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Romantasy and the quest for cliteracy

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ABSTRACT

Romantasy – a hybrid genre of romance and fantasy – is well known for its explicit ‘spicy’ content. Like romance fiction, female desire and pleasure are central to the narrative. Drawing on textual analysis from three popular romantasy series, this article examines the genre’s potential to foster cultural *cliteracy*: or the recognition and understanding of the clitoris as a central site of sexual pleasure. It explores how depictions of clitoral stimulation, female sexual response and orgasm function as a form of public pedagogy on female sexual embodiment. Through detailed sensory description, romantasy offers rich narratives of female pleasure that contrast the often disembodied and risk-focused approaches that pervade school-based sexuality education. While the genre is not without its limitations, it is argued that romantasy provides readers imaginative, safe spaces to engage with the embodied, erotic and emotional dimensions of sex, gender and relationships. In doing so, it offers valuable counternarratives to patriarchal and phallogocentric discourses that continue to constrain how female sexuality is understood and expressed.

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Introduction

The literary genre romantasy blends the speculative possibilities of fantasy with hallmarks of popular romance fiction, namely a central love story and a satisfying, optimistic ending. Unlike traditional fantasy where a romantic thread may be a subplot, in romantasy, both the fantasy and romance elements are of equal importance to the storyline. Readers encounter familiar romance tropes, such as enemies-to-lovers, love triangles and fated mates, set within fantastical, often high-stakes life-or-death environments.

Bestselling series such as Sarah J. Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (ACOTAR) and Rebecca Yarros’s *The Empyrean (Fourth Wing)* are well-known examples of the genre, popular with both adult and young adult readers. Digital platforms such as BookTok, where readers share recommendations, debate plot lines and rate the ‘spice’ level of books, have also amplified romantasy’s visibility. The genre’s ‘booming popularity’ is credited with driving a 41.3% increase in science fiction and fantasy sales between 2023 and 2024 (Creamer 2024). This momentum has continued through 2025, with *Onyx Storm*,

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the third instalment in Rebecca Yarros's *The Emphyrean* series, reported as the fastest-selling adult novel in the past 20 years (Alter 2025).

The development of contemporary romantasy has largely been led by female authors who foreground strong female protagonists and their desires. These heroines – and their sexual appetites – sit in contrast to the passive 'love interest' roles of earlier fantasy traditions (Dassler 2021; Mains 2009) and reflect a broader literary movement to centre female perspectives, particularly within genres historically dominated by male authors and male-centric narratives. Romantasy heroines drive the plot, their prowess and decision-making pivotal to the epic quests and battles. These worlds are also rich in female desire and intimacy with their erotic content, commonly referred to as 'spice', offering readers vivid depictions of female arousal and pleasure. While the levels of spiciness vary across the genre, sex scenes often contain their own epic world-building, lingering on each intimate, steamy detail, with the clitoris and female orgasm playing leading roles.

Romantasy's erotic content sets it apart from Young Adult (YA) fantasy novels where romance plays an important role in the plot, yet sexual encounters are often less explicit and glossed over quickly. For instance, series such as Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments* and Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* foreground romance, yet sexual encounters are deferred, off-page or brief. In these novels, the focus is on the well-crafted romantic build-up or 'sizzle' and less on the spice. In part, this is due to female protagonists in romantasy often being slightly older than those in YA literature, with 18–22 a typical age range. While the likes of Mass's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series were initially marketed as YA, many romantasy novels (including Maas') are increasingly categorised by publishers as New Adult – a relatively recent category aimed at readers aged 18–24 (Pattee 2017). Although YA romantasy with less explicit scenes does exist, the focus in this discussion are novels with explicit erotic content: novels that regardless of their categorisation, attract a wide young adult and adult readership.

In this article, I conceptualise romantasy as a potent form of public pedagogy (Giroux 2004) on sex, gender and relationships. Public pedagogy refers to educational processes, practices and discourses that occur outside formal educational institutions. It encompasses the ways in which people learn through cultural, social and political phenomena encountered in everyday life, including media, public spaces, popular culture and social movements (Sandlin, Schultz, and Burdick 2010). This perspective highlights the culturally situated nature of education and reveals how knowledge is constructed, transmitted and contested far beyond the classroom. Young people commonly experience formal sexuality education in schools as inadequate and 'out of touch' with many of their lives (Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016, 1); thus, it is unsurprising they often turn to media, popular culture and pornography to fill the gaps. Literature, film and television are recognised as valuable sites of sexuality education for young people (Allen 2024; Gilbert 2004; Hutchinson 2016; Little and Moruzi 2023), particularly topics that are often marginalised or absent in formal curricula. This article positions romantasy as one such means.

Delving into romantasy's erotic content, the article focuses on depictions of female desire and sexual pleasure. Employing a feminist discursive textual analysis, informed by Foucauldian understandings of discourse as productive of knowledge, subjectivity and norms (Foucault 1978), I examine how female desire, clitoral pleasure and sexual response are named, narrated and legitimised. Through illustrative scenes, I analyse the meanings on offer and their potential for destabilising restrictive sexual narratives that negate or

marginalise young women's desires and experiences. This intent contributes to a continued quest for *cliteracy* (Stiritz 2008; Wallace 2012), examining romantasy's potential in enhancing cultural literacy of the clitoris and female orgasm. The term cliteracy appeared in academic discourse at least as early as 2008, with Susan Ekberg Stiritz using the term 'cultural cliteracy' to describe the social and discursive deficits surrounding women's sexual knowledge and experience. The term was brought into broader cultural circulation through American artist Sophie Wallace's (2012) feminist art project *Cliteracy, 100 natural laws*, which critiqued the pervasive cultural illiteracy surrounding the clitoris. Wallace's project included large-scale text installations and sculptures that highlight the widespread absence of accurate knowledge about clitoral anatomy and function, challenging reductive penetrative-focused understandings of sex. In her Ted Talk, *A Case for Cliteracy*, Wallace (2016) poses a pertinent question: 'How is it possible that we landed on the moon before we discovered the anatomy of the clitoris?' Bringing Wallace's critique into conversation with romantasy, this article asks how popular fiction might help improve our cultural cliteracy by creating narrative worlds where female pleasure is vividly articulated rather than implied.

This article explores romantasy's cliterate potential through an analysis of female protagonists in several popular series: Rebecca Yarros's *The Empyrean* (2023–2025), A.K. Mulford's *The Rogue Crown* (2022), the third instalment in *The Five Crowns of Okrith*, and Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015–2021). As exemplars of romantasy, these texts foreground love stories within richly imagined fantastical worlds: a military college for dragon riders in *The Empyrean*, and magical kingdoms of supernatural creatures in *The Five Crowns of Okrith* and *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. While the levels of spiciness in these novels vary, they provide illustrative examples of the genre's erotic conventions and centring of female desire and pleasure, in both heterosexual and queer relationships. Teasing out some of its potentialities and limitations, I suggest romantasy offers readers imaginative spaces to explore the embodied, erotic and emotional dimensions of sexuality – spaces that often remain precarious within formal sexuality education.

Female desire and school-based sexuality education

Nearly four decades ago, Michelle Fine (1988) famously identified 'the missing discourse of desire' in school-based sexuality education and its damaging implications for young women. She argued that dominant discourses of danger, victimisation and individual morality construct sexuality as something to be feared or avoided, leaving little space to recognise girls' capacity for desire and entitlement to pleasure. Subsequent scholarship has reinforced Fine's critique, highlighting the narrow, heteronormative and risk-oriented focus of school-based sexuality education (see, for example, Allen 2005; Hirst 2013; Tolman 2002). Students critique lessons that are overly formal, biological and danger-focused, often resulting in a lack of meaningful discussion on the emotional and pleasurable dimensions of sex and relationships (Pound, Langford, and Campbell 2016). Subsequently, young people often express a desire for sexuality education that is more positive, inclusive of diverse sexualities and affirming of their lived experiences.

The consequences of narrow, risk-focused sexuality education are especially pronounced for girls and young women. Discussions of female desire, pleasure and agency often remain marginal; the historical omission of the clitoris from anatomy charts, for

instance, exemplifies how female sexual pleasure has been rendered invisible, taboo or unimportant (Allen 2004). These omissions reflect wider cultural anxieties surrounding female sexuality, where discourses of innocence and vulnerability continue to shape what is considered 'appropriate' knowledge and behaviour for girls (Egan 2013). As Fine (1988), Tolman (2002) and others have shown, girls and young women are routinely positioned as passive recipients of male desire or as moral gatekeepers tasked with saying 'no', rather than as active sexual agents capable of expressing and negotiating their own wants, boundaries and pleasures. Without access to affirming language or information, girls are frequently denied the knowledge and confidence to articulate their desires and make informed decisions about their experiences (Tolman 2002).

The inclusion of discourses of pleasure in sexuality education is argued to promote healthier and more equitable sexual encounters, enhance sexual decision-making, and help counter misinformation and stigma drawn from less reliable sources (Alldred and David 2007; Allen 2004, 2005; Hirst 2013). When sexuality is reframed as a positive and meaningful part of human experience, young people are given more space to explore strategies and perspectives that can enhance their sexual wellbeing. Positive recognition of female sexual pleasure also disrupts gendered discourses that cast female sexuality as passive, and offer counternarratives to mainstream pornography which often centres male gratification (Allen 2004). Crucially, discourses of pleasure help recognise young people as legitimate sexual subjects who have the right to information, whether sexually active or not (Allen 2007). It can enable more conversations about masturbation, the clitoris, orgasm and a wide array of sexual acts beyond penile-vaginal intercourse.

Although progress has occurred over the past three decades, the inclusion of desire and pleasure discourses in school-based sexuality education remains slow and inconsistent (Allen 2023). Debates over what constitutes 'appropriate' sexual knowledge for young people, and schools' reluctance to acknowledge young people as sexual beings, continue to hinder sexuality education's potential (Alldred and David 2007; Allen 2005). The lack of teacher professional development and pedagogical resources further constrains meaningful implementation (Ollis 2016). Scholars have also raised concerns over the potential of pleasure-oriented approaches to produce new forms of regulation by reinforcing normative ideals of bodies, gender and sexuality (Allen, Rasmussen, and Quinlivan 2014). One risk is the potential of a 'pleasure imperative' where pleasure becomes an expected outcome rather than a 'legitimate possibility', which can ignore the complexities of sexual pleasure (Allen 2012, 462). These important debates shift discussions from whether pleasure should be included in the curriculum, to how it might be included, and with what implications (Allen, Rasmussen, and Quinlivan 2014).

Despite these curricular limitations, pleasure and desire are far from absent in the lives of girls and young women. Feminist scholarship demonstrates the myriad ways in which girls and young women constitute themselves as desiring sexual subjects, negotiating gendered and sexual discourses in complex and often contradictory ways (Allen 2003; Egan 2013; Fine 1988; Tolman 2002). Rather than passive recipients of sexual information, girls interpret, contest and rework meanings circulating through peer culture, digital platforms, popular culture, including literature. These perspectives challenge deficit-based narratives that construct girls as vulnerable, duped or lacking agency, foregrounding instead their capacity for strategic negotiation of dominant norms, including accommodation and resistance.

At the same time, feminist scholars caution against romanticising young women's sexual agency, emphasising the regulatory dimensions of contemporary discourses of desire. For instance, analyses of postfeminist and neoliberal media cultures highlight how sexual agency is often narrowly defined, requiring young women to present themselves as confident, knowing and desiring subjects, while remaining intelligible within highly gendered and commercialised norms (Gill 2008). Dominant discourses of sexual agency also centre heterosexuality, often marginalising queer or non-normative forms of desire. This heteronormativity is similarly evident in formal sexuality education, where curriculum content privileges heterosexual relationships and reproductive logics, narrowing the conditions under which young people can recognise and articulate their own desires (Allen 2005).

Together, these debates highlight how female sexuality and desire continue to be a contested and shifting terrain both in the lives of young women and the media texts they consume.

Reading the female protagonist and her desires

The fantasy genre has a legacy of privileging heroes who are primarily white, heterosexual and male (Dassler 2021; McGarry and Ravipinto 2016; Young 2016). Prior to the 1960s, female characters in fantasy were often relegated to roles defined in relation to the male hero, such as the love interest, damsel-in-distress, virginal bride or the evil temptress (Mains 2009). Power and leadership were largely the preserve of the male, resulting in female characters often being one-dimensional, inconsequential or leveraged as objects for male desire or sexual violence. These depictions reinforce the construction of male sexuality as active and dominant, whereas female sexuality often appears passive and in need of protection, or conversely, dangerous and in need of control. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55) – a prominent fantasy series from this time period – featured very few female characters, and when they did appear, they were primarily 'prizes to be won or treasures to be protected' (McGarry and Ravipinto 2016, 20). Of course, Tolkien was not alone in his marginalisation of women in fantasy literature, nor was it only male authors who reinforced the traditional heroic male narrative. Like female characters, female authors were marginalised and often 'had an easier time breaking into the genre if they followed the already agreed upon masculine narrative' (Dassler 2021, 7).

The Women's Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s sparked a shift in fantasy literature, with increasing numbers of female (and a few male) authors creating powerful female protagonists central to the narrative (Dassler 2021). Tracing the history of women in fantasy literature since the early 1900s, Christine Mains (2009) suggests female fantasy authors have used the genre to recover a lost matriarchal tradition in myth and history, reclaiming female archetypal roles from well-worn stereotypes and explicitly addressing issues such as rape and gender inequality. Classical mythology and folklore have provided a rich source for feminist writing, reclaiming the female hero 'from damsel in distress to rescuer in her own right' (Mains 2009, 66). Feminist retellings of fairytales are another example of female authors leveraging the fantastic genres to redefine, and often reclaim, strong female characters who are neither a prize nor in need of saving.

Children's and young adult fiction has offered greater space for interesting female characters beyond stereotypical tropes, partly due to the absence or minimisation of romantic subplots (Kaplan 2009). Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) remains an early example of a young female character who is 'curious and clever, neither a sidekick nor a love interest' (Kaplan 2009, 268). Yet girls are still frequently cast as 'spunky sidekicks to the boy heroes' (ibid, 266), with Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter* being a familiar example. While the feisty female protagonist has a stronger presence in contemporary YA literature, the inclusion of explicit sex does not. When YA books feature romantic plots, they often adhere to a coming-of-age storyline, where the female protagonist experiences an 'awakening' of their sexual maturity, such as first kiss and first love (Little and Moruzi 2021). YA fiction also has a legacy of advocating sexual abstinence for young readers, repressing and even punishing sexual desire (Kokkola 2013; Trites 2000). Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005–2008), for instance, is well known for its abstinence-only-until-marriage storyline. It is not until Bella and Edward are married (in the fourth book) that they have sex; the scene brief and non-explicit, maintaining a focus on the romantic build-up and 'sizzle' rather than sexual detail.

Dubbed 'abstinence porn' (Seifert 2015, 3), *Twilight* is one of the many books published since the mid-2000s that have been criticised for fetishising virginity and mobilising the temptation of sex as a narrative device to create tension. In many YA dystopias with romance plots, including *Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, explicit sexual content is notably scarce. Instead, authors 'create sexual tone and mood by placing their characters in situations of extreme want and need' (Gillis and Simpson 2015, 90). Sexual desire is often portrayed as 'deviant' or associated with negative consequences such as pain and loss (Kokkola 2013). In *Twilight*, for example, Bella and Edward's eventual sexual relationship – sanctioned through marriage – results in a pregnancy that almost kills Bella, culminating in her violent transformation into a vampire to survive. In short, sexual desire is fraught with tension and potentially dangerous.

These portrayals are unsurprising, given YA literature is predominantly written by adults and often functions as a means by which adults attempt to educate young people (Kokkola 2013). This 'education' includes the potential dangers of sex and desire. Publishing constraints, the recent surge in banned books and dominant societal discourses also hinder representations of sex and sexuality. For instance, discourses of childhood innocence and protection are frequently leveraged to restrict the sexual knowledge available to young people, including within school-based sexuality education, media and literature (Robinson 2013). Since the *Twilight* era, there has been an increase in YA novels with sexual content, although it remains a complex terrain. While a growing body of scholarship highlights the educative potential of sexual content (Gillis and Simpson 2015; Hutchinson 2016; Little and Moruzi 2023; Parks 2023), authors may find themselves 'caught between the desire to represent adolescent sexuality as honestly and realistically as they can within a society where the dominant ideology is that adolescent sexuality is deviant' (Kokkola 2013, 39). This creates what Moruzi and Venzo (2021, 1) describe as a 'curious paradox', where a 'focus on instructing its readers clashes with a reluctance to discuss themes like sexuality'. Thus, when sexual encounters do occur, they are primarily through a normative heterosexual lens and often fade to black, leaving the reader to fill in the gaps with their own knowledge, assumptions or fantasies.

Romance fiction is a genre that unapologetically centres female desire and pleasure. While romance fiction is diverse and encompasses multiple sub-genres, a central trait is female sexual desire, love and pleasure that drive the plot, character development and resolution. While romance novels are often dismissed as ‘smut’ or ‘trashy’, popular romance scholarship highlights the feminist possibilities of the genre, particularly in the way it offers readers imaginative spaces in which female sexual desire and pleasure are legitimised and explored (McCann and Roach 2021; Roach 2016; Speese 2024). While feminist scholars have rightly critiqued romance fiction’s reliance on heteronormative, white and gendered conventions (see, for example, Radway 1984; Modelski 1982), they have also highlighted the genre’s capacity to open up sexual taboos and give readers ‘permission to explore love and sexuality and ultimately themselves in new, liberating ways’ (Roach 2016, 89).

While trends and thematic devices in romance fiction continually evolve, women’s sexual pleasure – whether explicitly depicted on the page or not – is narratively guaranteed. Romance writer and scholar Catherine Roach posits this as being one of the most challenging and potentially transformative features of the genre: ‘these are books about women wanting and getting great sex from partners who know how to deliver. This is an anxiety-provoking message indeed for a culture more comfortable with male arousal and satisfaction than its female counterparts’ (Roach 2016, 95). As the most popular and bestselling genre of fiction, romance provides a strong platform for readers to explore complex dynamics around gender, sex and relationships. Importantly, the genre depicts women’s sexual satisfaction with gusto, and thus can play a vital role in improving our cultural cliteracy.

Becoming cliterate with Romantasy

Fusing the erotic conventions of romance with the speculative world-building of fantasy, romantasy invites readers into imaginative spaces where dominant sexual narratives are both unsettled and reproduced. Unlike the sexual awakening storylines frequently seen in YA, romantasy heroines often have sexual histories, including previous relationships or casual sexual encounters. As a result, virginity is less frequently fetishised or mobilised as a plot device to produce tension. Like contemporary romance fiction, female protagonists are commonly depicted as capable of naming, initiating and enjoying their own sexual wants. Sexual desire and arousal are vividly articulated to the reader through the body – a flood of heat, a pulsing ache, a molten core. In Rebecca Yarros’s *Fourth Wing*, sensory detail – ‘Need streaks down my spine’, ‘Heat floods my body in an addictive rush’ (2023, 404) – gives readers a sense of what Tolman (2012, 749) refers to as embodied sexual desire: ‘sexual and pleasure feelings in and of the body that constitute a form of knowledge about the self’, albeit in a fictional setting. The pedagogical potential is not simply in what is shown but *how*, in the sense that narrative style can enhance or limit reader engagement and reflection (Parks 2023). First-person narration, for instance, helps position the body as a site of knowing, evoking a sense of intimacy and honesty that can offer more educational value to the reader than overt didactic depictions (Hutchinson 2016).

Like romance fiction, romantasy is notably ‘*cliterate* in that its stories are literate about the clitoris’ (McCann and Roach 2021, 422, italics in original). Varied depictions of clitoral stimulation – whether by fingers, tongues or other body parts – are often at the forefront

of sexual encounters, challenging phallocentric assumptions that prioritise male satisfaction and penetration. Authors such as Yarros explicitly name the clitoris: 'I suck in a sharp breath and throw my head back at the sheer pleasure of his tongue, licking and swirling around my clit' (2023, 452). While other authors employ euphemistic, yet anatomically precise phrases that situate the clitoris as a site of sensory focus and pleasure: 'his thumb circled that spot at the apex of my thighs' (Maas 2016, 210), 'her throbbing bundle of nerves' (Mulford 2022, 100).

It is common in romantasy for initial sex scenes to begin with, and sometimes solely consist of, explicit clitoral stimulation, usually culminating in female orgasm. This is particularly significant in depictions of heterosexual sex, where in several prominent texts, penetrative (penile-vaginal) sex is deferred or absent altogether in initial sexual encounters. For example, the first sexual encounter between Feyre and Rhysand in *A Court of Mist and Fury* centres exclusively on digital clitoral stimulation and concludes with Feyre's orgasm:

His hand at last trailed beneath my pants. The first brush of him against me dragged a groan from deep in my throat.

He snarled in satisfaction at the wetness he found waiting for him, and his thumb circled that spot at the apex of my thighs, teasing, brushing up against it, but never quite—

His other hand gently squeezed my breast at the same moment his thumb pushed down exactly where I wanted. I bucked my hips, my head full back against his shoulder now, panting as his thumb flicked—

I cried out, and he laughed, low and soft. 'Like that?'

A moan was my only reply. *More more more* (Maas 2016, 210, italics in original).

This scene prioritises the clitoris and Feyre's pleasure, with penetrative (penile-vaginal) intercourse and male orgasm only appearing in subsequent scenes. Feyre's pleasure is articulated through physical and verbal cues, such as her moans and 'wetness'. Speese (2024, 14) notes how Maas's writing often 'flips gendered scripts' by depicting male characters who prioritise women's pleasure over their own. McCann and Roach (2021) similarly observe this trend in contemporary heterosexual romance novels, where female authors often portray male characters as deriving pleasure from exploring and attending to their female lover's sexual needs. These depictions challenge the myth that men's sexual appetites are 'uncontrollable'; a myth romance fiction has been known to reinforce (Speese 2024).

When sex scenes do involve heterosexual penetrative sex, they frequently begin with clitoral stimulation and female orgasm. In *Fourth Wing*, Violet and Xaden's first sexual encounter progresses from kissing (initiated by Violet) to Xaden bringing Violet to orgasm twice through hand-clitoral stimulation, before transitioning to penetrative sex and subsequent orgasms for them both:

His fingers slide under my underwear and stroke my slickened core, and a moan tumbles from my lips. His touch is electric' [...]

He kisses me deeply as his fingers touch and tease, making that sweet coil of pleasure tighten in my core. I dig my nails into his shoulder, my back arching as he makes tighter and tighter circles against my swollen clit. (Yarros 2023, 407)

Along with explicitly naming the clitoris, this scene foregrounds female sexual response through descriptive terms such as ‘my slickened core’. Other authors similarly use vivid imagery like ‘wetness’ (Maas 2016, 210) or ‘wet heat’ (Mulford 2022, 101). Explicit bodily reactions – moans, verbal affirmation and physical movement – render female arousal visible, helping disrupt the perception that female arousal is harder to detect or achieve in comparison with males. The following scene from *The Rogue Crown*, a sapphic love story, similarly depicts lavish clitoral attention and corporeal cues of female arousal:

Desire coursed through her as she hovered her mouth over Lina, holding her still as Lina tried to close the distance between her wanting core and Bri’s lips. She grinned at Lina’s shameless writhing, desperate for the promise of her mouth to be fulfilled. Finally, Bri relented, lowering down.

The first slide of her tongue made Lina suck in a sharp breath, a guttural noise catching in her throat. Bri groaned, tasting Lina as her tongue lapped in slow sweeps up and down. Lina’s hand reached for Bri, threading her fingers into Bri’s hair as Bri found a rhythm with her tongue that made Lina’s breath hitch over and over. [...]

Lina’s back arched and Bri knew she was getting closer. She kept her steady rhythm, pulling each ecstatic note from Lina’s lungs.

“Gods, yes”, Lina mewled, and Bri pumped her fingers quicker as her tongue lashed Lina in fast, sweeping circles.

“Yes, Bri”, Lina cried out, and Bri groaned at the sound of her name against Lina’s bundle of nerves, the vibrations making Lina scream out Bri’s name again. (Mulford 2022, 101)

From a sexuality education perspective, these vivid depictions offer a fictional, yet materially rich form of knowledge that contrasts the disembodied treatment of sexuality that often pervades school-based sexuality education, particularly for young women (Allen 2005). Rather than vague or metaphorical language, the reader is privy to exactly what is happening and the response it incites: ‘her tongue lapped in slow sweeps up and down’; ‘Bri found a rhythm with her tongue that made Lina’s breath hitch over and over’. While this does not automatically translate into an increase in the reader’s own sexual embodiment, the pedagogical potential lies in the language and imaginaries they make available to readers – a ‘discourse of erotics’ through which female sensuality and pleasure become thinkable and legitimate (Allen 2004).

What is also notable across these scenes is the repertoire of sexual practices depicted as offering female sexual pleasure. These representations help disrupt the ‘coital imperative’ which contributes to a hierarchical understanding of sexual activity, prioritises male satisfaction and orgasm, and marginalises non-penetrative sexual experiences (Gavey 1992; Jackson 1984). School-based sexuality education can also reinforce this narrow and exclusionary definition of sex, which normalises heterosexuality and reduces young people’s access to information on a variety of sexual practices. Scenes that render the clitoris with attentive detail can ‘actualize a fuller cliteracy’ by moving beyond the romance trope of penis-in-vagina-sex leading to simultaneous orgasm (McCann and Roach 2021, 423). The contemporary shift towards clitoral focus and non-coital pleasure helps disrupt the ‘penetrative norm as the be-all and end-all of sex’ (Roach 2016, 98), offering more diverse representations of what gives women pleasure. These representations

expand young people's repertoire of sexual options, something sexuality education's focus on preventing pregnancy and STIs may desire, yet makes little space for.

Queer romantasy novels are also valuable in this regard, offering varied depictions of sexual intimacy and pleasure. While romantasy (and romance and fantasy genres more broadly) have a legacy of privileging heterosexuality, a growing number of novels, particularly in the last decade, centre queer protagonists and their sexual and romantic relationships. Importantly, many of these novels move beyond coming-out narratives to create queernormative worlds (Fielding 2020), where queerness is not a plot device for tension or surprise. A.K. Mulford's, *Five Crowns of Okrieth* series, for instance, offers diverse representations of gender and sexuality, featuring LGBTQ+ relationships alongside heterosexual romances. In this series, which includes the aforementioned *The Rogue Crown*, queer relationships are ordinary and integral to the fabric of the world. No one needs to come out and queerness itself is never the cause of a character's struggles. In relation to expanding sexual repertoires, an increase in depictions of female masturbation would also be a welcome addition, with Sarah J. Maas's, *A Court of Silver Flames* (Maas 2021) providing a notable example.

While romantasy's cliterate potential has much to offer, it is not without its tensions. As Roach (2016, 96) reminds us, the cliteracy of romance fiction 'is not that of full realism, [...] The heroes are masterfully sensitive, skilled, and attentive lovers, with complete control over their sexual response (no erectile dysfunction or premature ejaculation for these men)'. The female protagonists in these stories typically experience intense and consistent sexual satisfaction, sometimes from their very first encounter with the love interest. The cliteracy of romance fiction has also 'endowed many a romance heroine with a fantastically responsive sexual physiology'; she climaxes early, often and easily (McCann and Roach 2021, 423). This narrative structure may set up unrealistic expectations about sex, particularly around the ease and immediacy of orgasm. Highly responsive bodies risk establishing new norms around what 'good' or 'successful' female sexuality (and sexual response) looks like, potentially marginalising experiences that are slower, less intense, or less easily articulated.

These portrayals can also subtly reinforce gendered dynamics in which male partners are positioned as the keyholders to female pleasure – an echo of older, more paternalistic sexual scripts. For instance, although Feyre is a confident, desiring protagonist, sex scenes in *A Court of Mist and Fury* often rely on a heterosexual romance trope in which the 'right' man instinctively knows how to please her. As Dudek, Grobbelaar, and Boyd (2024, 4) highlight, the articulation of Feyre's desire largely occurs as internal narration rather than through explicit sexual communication, reinforcing the idea that 'he will know and give her what she needs, desires, and wants', elevating him to a power position. Xaden in *Fourth Wing* is similarly 'gifted' in his ability to sexually please Violet; however, there are notable examples of verbal communication where Violet signals her need for more:

The man kisses with his whole body, rolling his hips in time with the thrust of his tongue, bracing just enough of his weight so I can breathe while stroking his chest over my hypersensitive nipples. He keeps me on the same edge he's riding, and I don't know how much longer I can take it before I set this room on fire.

"I need ... I need ..." My frantic eyes search his. Where are my words?

"I know". He claims my mouth again and reaches between us, using those talented fingers to stroke me into another orgasm. (Yarros 2023, 502)

In this scene, Violet and Xaden are engaged in penile-vaginal intercourse, and while Violet does not fully articulate exactly what she needs (i.e. clitoral stimulation), she does signal she needs something. Luckily, Xaden knows exactly what and he delivers. This scene corresponds with research highlighting how only 18.4% of women report intercourse alone is sufficient for orgasm (Herbenick et al. 2018). The following scene in *The Rogue Crown* similarly depicts explicit verbal communication to enhance sexual pleasure:

She ground into Lina's hand, moving her hips against Lina's fingers in the rhythm she liked as her eyes rolled back and heat pooled in her core. Lina began to move, matching Bri's tempo, deftly working Bri as her lips fell to Bri's neck. [...] Bri groaned louder, bucking into Lina's fingers.

Lina repeated the action, drawing a rumbling moan from Bri's chest as she panted, "Faster".

Lina obeyed, her fingers moving up and down at double the pace (Mulford 2022, 100).

These scenes model the value of sexual communication in achieving sexual pleasure and orgasm. Female protagonists asking for what they want – whether that be faster, softer or a little to the left – can enhance understandings of the nuances of female sexual pleasure and how it might be achieved. In relation to sexual communication, there is also a positive trend in romantasy for heterosexual couples to discuss contraception prior to sex, with authors often playing with how this may function in their fantasy realm: for instance, contraception is commonly depicted as a shared responsibility, where both males and females take some form of fertility suppressant.

As evident in these illustrative scenes, female orgasms are abundant in romantasy. Portrayals of 'happily orgasmic' heroines (Roach 2016, 94) sit in contrast to reality, where women are reported as having fewer orgasms in heterosexual sexual encounters than men (Mahar, Mintz, and Akers 2020). This discrepancy is commonly referred to as the gendered 'orgasm gap': a phenomenon linked to a range of sociocultural factors including: the cultural prioritisation of penile-vaginal intercourse over more clitorally focused sexual activities; societal scripts about masculinity; women feeling less entitled to sexual pleasure; and women less likely to communicate to their partners how they need to be stimulated to reach orgasm (Mahar, Mintz, and Akers 2020). The lack of pleasure-focused information in formal sexuality education may also contribute to the orgasm gap and misconceptions about orgasm (O'Kane and Mahar 2022): for instance, the perception that female orgasms are harder to achieve or require 'more work' than for a male (Andrejek, Fetner, and Heath 2022). Romance fiction's generous depictions of female orgasm clearly offers a striking counternarrative.

While plentiful female orgasms might be read as an indicator of 'good' sex, they risk contributing to an 'orgasm imperative' where women must orgasm for them to be viewed as 'normal' and for sex to be deemed as 'good' (Frith 2015; Potts 2000; Tiefer 2004). Societal discourses that prioritise women's orgasms during heterosexual sex can simultaneously benefit and limit women's sexuality (Chadwick 2024). While on one hand, they can combat historical narratives that position women's pleasure and orgasm as secondary to men's, they can also position orgasm absence as a problem

(Tiefer 2004), which may lead to women feeling pressured to fake an orgasm. While these contradictory perspectives are tricky terrain, Chadwick (2024, 1278) describes them as ‘two sides of the same coin’, both having the same goal of ‘more pleasurable, enjoyable, and equitable sex for women’: a goal similarly shared with romance fiction.

Conclusion

Romantasy contributes to a broader cultural repertoire through which young people encounter and make sense of sexual embodiment, desire and pleasure. Its varied depictions of clitoral pleasure and female sexual response can help foster cultural literacy, challenging the marginalisation of female pleasure within both popular discourse and formal sexuality education.

As a form of public pedagogy, these texts offer embodied vocabularies for young people as they negotiate their own sexual subjectivities. They create space to explore some of the intricacies of sex and relationships, inviting conversation and critical reflection, whether that be in bedrooms, classrooms or online spaces. Readers might applaud or critique a protagonist’s choices, love or resist particular plot lines; it is this engagement that holds feminist potential (Parks 2023). Romantasy is not ‘perfect’ in its representations, and at times, can reproduce heteronormative and patriarchal systems of power that can undermine portrayals of female sexual agency (Little and Moruzi 2021). Yet the genre also has the capacity to complicate and disrupt gender and sexual norms, offering a safe space for young women to explore sexuality (Speese 2024). In this sense, like romance fiction more broadly, it can be ‘problematic and problematizing, both at once’ (McCann and Roach 2021, 419); although this tension may be what renders the genre pedagogically compelling.

In considering literature as sex education, Gilbert (2004, 233) asks: ‘if sex includes some of the most exhilarating, passionate and devastating experiences in a person’s life, shouldn’t sex education address exhilaration, passion and devastation?’ Gilbert posits the novel as one place where young people (and adults) might explore some of these exhilarating and devastating complexities. When it comes to romance fiction, these complexities are its core business. Romantasy extends this dynamic into speculative worlds, opening up narrative possibilities beyond the confines of realism. These imaginative worlds can reinforce, expose and reimagine gender and sexual norms: queernormative worlds being one example. While Romantasy’s literacy is set in fictitious worlds, it may help reshape what becomes speakable in our own.

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