dragon and rider” (Yarros 58). Violet’s signet is lightning wielding, with which she can summon strikes from the sky. Since the rider acts as a physical conduit and often channels when experiencing high emotions, Xaden helps her control and ground herself.

By acknowledging that hatred towards the marked cadets is misdirected, Violet implicitly recognises that her own anger with Xaden has also been misplaced. That this recognition is made in front of Mira suggests the strength of her new conviction.

A subsequent unexpected attack during their stay leads to a second kiss, this time free of any doubts: “there is nothing hesitant about the way he lays claim to my mouth” (373). The kiss unfolds a series of reaction events, both physical, as they maintain a sexual relationship, and emotional, as Xaden reveals that if any of the rebel children betray Navarre, he will be executed as a punishment for being Riorson’s son (413). Violet is the first to verbalise her feelings after these events: “I’m so wildly in love with you. (...) If we are doing this, then we’re starting from a place of complete honesty” (450), yet Xaden remains reluctant, warning Violet not to fall for him on the grounds that she does not truly know him. Violet finally discovers that he has been secretly working for the enemy gryphon riders, who merely want to protect themselves from a darker magic before the inaction of Navarre, a truth her own mother has deliberately concealed to protect the kingdom’s facade of security, as Violet realises: “Their parents died to expose the truth while mine sacrificed my brother to keep this heinous secret” (494). Xaden urges Violet to reconsider her loyalties, and she decides to side with him, thus consolidating her position in the political conflict. Lastly, Violet’s fatal wound during an unexpected assault forces Xaden to finally confront his feelings:

We hadn’t even kissed and I fell (...) And I never told her. (...) Why? Because I was scared to give her power over me when she already held it all? Because she’s Lilith Sorrengail’s daughter? (...) No. Because I couldn’t give her those words without being totally completely honest with her.” (532)

Xaden’s confession thus completes the three-stage progression: The enmity has been dismantled, the destabilisation navigated, and the transformation confirmed. Xaden’s reluctance to confess is revealed to have never been rooted in indifference but rather in the impossibility of being honest with Violet while keeping his secret, as love and truth

are bound together for him. Significantly, even the political resolution of the novel is structured as a function of the romantic arc. The revelation about Violet's mother hiding the truth behind Poromiel's rebellion reframes the entire ideological conflict that initially grounded the enmity.¹⁴ This political reversal does not resolve any political or war-related conflict, but it does resolve the romance, removing the last legitimate barrier between them and retrospectively justifying the erosion of their rivalry. Thus, the fantasy and political plotlines are mobilised at the precise narrative moment when the trope requires them, evidencing that in *Fourth Wing*, the romantic arc organises and directs the novel's broader structural (political) logic. This structural subordination and the gender implications of the centrality of the romance are further analysed in the following section.

2. Gendered Fantasy and the Illusion of Subversion

2.1. Theoretical Framework

If the first part of the dissertation has demonstrated that the ETL trope is constitutive of *Fourth Wing*'s narrative structure, the second part turns to examine what gender implications this structural centrality carries with it. It is first essential to understand that romance as a genre is, by its nature, gendered. Radway notes that spokespersons at Harlequin, Silhouette, and Fawcett (the genre's main publishers) repeatedly indicate that most of their readers are female and fall within the twenty-five to forty-five age group (45). Other scholars, such as Clasen, similarly note that most "young adult literature, like adult romance, is largely a female space" (229). As Radway observes, at first, romance novels provided an escape from a patriarchal mundane existence, reflecting female desires that were internally repressed (55); nonetheless, these ultimately reinforced notions of male power, perpetuating a male-female gender dichotomy (55). Crucially,

¹⁴ See *Introduction*, page 4.

however, Radway found that the readers were not passive consumers of these narratives but were mostly conscious of romance's consolatory function and engaged with it deliberately, regarding it as a strategic tool for emotional replenishment and temporary refusal of social demands (11). That the contemporary romantasy readership now skews toward working, feminist-identified women makes this dynamic all the more striking: Despite the shift in readership, the structural narrative of romance and gender do not seem to have drastically shifted from these pervasive divisions.

Romance novels, as Clasen notes, tend to follow a tight structure that relies "on a primary convention in which the male was initially angry (...) until some point in which he realises his love for the woman, highlighting the importance of love in transforming male emotions" (229). That this structure has been challenged yet not entirely contested may cause gender conventions to appear unchangeable or intrinsic to both genre and gender; however, as Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, gender is not a natural or biological given but a performance, produced and reproduced through repeated acts that over time naturalise themselves as inevitable and universal (179). Romance, read in this light, is a space where such performances are rehearsed with particular intensity: Its conventions do not merely reflect existing gender norms but actively consolidate them through repetition. In romantasy, this stress on gender performativity is usually carried out through tropes, particularly those that revolve around romance, such as ETL. The naturalisation and familiarisation of tropes make them ideologically powerful as they can bind characters to standardised gender norms and narratives that are difficult, although not impossible, to subvert.

Traditionally, portrayals of romantic love within heteronormative relationships have been dictated by constructions of power led by the dominant male (Clasen 229). This dominant male is constructed around a defined physique that repeats itself

throughout romantic fiction, establishing a tropified “spectacular” masculinity (Radway 128) that creates a link between physical appearance and expectations on behaviour. This prototype has been described as the “alpha male”, defined by Radway as “a brooding, handsome man who is also curiously capable of soft, gentle features” (55), establishing him as simultaneously threatening and desirable. Guy, on the other hand, describes the romance hero as “powerful, ruthless, strong, emotionally stoic and a follower of patriarchal social scripts” (5). Niebling explains how the alpha male has originally been regarded as an individual of “hyperperforming heterosexual masculinity” (8) who acts “through dominating and aggressive behaviour”, making his “masculinity essential to his ability to fulfil the romantic fantasy; he is the perfect partner *because of it*” (8, original emphasis). This stereotypical masculinity, while desirable to both heroines and readers, perpetuates a toxic model of masculinity, which, in romantasy, is expanded by the fantasy setting, granting him additional markers of dominance and power, such as political or military rank. These reinforce his position of authority over the female protagonist, especially within gendered tropes such as ETL.

Newer models of masculinity have recently emerged to move towards heroes who distance themselves from the long-criticised toxic masculinity that “alpha males” portray (Niebling 9). However, the way this subversion has been approached leaves room to question the limits of this archetype's evolution. Niebling states how, while the archetype still exists, it is now “more victim than perpetrator” (9): His initial aggressive demeanour is “a facade to navigate environments where the characters themselves possessed limited consent capital within their societal roles” (9). The male protagonist is reframed not as a figure of uncomplicated dominance but as a traumatised individual whose aggression masks vulnerability; a shift that invites the female protagonist, as well as the reader, to look beyond his initial behaviour and perceive his potential for tenderness. This dynamic

is captured in what Niebling identifies as the 'I can fix him' trope, which "depicts a female character sacrificing aspects of her autonomy to save a flawed male character" (12) and which does not drastically diverge from Radway's proposal: That a man's tenderness is part of his true character but it's simply suppressed, which "places ultimate responsibility for its nurturance and flowering on the heroine herself" (216).

Being aware of how these ideologies leak into romantasy is essential to understand the importance of questioning patterns that recurrently appear in literature and how they are transmitted to the reader, especially in fantasy, as in it "the audience is given the illusion of the suspense of the social rules of the society in which they live" (Ruehlmann 63). There is extensive research proving that the media influences the way in which we think. Clasen describes how a relationship has been found "between media content and cognition wherein media conditioning triggers behaviour" (229): Despite the reader's awareness that ideals presented in literature are meant as an escape and are not necessarily realistic, "they influence cultural perceptions of what they think *ought* to be happening" (229, original emphasis). Mary Frances Casper demonstrates this phenomenon through the *Twilight* series (2005-2008), arguing that characters' roles and behaviours created "understandings of feminism, female identity and empowerment" (216), contributing to a "process of gendered identity formation" that could be later used as a source of comparison (216).

This is especially notable when analysing female counterparts, who are equally bound to a complementary set of conventions, which present empowerment as their surface narrative while reinstating patriarchal structures beneath. Although the publishing industries highlight female protagonists more prominently than before, Ruehlmann argues that most romantasy fiction by women is unable to eradicate or challenge patriarchal structures most likely due to an internalised misogyny which "reinforces

limitations on female independence and autonomy” (1). Romantasy novels typically feature “young, seemingly independent heroines” (Ruehlmann 4) who, despite living in a fantastical world, continue to bind themselves to patriarchal ideologies, through their “sexual (...), social relationships, fashion and dress, and self-confidence” (Ruehlmann 4), proving that the presentation of female characters as heroic is merely a surface-level presentation, as it is the case with most romantasy series (10). Most romantasy authors equate physical or magical power, such as riding a dragon, to having “genuine autonomy (...) in terms of sexuality and decision-making” (Ruehlmann 5), which creates a misleading image that seems to elevate a novel to a feminist status when in reality, a repetitive pattern usually embedded within the chosen trope is being created, based on superficial images of empowerment.

The presence of so many female protagonists has created a social space, both online and presently, that offers a global community that, as Radway indicated, was lacking in her time (212). As Niebling explores, users on BookTok have started up trends that feature female romantasy characters as empowered heroines who would, for instance, “fight for women’s rights” (4). These videos may have given rise “to a novel digital discourse, where fictional characters have begun to transcend their own narratives and evolved into imagined allies” (Niebling 6), which reflects both Radway and Niebling’s shared view that the genre is “inextricably bound up with her (the reader’s) position as a woman in the modern world” (McCracken qtd. in Niebling 11). Butler’s reminder that gender is “what is put on, invariably, under constraint” (531) becomes particularly urgent here: If readers mistake these performances of empowerment for genuine subversion, the power to demand something more radical from the genre is quietly relinquished.

2.2. Analysis of Unravelling Empowerment

Radway's call to study romance critically, not only to understand its origins but to learn "how best to encourage it and bring it to fruition" (212), is precisely the impulse that motivates the following analysis. If romantasy aims to move beyond the illusion of empowerment, and toward the genuine subversion that Butler suggests is always possible, then the gender dynamics embedded within its most dominant tropes must first be made visible. It is with this objective that the following section turns to examine how the romantasy trope of ETL binds its characters to patriarchal gender norms that are only seemingly challenged and what that means for a genre consumed, written, and loved predominantly by women.

It is first important to analyse how both Xaden and Violet fit Radway's model of romance. Xaden is introduced to the reader through Violet's initial perception of him before she becomes aware of his lineage. She first compares him to a shark for his commanding, magnetic presence: "all the riders seem to move around him, (...) they are all fish giving him a wide berth" (Yarros 44). Throughout the novel, Violet shows a constant admiration for Xaden's masculine body which often overlaps and overrides her animosity towards him, framing Xaden's attractiveness as overpowering and causing Violet's values to waver before any significant emotional breakthrough has occurred: "my breath catches and my body warms, the traitorous bitch. *You are not attracted to toxic men*, I remind myself, and yet, here I am, getting all attracted" (119, original emphasis).¹⁵ Yarros leverages the sparring lessons to exploit this attraction, rooting it on a physical level. Therefore, Xaden seems to fit the "spectacular" masculinity standard that

¹⁵ The colloquial and contemporary register of Violet's inner voice is a deliberate stylistic choice, characteristic of romantasy, which often employs sexual language (Moldrem 10) and prioritises reader identification over coherence with the pseudo-medieval setting of Navarre. This is also common of romance novels which attempt to "create an immediate sense of the story's words, without the reader having to rationalize all the time throughout the story" (Dos Santos 34).

Radway describes, in which “almost everything about [the hero of romance] is hard, angular, and dark” (128). Following Radway’s argument, the qualifying “almost” allows a softer side of the male hero to be introduced: This duality, the simultaneously threatening and desirable male, is central to the alpha male archetype that Niebling describes, as Xaden’s aggressiveness is allegedly nothing more than a front to protect himself.

Xaden’s desirability is enhanced by his contrast with Dain Aetos, Violet’s best friend and former crush/love interest, simultaneously establishing a preferred model of masculinity. Yarros creates a stark contrast between Violet’s perception of both suitors, which serves to consolidate Xaden’s emerging role as Violet’s ideal partner. On the one hand, Dain expresses his disagreement with Violet entering the Riders Quadrant as he fears for her safety, encouraging her to abandon the Quadrant before Xaden decides to get her killed: “This place will kill you, Violet. (...) please let me save you” (41-42). After Violet refuses to abandon, Dain remains worried, often urging her to remain invisible. On the other hand, Xaden pushes her to overcome her fears and rely on her abilities, which allows Violet to create a clear distinction between the two: Dain’s protectiveness is coded as paternalistic rather than caring, as he consistently prioritises his own judgment over Violet’s autonomy. While Dain and Xaden’s confrontation serves to advance the ETL trope by helping Violet realise Xaden is a better match for her, the narrative’s solution does not offer Violet genuine independence but replaces one form of male authority with another. When Dain expresses concern about Xaden sparring with Violet, Xaden silences him with a reminder of their rank difference: “No one asked you to think, *squad leader*” (101, original emphasis). Xaden’s curt dismissal of Dain is itself an exercise of (alpha) dominance which repositions Violet not as an autonomous agent but as an object over whom two men negotiate authority.

That Xaden's attractiveness is rooted in his dominance becomes clear when comparing him physically to Dain: They are both broad, muscular, and stereotypically masculine, yet the alpha male makes his aggressive behaviour an essential part of his allure, becoming the ideal partner *because* of this belligerence (Niebling 8). When Xaden starts worrying that Violet will get attacked by unbounded riders for having two dragons,¹⁶ he enforces protection on her dorm and escorts her around, to which Violet responds: "I don't know how to feel about that. It's more than slightly controlling, and way out of line, but also... sweet" (Yarros 258, original ellipsis). The distinction Violet draws between the two men is therefore one of dominance versus its absence. While Xaden's initial encouragement of her abilities appears empowering, his subsequent controlling behaviour complicates the reading. That Violet registers Xaden's surveillance as both "out of line" and "sweet" (258) suggests that his dominance has been so naturalised through the narrative that its manifestations are absorbed into the romance rather than questioned, distinguishing him from Dain, who did not exert that same authority. The same quality that appeared to liberate Violet, Xaden's refusal to coddle her, is revealed to be inseparable from a broader pattern of control that the narrative ultimately asks her, and the reader, to overlook, aligning aggressiveness with lust.

Before analysing how Xaden and Violet's intimacy is deeply tainted by these patterns of patriarchal masculinity, an analysis of Violet at an individual level reveals the differences in how she interacts with Xaden at an intimate level. Almost inadvertently, Yarros contradicts the initial premise of her world-building and allows classical patriarchal patterns to filter into her characters while attempting to maintain the structure of the ETL trope. At a political level, Yarros presents a seemingly non-patriarchal setting:

¹⁶ Bonding with two dragons is highly unusual. Unbounded riders regard Violet's situation as an irregularity and attempt to kill her as a quick way to unbound her from both dragons and have another chance at bonding with them.

women are equal participants in the military landscape of Navarre, holding unquestionable positions of high power, as is the case with Violet's mother. Inside Basgiath College, there exists minimal disparity between men and women: The students are conditioned by their own strength and not by their gender. Nevertheless, Violet does not entirely fit into this scene from the beginning. Violet describes herself as "too short. Too frail. What curves I have should be muscle, and my traitorous body makes me embarrassingly vulnerable" (3). Although it is not made explicit in the novel, Violet's repeatedly mentioned weaknesses might be due to a medical condition that "leaves her in constant pain due to fragile joints and brittle bones" (Ruhelmann 12). Nonetheless, Yarros only hints at Violet having a chronic illness: "just because your body is built differently than the others does not mean you don't deserve to keep your seat" (Yarros 384). Since her condition is not made explicit, the reader is left to assume that Violet is just fragile due to a lack of training, as she had initially prepared to become a scribe. Her sister Mira, in contrast, is described as a young version of their mother, "tall, with strong, powerful muscles toned from years of sparring" (Yarros 3).

Far from surrendering, Violet devises other strategies to ensure her place in Basgiath, such as poisoning her opponents in advance and relying on her speed to advance through the year. This places Violet as a determined heroine, which Yarros points out by stating that "only a master can properly dose and administer for effective onset" (98). Nonetheless, Xaden highlights how her system will eventually falter, and the importance of training, distancing himself from Dain's protective approach, by stressing that "she could use a little less protection and a little more instruction" (120). Xaden's encouragement proves fruitful during the Threshing,¹⁷ an episode reinforcing Violet's

¹⁷ The Threshing refers to the event in which first-year cadets attempt to bond with a dragon. During the Threshing, Violet defends a smaller dragon from other riders who attempt to kill it, engaging in a physical fight which results in a successful attempt to save it.

presentation as a brave heroine with a deep personal strength. The evolution of her abilities, partly due to Xaden's aid, positions Xaden as a positive influence for Violet. Despite this apparently equalised setting, Violet's intimate relationship with Xaden reveals that the novel's surface-level dismantling of patriarchal structures does not extend to the emotional and sexual dynamics between its protagonists, mainly due to the centrality of the ETL plot, which conditions the development of the novel, needing rivalry to maintain the tension that prevents the final resolution from occurring. As is common in romantasy novels, this bargaining is negotiated through sex.

Violet interacts with Xaden in the way that she does because Xaden's hostility is narratively framed as a protective facade rather than a genuine flaw. This has direct consequences for how Violet is positioned in relation to him: In her eyes, Xaden is not beyond repair, and Violet is the only one who can 'fix' him. From the very beginning, Xaden is established as the dominant force in the relationship, both physically and socially, since Xaden is Violet's wing leader and "nothing is worse than cadets gossiping that you've slept your way to safety" (Yarros 385). After their first kiss, which emerges partly under the influence of the magical bond between their dragons, for they channel sensation between riders, Xaden breaks their kiss, as noted, and distances himself from Violet, maintaining an emotional distance that persists during the novel, underwritten by secrecy. Despite Violet's disadvantaged position, she is convinced of the attraction they feel for one another, and in an attempt to bridge a gap between them, she begins being direct about her desire, especially during sparring: "I know how to handle *you* on top of me" (323, original emphasis).

However, Violet's attempts to appear in control of the situation are futile, and her dissatisfaction with the lack of emotional closeness from Xaden arises in moments of tension, evidencing how Xaden's emotional reticence holds a bigger power over her,

which she attempts to deflect by seeming to be in control sexually His distress is not only inferred but actually disclosed by Violet, who begs him to “tell (her) something real” (379) since she believes she barely knows him after having shared several intimate moments. Xaden’s response is succinct and later backed by Violet’s dragon: ““Are you pushing for a reason? (...) he cares for you. That’s already hard enough for him”” (380). Xaden’s vulnerability is revealed slowly but never completely, in order to elongate the tension of the enmity that frames the ETL trope, leaving Violet in a position in which she holds no real control, and in which the narrative prioritises Xaden’s aloofness over Violet’s emotional neglect by him.

This emotional imbalance becomes most acute in the aftermath of their sexual encounters, when Violet’s attempts to assert agency are most visibly dismantled after Xaden advises Violet not to fall for him and to not “mistake any part of him for soft or kind” (413). His stance appears immovable, and Violet, unable to pretend that she is content with sexual reciprocity from Xaden, states: “I don’t think I can separate sex from emotion when it comes to you” (424). Xaden’s lack of emotional response seems to finally allow Violet to reclaim her agency by declaring: “You don’t get to dictate how I feel. You might give the orders out there, but not in here. (...) You can only respect what I choose to do. So we’re not doing this again until I *want* to risk my heart” (426, original emphasis). Nevertheless, the power that Xaden exerts on Violet is noticeable by the way she keeps teasing him after having stood her ground only moments after: “If you’d just *man up* and admit there’s something between us, I would strip down to my skin so you could see every single inch of me” (428, added emphasis). Violet seems to realise that only through the reminiscing of their sexual encounters can she get Xaden to externalise his feelings; however, Violet’s inability to stand by her initial viewpoint makes her intention of guarding her heart appear a mere spur of frustration and a desperate attempt

to regain power over Xaden. Violet's emotional frustration is used to sustain the required tension of the ETL trope, but in turn, dismantles her as a strong female character and Xaden as a positive addition to her personal development.

Violet can withhold or pursue sex and love, but the relationship's progression remains fundamentally dependent on Xaden's willingness to open up. After Violet declares her love for him openly, Xaden responds with the same sexual desire that has characterised their relationship since the beginning: "I fucking *need* you Violet. Right now. And I don't need *anyone*, so I'm not quite sure how to handle this feeling" (450, original emphasis). That Xaden's response to Violet's declaration of love is not emotional reciprocity but sexual urgency encapsulates the fundamental imbalance that structures their relationship. Violet has moved through vulnerability, frustration, withdrawal, and finally complete emotional exposure, yet what she ultimately receives in return is desire, not love. This aligns with Radway's observation that the suppression of a man's tenderness ultimately places the responsibility for its flowering on the heroine (216).

Fourth Wing makes this dynamic not only legible but romantic. As Violet declares:

"It doesn't matter that he's leaving soon or that he probably doesn't feel the same for me. It doesn't even matter that he warned me not to fall for him. It's not an infatuation, our physical chemistry, or even the bond between our dragons that keeps me reaching in every possible way for this man. It's my reckless heart." (441)

Violet's willingness to read past Xaden's silence is presented as perceptiveness and emotional generosity rather than as the asymmetrical burden it structurally is. The novel thus positions female emotional labour and dedication not as a concession to male inadequacy but as the heroine's distinguished virtue, in turn restricting Violet's agency over her romantic situation.

Fourth Wing ultimately reveals the tension at the heart of the romantasy genre: Despite aspiring toward feminist sensibilities, it remains structurally dependent on the very conventions that undermine them. The overreliance on romantic tropes which centre

around heteronormative desire and complementary gender roles demonstrates how patriarchal arrangements remain dominant within Western culture. Yarros constructs a world in which women can ride dragons and command armies, yet despite the suspended disbelief that characterises fantasy, her protagonists remain unable to break free from the same gendered patterns that Radway identified in romance fiction four decades ago, in turn revealing how these attitudes remain deeply tethered even in those women who attempt to write empowered female characters. As Robyn Warhol underlines, “the more we can understand about narrative’s role in the constitution of gender, the better positioned we are to change the oppressive ways that gender norms work in the world” (5); however pleasurable and compelling, *Fourth Wing* carries within it a set of gendered ideologies that remain invisible to its readers precisely because they have been made to feel inevitable.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

The present dissertation has analysed how the ETL trope in Rebecca Yarros’ *Fourth Wing*, perpetuates and reinforces patriarchal patterns and stereotyped gender performativity by structurally and ideologically positioning it as the central narrative device of the novel. The two analytical sections that constitute this dissertation have demonstrated the consequences of the trope’s centrality, which extend beyond narrative organisation and into regarding and performing gender through a binary lens.

The first section has traced how *Fourth Wing* reproduces the three-stage progression of the ETL trope through a close-reading of the text. The analysis has revealed how the trope actively organises the narrative architecture of the novel, reducing the political and the fantasy plotlines as tools to mobilise, sustain, or generate the conditions of the romantic arc. That the demands of the trope are constitutive of the

novel's broader structure has been evidenced through the reveal that Violet's political upbringing had been based on deceitfulness, which, while resolving the romance, does not advance the political warfare.

The second analytical section has critically explored how the centrality of the ETL trope carries a gendered ideology that bleeds into Yarros' characters and perpetuates patriarchal gender norms which are only superficially subverted. Firstly, an examination of Xaden as the encapsulation of the 'alpha male' reveals how Xaden's aggressive and distant demeanour is regarded as a facade which ironically places him at a superior position than less hostile representations of masculinity, as is the case with Dain Aetos. Additionally, a comparison between Violet's initial presentation as a determined and capable heroine and her submissive and vulnerable position within her relationship with Xaden, uncovers a power imbalance between both characters, framed as a romantic tension to be savoured.

Yarros' work invites readers to imagine a military society free of patriarchy, yet the interplay portrayed by Xaden and Violet's relationship naturalises patriarchal emotional dynamics which are presented as the very conditions that make the romance compelling rather than as conventions to be questioned. The structure of the ETL trope denies that Violet is an empowered female protagonist in order to elongate the romantic tension until the novel's resolution. Ultimately, the narrative forces Violet to neglect her desire while prioritising Xaden's emotional inadequacy, which reinstates *Fourth Wing* into the patriarchal structures it superficially attempts to subvert.

This study has also attempted to elucidate the risk in the overreliance of narrative conventions that centre around heteronormative desire by analysing one of the most current popular novels in romantasy. Even among young women writers, there continues to exist a tendency to create protagonists whose independence and empowerment are

limited by traditional models of femininity and masculinity, which works to perpetuate harmful stereotypes and expectations.

This analysis has focused exclusively on the first novel in Yarros' *Empyrean* series; for further research, a logical step forward would be to extend the study to other contemporary pieces of romantasy such as Sarah J. Maas' wildly successful *A Court of Thrones and Roses* or Lauren Roberts' *Powerless* to observe if and how this pattern is broadly reproduced across the genre. Most pressing, however, it would also be valuable to conduct a reader-response study similar to Radway's original ethnographic methodology, examining how contemporary readers of romantasy are internalising the binary gender dynamics that are reproduced through the ETL trope. Relatedly, such a study could also interrogate what specific consolatory function, if any, romantasy currently offers its readership: Radway's interviewees turned to romance as a refuge from domestic constraint, so the question as to why contemporary women continue to seek out narratives structured around patriarchal hierarchies remains an unanswered yet pressing one. Such research would allow for empirical conclusions to be drawn on the real-life effect that these narratives have on readers' expectations of romance and gender roles, which textual analysis alone cannot provide.

Given that romantasy's primary audience includes predominantly young women, further investigation is key to broadening our understanding on how literature functions as a powerful tool that can shape, sustain, and subvert our mental constitution of gender. As the romantasy genre continues to grow and diversify, the focus should be on deploying tropes consciously and critically, allowing the genre's cultural reach to be directed toward the more inclusive and equitable storytelling it has the potential to achieve.

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