



# Romantasy, Virginity and Other Fictions

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## Abstract

Virginity is a gendered, racialised, and classed construct disproportionately applied to girls and young women. As a disciplinary mechanism, purity ideals uphold the sexual double standard and regulate femininity through discourses of morality, respectability and innocence. Ideals surrounding ‘correct’ virginity loss also continue to shape female sexuality, including within youth-oriented popular culture and sexuality education. Against this backdrop, this article examines contemporary romantasy literature as a form of public pedagogy with the potential to disrupt and reconfigure dominant virginity narratives. Focusing on four female protagonists across three popular romantasy series – *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, *From Blood and Ash*, and *The Five Crowns of Okrith* – the article analyses varied depictions of sexual (in)experience and first sex, grounded in the legitimacy of female desire and sexual agency. Through embodied, emotionally rich narratives, romantasy creates imaginative spaces for exploring intimacy, sexual decision-making and pleasure beyond purity norms. While these texts do not fully escape heteronormative or romantic conventions, they offer valuable counternarratives to restrictive purity frameworks and open up more expansive possibilities for imagining female sexual subjectivity.

**Keywords** Girls · Desire · Femininity · Popular fiction · Public pedagogy · Sexuality

## Introduction

Virginity is a notoriously nebulous yet powerful construct. What constitutes virginity, and importantly, its loss, remains open to cultural, historical and personal interpretation. Despite this ambiguity, virginity and purity ideals are inextricable from how

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female sexuality is understood, valued and regulated. Feminist scholarship has long argued virginity is not a concrete, measurable state, but a socially constructed idea mobilised as a form of power and control over female bodies and sexuality (Blank, 2007; Carpenter, 2005; Fine, 1988; Valenti, 2010). Within contemporary Western girlhood, discourses of virginity, sexual innocence and purity continue to shape what is perceived as ‘good’ or ‘appropriate’ sexual behaviour for girls and young women. Messages promoting modesty and sexual restraint circulate across institutions and cultural sites, including school-based sexuality education, religion and popular culture. These ideals reinforce the sexual double standard and limit female sexual agency and bodily autonomy. Discourses surrounding ‘correct’ virginity loss – that is, when virginity can ‘acceptably’ be lost, to whom and how – further operate as a point of regulation and vulnerability (McAlister, 2020). As Valenti (2010) highlights, while the definition of virginity is fairly abstract, its consequences for young women are not.

Against this gendered regulatory backdrop, this article examines the portrayal of sexual purity and first sex in romantasy literature. The portmanteau *romantasy* refers to the hybrid genre of romance and fantasy, which has recently surged in popularity with both young adult and adult readers. Bestselling series such as Sarah J. Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015–2021) and Rebecca Yarros’s *The Empyrean* (*Fourth Wing*) (2023–2025), along with digital platforms such as BookTok, have been instrumental in romantasy’s commercial success. To give readers a sense of its current popularity, Sarah J. Maas, the author of three romantasy series including *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (ACOTAR), has sold over 70 million books in English worldwide, and is published in 38 languages. Meanwhile, the recently released third instalment in Rebecca Yarros’s *The Empyrean* series, *Onyx Storm* (2025), is reported in the New York Times as the fastest-selling adult novel in the past 20 years, selling 2.7 million copies in the first week (Alter, 2025).

Romantasy blends intricate fantasy world-building with the hallmarks of popular romance fiction – most notably, a central love story and an emotionally satisfying, optimistic ending (RWA, n.d). The genre often employs familiar romance tropes such as enemies-to-lovers, love triangles or fated mates, situating these storylines within magical, often high-stakes life-or-death environments. For example, a war college for dragon riders in Yarros’s *The Empyrean*, or the tumultuous machinations of the faerie kingdom in Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. Contemporary romantasy has been shaped predominantly by female authors who foreground female heroines, their epic quests and their desires. Following Tolman (2012, p. 749), desire is conceptualised as an embodied dimension of sexual subjectivity, encompassing the “sexual and pleasurable feelings in and of the body that constitute a form of knowledge” about the self, relationships and broader social worlds. Well known for its explicit or ‘spicy’ sexual content, romantasy offers a rich space for exploring female sexuality, agency and desire beyond the constraints of purity culture.

This article positions romantasy as a form of public pedagogy: a space where young people learn about gender, sex and relationships outside the confines of formal schooling (Giroux, 2004; Sandlin et al., 2010). While comprehensive sexuality education in schools holds considerable potential, in many Western contexts it has historically been constrained by risk-oriented frameworks and moralised discourses,

particularly when addressing girls' sexual desires and decision-making (Allen, 2005; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Hirst, 2013). Michelle Fine (1988, p. 33) famously identified "the missing discourse of desire" in school-based sexuality education, noting how desire "remains a whisper", overshadowed by discourses of victimisation, violence and individual morality. These discourses frame sexuality as inherently negative and risky, often reinforcing ideals of modesty and abstinence, which position females as either potential victims or gatekeepers of male desire. Decades of subsequent scholarship have drawn attention to the persistent inadequacies of school-based sexuality education, including young people's critiques of content as overly focused on biology, risk, and heterosexual reproduction (e.g., Alldred & David, 2007; Allen, 2005; Iyer & Aggleton, 2015; Pound et al., 2016). The limited acknowledgement of desire and pleasure in sexuality education curricula, often results in young people seeking alternative sources of sexuality-related knowledge, such as through film, television, pornography, literature and social media (Allen, 2005; Buckingham & Bragg, 2003).

The concept of public pedagogy highlights the culturally situated nature of education in everyday contemporary life, revealing how knowledge is constructed, transmitted and contested far beyond traditional educational spaces. This article proceeds from an understanding that sexuality education has never been confined to the classroom context (McClelland & Fine, 2017), and that young people are continually surrounded by gender and sexual meanings throughout their daily lives. Literature, film and television are recognised as valuable sites for sexuality-related education in contemporary Western contexts (Allen, 2024; Bittner, 2012; Gilbert, 2004; Nicolini, 2013; Hutchinson, 2016), particularly for topics often marginalised in formal curricula. As one of the fastest growing and bestselling genres, this article positions romantasy as one such site of learning, particularly among its predominantly female readership. At a time when girls and young women continue to navigate contradictory discourses surrounding sexual agency and 'acceptable' femininity, popular fiction becomes an important space where sexual meanings are constructed and contested (Little, 2024; McAlister, 2020; Seifert, 2015). Against this backdrop, romantasy offers readers emotionally rich and embodied depictions of female sexuality that both reflect and challenge dominant sexual norms, including those related to virginity.

The discussion unfolds in three parts. First, I consider how the valorisation of virginity (Valenti, 2010) and the figure of the consummate virgin (McAlister, 2020) have been mobilised to regulate female sexual behaviour and reinforce the sexual double standard. The discussion considers the social value attached to virginity and its 'acceptable' loss, tracing how purity myths constrain young women's sexual subjectivities and decision-making. The article then considers the evolving depiction of sex and desire in Young Adult (YA) literature, noting how even though romantic plots are common in YA, dominant narratives have tended to position sexual activity for young people as risky or dangerous (Trites, 2000; Kokkola, 2013). The depiction of sexuality in YA literature can be understood within the larger landscape of adult regulation of the sexuality-related knowledge available to young people, in particular, what content is deemed 'appropriate' and at what age (Robinson, 2012). I then explore some of the counter-narratives offered in romantasy, and how depictions of

female desire and sexual experience can help destabilise normative ideals associated with virginity and its loss.

The discussion focuses on four female protagonists from three popular romantasy series: Feyre and Nesta from Mass's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015–2021), Poppy from Jennifer L. Armentrout's *From Blood and Ash* series (2020–2025), and Rua, the lead protagonist in *The Witch's Blade* (2021), the second instalment in A.K. Mulford's *The Five Crowns of Okrith* (2021–2024). I situate these three series firmly within the romantasy genre, each centring romantic storylines, spicy content and the happily-ever-after. The female protagonists are aged between 18 and 22 (Poppy, 18; Rua, 18; Feyre, 19; Nesta, 22), and while these novels tend to be marketed by publishers as New Adult – a “fuzzy” and continually evolving category (McAlister, 2021, p. 65) – they attract a wide adult and young adult readership.

Focusing on these four female protagonists, I trace depictions of sexual experience, virginity and first sex. All four protagonists are in heterosexual relationships, which is unsurprising given romantasy (like much romance and fantasy) remains largely heteronormative, although LGBTQ+ representation within the genre is steadily expanding. Two of the books within *The Five Crowns of Okrith* series, for instance, centre queer characters and their love stories. The article's focus on heterosexual relationships is due to the platform they provide for interrogating some of the heterosexual dynamics and gender politics that cohere around virginity ideals and the sexual double standard. While what constitutes virginity loss is open to individual and cultural interpretation, it is commonly thought of within a heterosexual paradigm as first coitus, or vaginal-penile intercourse (Carpenter, 2001). This assumption also underpins the narratives surrounding virginity loss articulated in these three series. Accordingly, references to ‘first sex’ throughout this discussion refer to vaginal-penile intercourse, while recognising the heteronormative assumptions embedded within this definition. Importantly, the article attends to the ways romantasy narratives reconfigure first sex through frameworks of agency, pleasure and self-knowledge, rather than a form of ‘loss’ for young women.

## Doing Virginity ‘Correctly’

Feminist scholarship has demonstrated the enduring regulatory force of virginity ideals and their damaging consequences for girls and women. In her book, *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*, Jessica Valenti (2010) demonstrates how the valorisation of virginity within the United States operates at the nexus of gender, power and morality, tethering young women's worth to their sexual chastity. Valenti argues American purity culture erases female sexual desire and agency, replacing them with a narrow, moralistic ideal rooted in patriarchal control. The valorisation of virginity is premised on the assumption that virginity is a fixed, knowable state, and that preserving it signals moral virtue and social value. As Valenti (2010, p. 9) puts it: “The lie of virginity—the idea that such a thing even exists—is ensuring that young women's perception of themselves is inextricable from their bodies, and that their ability to be moral actors is absolutely dependent

on their sexuality”. In this framework, virginity becomes a proxy for innocence and morality, shaping how girls and young women are judged, policed and valued.

As a gendered cultural construct, virginity serves as a powerful disciplinary tool that upholds the sexual double standard. Purity ideals primarily cohere around female sexuality, with boys and men rarely subject to the same moral codes and stakes when it comes to their virginity (Blank, 2007; McAlister, 2020; Valenti, 2010). For males, it is often the opposite. As McAlister (2020, p. 5) notes, virginity loss for men is often framed “more as a gain than a loss, a moment where a kind of symbolic manhood can be attained”. Consequently, dominant constructions of masculinity position sexual experience as expected and desirable, while prolonged virginity may be read as a failure to embody normative masculinity. This disparity exemplifies the sexual double standard, where male sexual desire and agency are normalised, in contrast to female desire, which is often constructed as passive or lacking (Fine, 1988; Tolman, 2002). Within the sexual double standard, girls and women are expected to exercise sexual restraint and discipline, and act as gatekeepers tasked with containing male passion. This positioning adheres to, and shores up, two interlocking binary frameworks: active/passive sexuality and the enduring virgin/whore (good girl/bad girl) dichotomy (Tolman & Chmielewski, 2018). Virginity becomes a marker of ‘goodness’, positioning girls who do not conform to purity ideals as the opposite. For young women, falling short of the purity ideal is to risk being labelled a slut, perpetuating what Valenti describes as a “dirty double standard” (2010, p. 42); these labels rarely ascribed to males with the same veracity or implications. The virgin/slut dichotomy operates as a discursive enforcement of the double standard (Tolman & Chmielewski, 2018), reinforcing broader gender hierarchies by shaming and punishing girls for stepping outside the bounds of sexual ‘propriety’. Virginity, then, is not simply about whether one has had sex or not; rather, it is a gendered, moralised status that disciplines young women’s bodies and desires in powerful ways.

Like virginity, girlhood is a socio-cultural construct shaped through historically specific discourses of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and class (Aapola et al., 2005; Driscoll, 2002). Within contemporary Anglophone Western contexts, girls navigate competing discourses surrounding sexual empowerment and vulnerability (Egan, 2013). Postfeminist and neoliberal discourses increasingly position girls as active, agentic sexual subjects, while simultaneously subjecting them to ongoing scrutiny regarding expressions of sexuality and femininity (Gill, 2007). Consequently, contemporary girlhood is characterised by a tension between sexual agency and enduring expectations of respectability and sexual restraint.

Purity ideals are also shaped through intersectional axes of race, class and sexuality. The figure of the ‘pure’ girl is most often coded as white, middle-class, cisgender, and heterosexual (McAlister, 2020; Valenti, 2010). Thus, white middle-class girlhood becomes the primary site upon which anxieties about sexual purity and ‘lost’ innocence are projected (Egan, 2013). This is particularly evident in contemporary concerns over the premature or hypersexualisation of girls and the perceived negative impact of media and popular culture (APA, 2007; Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006). Discourses of ‘sexualisation’ frequently invoke a language of protection; however, such protection often masks deeper anxieties or assumptions about girls’ sexuality. The ‘sexualisation of girls’ discourse has been critiqued for

positioning girls as passive, vulnerable victims, reinscribing the active male/passive female sexuality binary and denying girls' sexual agency, rights and desires (Egan & Hawkes, 2008; Egan, 2013). Cultural anxieties over the sexualisation of girls are grounded in discourses of purity and innocence, and largely prioritise adult concerns, rather than the voices of girls themselves. How girls engage with sexualised media is often overlooked, despite research highlighting the complex ways girls negotiate gender and sexual meanings in their everyday lives (Renold et al., 2015).

Cultural ideals surrounding female virginity extend not only to whether one has had sex, but to how virginity is lost, to whom, and when. As Jodi McAlister (2020, p. 32) succinctly notes, virginity “becomes most visible—and most important—at the moment of its loss”; and in the Anglophone West, this moment is saturated with cultural expectations the virgin must navigate. McAlister's (2020) potent figure of “the consummate virgin” describes the ideal young woman who has lost her virginity in a manner deemed socially and culturally appropriate. The consummate virgin follows a romantic heterosexual script, having “lost their virginity in the right way at the right time to the right person, and thus can be said to have ‘done’ virginity properly” (McAlister, 2020, p. 4). What constitutes ‘rightness’ in relation to virginity loss is deeply entwined with dominant discourses of romance and what McAlister terms “compulsory demisexuality”: demisexuality denoting a sexual orientation where individuals only experience sexual attraction to someone after they form a close emotional bond.

Building on Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of compulsory heterosexuality, McAlister (2020, p. 25) suggests women are subject to a discourse of compulsory demisexuality: the assumption that for women, “sex and love are and should be tied together and that romantic love is the only socially appropriate reason for a woman to have sex”. This framework positions female sexual activity outside emotional intimacy as unnatural and wrong, imposing a gendered and heteronormative ideal that frames female desire and sexual activity as inherently emotionally motivated (i.e. through love and commitment), in contrast to the presumed spontaneity and physicality of male desire. In this logic, for women to feel sexual desire and lose their virginity ‘correctly’, there must be an emotional and romantic connection.

Over the last two centuries, ‘correct’ virginity loss for women has gradually shifted from marriage to ideals of romantic love as the legitimising force for female sexual activity (McAlister, 2020). While on the surface this may seem sexually progressive, McAlister reminds us that legitimisation is still needed, in her words: “Women need an ‘excuse’ to have sex, while men do not” (2020, p. 5). During the twentieth century, premarital sex became more socially accepted, sparking a shift in cultural concern from the sexual behaviour of unmarried women to the behaviour of girls. These concerns are fuelled by the discourse of childhood innocence; a notion once applied to children in general, however, now largely coheres around the girl subject (Egan, 2013). Rather than achieving its professed aim of protection, notions of childhood innocence are argued to endanger young people by restricting their access to sexual knowledge and denying their capacity for sexual agency and expression (Giroux, 2000; Kitzinger, 2014; Robinson, 2012). Girls navigate a fine line between presumed innocence and expectations of sexual development that proceed in an ‘age-appropriate’ manner. McAlister (2020) suggests the Anglophone cultural ideal for

girlhood is intrinsically a demisexual one, where sex occurs at an ‘appropriate’ age within a committed, loving and monogamous relationship.

The figure of the consummate virgin shows how virginity ideals evolve, yet do so in ways that continue to reinforce the sexual double standard. It can be argued that much of school-based sexuality education remains entangled in the logic of the consummate virgin. Messages about waiting for the ‘right person’ and the ‘right time’ are couched in language that appears to centre autonomy, however, they may conceal a moral imperative, especially for girls. This framing implies that there is a correct narrative arc to one’s sexual debut, one that privileges heterosexual romance and the prerequisite of a committed romantic relationship. Beyond the classroom, the novel also operates as another powerful cultural site in which sex and love are often entwined to produce narratives of ‘acceptable’ virginity loss for young women (McAlister, 2020).

## Desire and Virginity in Young Adult Fiction

Texts written for and about young people play a significant role in transmitting cultural expectations around gender, sex and relationships. Within Young Adult literature – typically aimed at readers aged 12 to 18 – it is common for narratives to feature a romantic subplot. YA fantasy, for instance, often intertwines elements of magic and adventure with an emotionally charged love story. Depictions of romance and sexual desire frequently adhere to a coming-of-age motif, in which the female protagonist experiences an ‘awakening’ of sexual maturity through milestones such as first kiss or first love. YA narratives primarily position sexuality within a framework of romance (Trites, 2000), with storylines emphasising the slow burn romantic build-up. If or when sex occurs, it is often implied or glossed over quickly, rather than described in intimate detail. Readers might infer that sex has taken place, but they are often not privy to the explicit details. A notable exception is Judy Blume’s (1975) controversial novel *Forever*, one of the first YA novels to explicitly address teenage sex, pregnancy and orgasm. At the time, *Forever* was ground-breaking for its candid portrayal of adolescent sexuality, garnering both praise and criticism (Spiering & Kedley, 2019; Seifert, 2015; Trites, 2000). Fifty years after publication, the novel remains widely available and continues to resonate with young people, as evidenced by the recent TV adaptation produced by Netflix (2025). Meanwhile, *Forever* continues to be banned in some places, highlighting enduring cultural anxieties about young people’s sexualities and the sexuality-related knowledge adults deem (in)appropriate.

While YA literature holds considerable potential as an informal source of sexuality education, portrayals of sex (or lack thereof) vary significantly and often reflect competing discourses about children and sexuality (Venzo & Moruzi, 2021). Historically, the depiction of sex has largely been through a normative heterosexual lens. Critiques also highlight a negative framing of sexual desire as dangerous or deviant (Kokkola, 2013; Seifert, 2015; Trites, 2000). In her influential study, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*, Trites argued YA literature frequently operates as “an ideological tool used to curb teenagers’ libido”, and as such, “tend to be heavy-handed in their moralism” (2000, p. 85). The implied lesson for readers is clear: if you have sex, negative consequences will follow. Even Judy

Blume's *Forever*, which Trites suggests offers young people honest, explicit depictions of sex, is still interlaced with cautionary messages.

YA fiction also has a strong legacy of advocating sexual abstinence, often repressing or even punishing sexual desire (Kokkola, 2013; Trites, 2000). Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), for instance, is widely recognised for its abstinence-until-marriage storyline. Dubbed "abstinence porn", *Twilight* is argued to fetishise virginity, reducing female characters "to objects whose sexual acts, or lack thereof, are the sole expression of their identities" (Seifert, 2015, p. 3). In *Twilight*, Bella's sexuality is cast as perilous, her desires depicted as uncontrollable forces that lead to danger (Allan & Santos, 2016). Desire functions simultaneously as threat and allure, with sexual temptation leveraged as a plot device to create tension (Gillis & Simpson, 2015). In her analysis of carnal desire in adolescent literature, Kokkola (2013) similarly argues sexual desire is often portrayed as 'deviant' or associated with negative outcomes such as pain and loss. Consequences might include a less-than-satisfactory experience, slut shaming, or in the case of Bella from *Twilight*, a pregnancy that weakens her to the point of near-death, culminating in her transformation into a vampire to survive.

This pattern is unsurprising given YA is predominantly written by adults for young people. As Kokkola (2013, p. 2) reminds us, YA literature "has always been a means by which adults attempt to educate and guide young people" – a project that often includes warnings about the potential dangers of sex and desire. Discourses of childhood innocence and protection are palpable here. Authors navigate the tension between representing sexuality honestly and operating within a cultural milieu that casts young people's sexualities as dangerous or deviant (Kokkola, 2013). Hence, when sex does occur, the scene often fades to black, and the reader is left to their own imagination or knowledge to join the dots. When YA stories do include sex, these encounters are often moralised. McAlister (2020) illustrates how contemporary texts frequently replace the older ideal of the untouched virgin with the consummate virgin – a young woman who loses her virginity in the 'right' way, at the 'right' time, to the 'right' person. This trope, while seemingly progressive, risks disciplining female sexuality by attaching moral value or judgment to the circumstances of first sex.

In many YA romances, first sex is heavily coded with gendered expectations, framing female sexual agency and 'acceptable' virginity loss within the bounds of romantic love and a monogamous relationship; thus, girls' sexual desire and first sex are only legitimate when emotionally justified. For instance, Seifert (2015) highlights how in YA paranormal romance, a female protagonist's sexual awakening often occurs when they meet their soul mate, legitimising sex through the 'one true love' trope. Seifert further argues these paranormal heroines are often "ordinary girls who are secretly extraordinary"; their abilities are only revealed once she finds her soul mate (2015, p. 24). In short, it is the male hero who awakens her sexuality *and* her power.

While many YA novels continue to replicate restrictive tropes around virginity and female desire, a growing body of texts offer more nuanced and affirming portrayals of female sexual subjectivity, including valuable depictions of first sex and consent (Seifert, 2015; Speese, 2024). YA fiction can be a productive site for readers to explore diverse sexual experiences, particularly when the style of narration privi-

leges the character's embodied experience or prompts reader reflection (Parks, 2023; Hutchinson, 2016). As Hutchinson notes, novels can provide "a discourse of desire that opens up the world of sexuality to young readers and allows them to question and reflect upon their own experiences and expectations" (2016, p. 323). Depictions of first sex can be a fruitful landscape for such reflections. Fantasy literature also offers unique affordances for these imaginings as it is not bound to the social, religious or legal structures of the real world, and as such, has the potential to subvert social and cultural norms (Jackson, 1981): for example, authors can create societies where virginity has no symbolic value, where sex is not moralised, and where gender and sexuality operate beyond heteronormative scripts. The capacity to unsettle normative frameworks positions fantasy – and by extension romantasy – as a genre rich with pedagogical potential, allowing for explorations of sexuality that realism often cannot achieve.

## Sexual (in)experience in Romantasy

Romantasy merges the imaginative freedom of speculative worlds with the emotional and sexual intimacy central to popular romance fiction. This fusion creates a dynamic narrative space where sexuality, gender and power intersect in ways that both draw on and disrupt conventional gendered norms, including those related to virginity and its loss. While the virginal female heroine has long been a standard trope in popular romance and fantasy, female protagonists in contemporary romantasy have often had previous lovers and sexual experiences before meeting the central love interest. In Mass's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series, both Feyre and Nesta have had previous sexual partners, uncoupling their ensuing love stories from ideals of purity and sexual innocence. Feyre recounts experiences of sex with Issac, a boy in her village, their sex not depicted as love but "*a release, a reprieve, a bit of selfishness*" to help combat the loneliness and hardship of her daily existence (Maas, 2015, p. 35). These sexual encounters portray sex as a legitimate source of pleasure or "release", without the prerequisite of love or a committed relationship. Such depictions help disrupt the tired 'girls want love, boys want sex' trope that has long shaped cultural perceptions of young women and their heterosexual relationships (Allen, 2003).

The ACOTAR series traces Feyre's relationships with two central characters: Tamlin in the first two books, followed by Rhysand across the remainder of the series. Feyre's relationship with Tamlin initially unfolds within a conventional romantic arc, in which love, protection and intimacy appear tightly bound; however, Tamlin's need for control intensifies and becomes central to the erosion of Feyre's personal freedom and sexual agency. Feyre ultimately leaves Tamlin and the narrative later reveals Rhysand to be her fated mate. While the fated-mates trope conjures the 'one true love' ideal, the storyline does not position him as Feyre's only love or sexual partner. Nesta's story in the fifth book in the series, *A Court of Silver Flames*, similarly detangles sex from love. The book begins with an angry, grieving Nesta, who attempts to cope with her trauma through drinking, music, gambling and sex with multiple partners. The sex is neither romanticised nor seen as a point of regret; rather, Nesta describes it as "*sex that made her feel nothing—but offered a moment of release amid*

*the roaring inside her*” (Maas, 2021, p. 11). Nesta’s sexual encounters evoke a sense of ambivalence, while also foregrounding her sexual agency and decision-making:

The sex hadn’t been bad—she’d had better, but also much worse. Even immortality wasn’t enough time for some males to master the art of the bedroom. So she’d taught herself what she liked. She’d obtained a monthly contraceptive tea from her local apothecary, and then she’d brought that first male here. He had no idea that her maidenhead had been intact until he’d spied the smeared blood on the sheets. (Maas, 2021, p. 11)

Rather than positioning first sex as the forfeiture of purity or innocence, this narrative frames the encounter as a site of embodied knowledge, agency and self-discovery. This narrative also challenges the cultural assumption that women’s first sexual experiences should be emotionally significant or romantic. Nesta initiates her own virginity loss – a growing trend in romance fiction (McAlister, 2020) – without feeling the need to divulge her virginity status. Virginity, or “*her maidenhead*” in Nesta’s terms, is not framed as a gift to be bestowed upon a ‘worthy’ partner in exchange for love or commitment; a familiar script disproportionately associated with young women than young men (Carpenter, 2002). Instead, Nesta resists the terms of ‘correct’ virginity loss embedded within compulsory demisexuality, in which love and a committed relationship operate as the primary legitimating forces for virginity loss (McAlister, 2020). By refusing these terms, Nesta forfeits access to the status of the consummate virgin, and instead asserts her authority over the meaning of the experience. The scenario also avoids conflating ‘sexual awakening’ and ‘one true love’ tropes commonly found in YA literature, offering more expansive possibilities for understanding female sexual subjectivity, where sex is not always idealised and where characters are allowed to explore, make mistakes and seek pleasure for its own sake. Past sexual experiences are positioned as formative, often enriching the heroine’s self-knowledge and sexual decision-making without tethering them to purity.

Read through a postfeminist lens, Feyre and Nesta’s sexual agency might appear to align with contemporary cultural scripts that encourage women to be confident and knowledgeable, choosing sex on their own terms (Gill, 2007). While this form of neoliberal sexual agency can appear liberatory, it often masks ongoing regulatory pressures and gendered dynamics. Although these narratives resist purity culture, they also risk reproducing postfeminist norms that define acceptable femininity through sexual capability and self-management. For example, Little and Moruzi (2021) highlight how Feyre exhibits sexual agency, however, her agentic potential is undermined by heterosexual and patriarchal norms. One could also read Feyre and Nesta’s earlier “empty” sexual experiences (Maas, 2015, p. 9) as laying the groundwork for their eventual happily-ever-after narratives, which culminate in exceptional sexual fulfilment. In this sense, casual sex is legitimised, yet ultimately subsumed within a narrative structure invested in fated, transformative love. These tensions highlight romantasy’s progressive possibilities and its limitations.

While many female protagonists have had previous sexual experiences, virgin heroines do appear in romantasy. Poppy from Jennifer L. Armentrout’s, *From Blood and Ash* (2020a), and Rua in A.K. Mulford’s *The Witches’ Blade* (2021) both begin

their respective journeys as virgins. Their virginity is arguably more a product of circumstance than personal choice, due to their isolated upbringings: Rua, a fae princess, becomes an orphan at age five and grows up within a coven of witches hidden in the forest; Poppy spends her childhood isolated, cloistered away and veiled as the ‘maiden’, forbidden from fostering friendships outside a small, approved group of people. Poppy’s purity functions as a disciplinary mechanism, regulating her body, behaviour and access to knowledge and friendships: “*Simple things like hand-holding and chaste kisses were forbidden to me. As were being wanted or feeling desire*” (Armentrout 2020b, p. 16). Poppy’s sexuality is policed as part of the broader system that ties her bodily purity and ‘untouched’ status to her moral worth:

“Purity?”

I hated that word, the meaning behind it. As if my virginity determined my goodness, my innocence, and its presence or lack thereof was somehow more important than the hundred choices I made every day. (Armentrout 2020a, p. 22)

Poppy’s critique speaks directly to Valenti’s (2010) argument that female ‘goodness’ is unjustly tethered to sexual restraint and purity, rather than ethical conduct. As the maiden, Poppy has been forbidden from expressing her own wants and desires, reinforcing the idea that female sexuality requires regulation. Much of her narrative arc revolves around reclaiming choice, her desire to feel alive and make decisions for herself. Choosing her love interest (Hawke, later revealed to be Cas), and choosing to have sex become part of that reclamation.

## First Sex

In Poppy’s and Rua’s respective stories, both protagonists embark upon sexual relationships with the central love interest. While each has formed an emotional connection with the male partner, their narratives do not neatly align with the framework of compulsory demisexuality, as neither professed their love nor entered a formally committed relationship before virginity loss. Like Nesta, both Poppy and Rua initiate the encounter, with each scene exploring an array of emotional and corporeal dimensions. In Poppy’s case, she explicitly asks Hawke (Cas) to stay the night with her, signalling her awareness and consent to what may follow. In the weeks leading up to this encounter, Poppy and Hawke have shared moments of physical intimacy, including kissing and clitoral stimulation (over clothes) that brings Poppy to orgasm, establishing sexual pleasure prior to penetrative sex. The depiction of Poppy’s first sex (understood here in penis-vagina terms) is notable for its embodied realism and attention to physical detail, where nerves, awkwardness, discomfort and pleasure co-exist:

In a heartbeat, I was on the bed, and he was above me, the rough hair of his legs abrasive against mine in the most surprising, pleasant way. But the feel of him

against my hip caused a nervous swallow, and also brought a reminder of a very real consequence that could come from this.

Are you—?

“Protected?” His thoughts obviously following the same path as mine. “I take the monthly aid.” (Armentrout 2020a, p. 345).

Poppy’s nervous anticipation mingles with pleasurable sensations and pragmatic consideration of potential consequences. Discussions of contraception are common in romantasy, with authors often playing with how this may look in their fantasy realm: in this instance, both males and females can take a monthly herbal aid, framing contraception as a shared responsibility. The encounter progresses with mutual touching and Hawke bringing Poppy to orgasm through mouth-clitoral stimulation. Consent is explicit and continuous throughout, with Hawke repeatedly checking-in and Poppy providing verbal affirmation: “*Are you ready?*” *Breath catching, I nodded. “I want to hear you say it.” The corners of my lips tugged up. “Yes.”* (2020a, p. 348). Poppy’s internal monologue further reinforces her personal choice and sense of autonomy, while also depicting physical sensations of both discomfort and pleasure:

It was about me.

What I wanted.

My choice.

I took a deep breath, and the burning lessened. Hawke remained still above me, waiting. Tentatively, I lifted my hips against his. It stung, but not as severely as before. I tried it again. Hawke shuddered, but he didn’t move. Not until my grip on his shoulders loosened, and my breath caught for an entirely different reason. There was a burning friction, but it wasn’t the same. Muscles low in my stomach tightened as a ripple of pleasure skittered through me. (Armentrout 2020a, p. 349).

Rather than idealising the encounter or erasing physical discomfort, the narrative acknowledges the emotional and embodied dimensions of penetrative sex. While Poppy’s discomfort may evoke a long-standing trope equating pain with embodied ‘proof’ of virginity, the scene’s attention to bodily sensation also provides an embodied realism often absent in idealised representations of first sex. Poppy’s experience is framed as a self-chosen act, embedded within her broader journey toward autonomy and agency. While this resists dominant purity scripts, it is later unsettled by Cas’s admission that he wanted to be her “*first everything. Kiss. Touch. Pleasure*” (Armentrout 2020b, p. 456); this comment signals his investment in sexual exclusivity that mirrors traditional purity ideals, albeit framed through romance and devotion (Seifert, 2015). Poppy’s initial eligibility for the status of consummate virgin is tenuous. She and Hawke are not officially in a relationship, and she is unaware of Hawke’s

real identity (i.e. Cas), resulting in subsequent feelings of betrayal. However, the later revelation of Cas as her fated mate and the promise of their happily-ever-after, may enable Poppy to embody the ideal of the consummate virgin after all. Although Poppy's growing powers derive from her lineage and maturation, the intertwining of her supernatural and sexual awakenings might also be read as a form of female empowerment partially mediated through romantic destiny (Seifert, 2015).

Rua's first sexual encounter with Renwick in *The Witches' Blade* (Mulford, 2021) offers a complex mixture of desire, choice, pain, embarrassment and regret. In a state of turmoil, anger and desire, Rua initiates the encounter both verbally and physically:

"Mindlessly, Rua's fingers drifted down and began unbuckling his belt. She didn't want to think anymore.

I want you," she growled against his mouth as she freed him. She gripped his satin, hard length, positioning him between her legs. "Do you want me?

"Yes," he gritted out as she moved him to her entrance.

"Then have me," she demanded, pulling his lips back to hers." (Mulford, 2021, p.127).

Renwick enters her in "*one hard thrust*", unaware it is Rua's first time. The pain catches her off guard, despite her attempt to conceal it. Renwick freezes instantly:

Are you okay?" A look of horror filled his face as it all at once dawned on him. "Gods, please—please tell me this is not your first time.

She tried to keep that shield of armor even as he was motionless, buried inside of her. "Maybe."

Gods damnit, Rua, why didn't you tell me?" he shouted, eyes darting back and forth between her own. "Are you hurt?

I'm fine." She lied, her breath steaming out of her as the pain between her legs grew.

[...]

Everyone says it hurts the first time. . .

"It doesn't have to!" he shouted.

She pushed off the tree trunk and balled her fists at her side, using every ounce of restraint not to throttle him. "Stop making this a big deal."

"It is a big deal." He bared his teeth as he yelled at her.

“No, it’s not!” she screamed back. She didn’t care if she woke the whole camp. “I wanted this. You wanted this. There doesn’t need to be a bigger reason.” (Mulford, 2021, pp. 127–128).

The embodied depiction of Rua’s first sex foregrounds discomfort and pain, rather than idealised or effortless pleasure. This scene captures an array of emotions: Rua’s determination, pride and desire for control sit alongside Renwick’s shock, concern and anger. Rua repeatedly attempts to minimise her pain and vulnerability, insisting she is fine, invoking a familiar cultural narrative: “*Everyone says it hurts the first time*”. By contrast, Renwick’s panicked response reveals his investment in a more sentimental script of first sex, where pain is not inevitable and where unsatisfactory first sex “*is a big deal*”. Narratives of bodily autonomy collide with relational responsibility to create a nuanced scene that simultaneously evokes and resists virginity loss ideals.

Despite Rua’s defiant insistence to minimise the encounter, in the aftermath she feels upset and embarrassed, signalling her awareness of normative expectations of how virginity loss ‘should’ unfold:

Gods, she was so embarrassed. The pain between her legs ached as the salt from her tears stung her chapped lips. She had done it all wrong. There was nothing gentle or pleasurable about that experience. She had demanded it, and all it did was get herself injured.

(Mulford, 2021, p.128)

Rua’s admonishment that she “*had done it all wrong*” aligns with the expectation that first sex should be gentle, meaningful and pleasurable. Notably, Rua frames the experience as her own failure rather than a product of a lack of sexual communication or cultural expectations surrounding first sex. Her friend Bri’s response, however, offers an alternate narrative:

“I really fucked up my first time,” Rua sniffed, drinking the bitter tonic.

Bri snorted, and Rua scowled at the warrior.

“I’m sorry,” Bri grinned. “It’s just that there is no one first time. You will have lots more first times. Let that be the first and only of your shitty experiences barefoot in the snow.

[...]

Rua rubbed her hands over her face, shaking her head. “I’m so embarrassed.

“Well, welcome to the legion of fae who had embarrassing starts.” Bri gave her a mocking clap on her shoulder, and Rua rolled her eyes. “Next time you

will wait until the outcome seems more exciting than embarrassing.” (Mulford, 2021, p. 128–229).

Bri’s retort that “*there is no one first time*” disrupts the notion of virginity loss as a singular, defining event. Instead, she reframes sex as a series of first-time encounters, each carrying different meanings, pleasures and lessons. This perspective resonates with Carpenter’s (2005) findings that individuals often construct personal virginity narratives that resist singular or symbolic definitions. Bri’s humour and normalisation of “*embarrassing starts*” helps relieve Rua of the weight of perceived failure, softening the high-stakes logic of a one-time ‘successful’ virginity loss and repositioning sexual experience as pragmatic, contingent and open to individual interpretation.

Fantasy worlds are not bound by realism and this imaginative freedom creates valuable spaces for exploring desire, sexual decision-making and first sex. The use of first-person narration further enhances this potential. Hutchinson (2016) argues first-person narration offers an intimate view of protagonists’ thoughts, uncertainties and bodily sensations, lending authenticity to depictions of sexual experiences. Such narration invites readers “to question and reflect upon their own experiences and expectations”, making these scenes less instructional and more exploratory (Hutchinson, 2016, p. 323). Parks (2023) similarly contends that YA romance novels do feminist work not by delivering authoritative messages, but by encouraging readers to explore questions related to love, pleasure, sex and relationships. Readers may agree or disagree with a protagonist’s decisions; either way, the feminist potential emerges through active, reflective engagement rather than prescriptive instruction. In this way, romantasy is not a guide for ‘doing sex right’, but a generative space for thinking through the plurality of first sexual experiences.

## Concluding Thoughts

Contemporary romantasy offers multiple and sometimes contradictory pathways of sexual (in)experience, grounded in the legitimacy of female desire, pleasure and agency. Varied depictions of sexual (in)experience and first-time sex create imaginative room for readers to see their own diverse experiences reflected without shame or moral judgement, affirming young women’s right to desire, choose and define their own stories beyond the purity myth. It is also worth noting that while virginity in literature is most often tethered to girls and young women, there are occasional but significant depictions of male virginity in romantasy, opening space for reconfiguring masculinities beyond hegemonic tropes. A notable example appears in Jennifer L. Armentrout’s *A Shadow in the Ember* (2021) – a *From Blood and Ash* spin-off – where the God-King Nyktos is revealed to be a virgin while his love interest Sera is not. This marked reversal of genre and gender expectations disrupts masculinity ideals that presume sexual experience and prowess.

Nyktos’s virginity is framed as an intentional choice due to his emotional guardedness rather than moral purity. This depiction contrasts with the regulatory practices surrounding female sexuality, where virginity is frequently bound to ideals of respectability and moral worth (Valenti, 2010). Nevertheless, depictions of male vir-

ginity are refreshing and help unsettle the sexual double standard, where girls are told to protect their virginity and males are encouraged to lose it. Jonathan Allan (2011, p. 12) highlights how romance writers often treat male virginity as “a topic worthy of serious consideration and sometimes quite elaborate exploration”, offering more complex representations than the ridicule or pity often seen in other media. Romantasy has the potential to not only diversify representations of female sexuality, but also reimagine male sexual subjectivity beyond the narrow confines of hegemonic masculinity.

Virginity remains a nebulous and culturally inconsistent category, one that is historically bound to heteronormative, gendered and racialised assumptions. Although this article (and the novels discussed) have focused on heterosexual penetrative sex, such definitions remain far too narrow to encompass queer and diverse sexual practices (McAlister, 2020). Romantasy holds potential to further unsettle these boundaries by depicting a wider array of virginity narratives – or abandoning the category altogether. The potential of romantasy lies not in perfect representations, but in its capacity to disrupt, complicate and expand gender and sexual scripts. Through embodied, emotionally complex narratives, the genre offers imaginative possibilities for how characters – and readers – navigate sex, love, intimacy and sexual decision-making beyond restrictive frameworks. Romantasy’s popularity among adult and young adult readers signals an appetite for stories that validate complex, contradictory, and varied experiences of sexuality, offering alternatives to cultural narratives that have long constrained the sexual subjectivities of girls and women.

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