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Dana Cuadrado

Honors College, Pace University

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Medieval Literature and Young Adult Fiction:
A Comparison of Chaucer and Sarah J. Maas

Dana Cuadrado

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Major: English Language and Literature

Advisor: Dr. Martha Driver

Department: English

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I. Abstract

The medieval works of Geoffrey Chaucer and the contemporary works of Sarah J. Maas employ three of the same themes: forbidden love, insta-love, and love triangles. These themes are based in the medieval literary tradition of courtly love as first written by Andreas Cappellanus in the twelfth century. Sarah J. Maas is a contemporary author of the young adult fantasy series *A Court of Thorns and Roses* that follows a young girl who by magical circumstances becomes romantically involved with two male faeries. This modern series portrays the same themes that Chaucer's works of *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* display, which makes these antiquated ideas of love relevant. In fact, the medieval depiction of women provides a certain agency that the modern teen fiction novel does not. Critics think such themes in young adult fiction do not portray a healthy and realistic view of romance for young women to strive for. While these themes are not modern romantic notions, they do remain entertaining in fiction, despite their critics.

II. Introduction

Romances of young people have been shown in literature for hundreds of years. The theme of youth falling in love has become massively popular in a genre marketed specifically to young teenage readers. This paper compares themes of three stories by Chaucer composed from the 1380s to about 1400 with those in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series written by Sarah J. Maas, a *New York Times* bestselling young adult fiction author, looking at the the three themes of forbidden love, insta-love and love triangles. Despite writing centuries away from each other, there is a surprising number of similarities between the two authors. Three themes that began to appear in literature around the twelfth century have persisted and remain a source of entertainment.

Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales* in the fourteenth century in verse in Middle English. His stories are all vastly different, but contain many of the same themes such as magic, social class, and romance. On the other hand, Sarah J. Maas is a contemporary young adult fiction author. Young adult fiction is written for people between the ages of 12 to 18, as determined by The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), and deals with the experiences that occur during that age range. Young adult literature is uniquely romantic in its emphasis on individuality (Talley 232) and includes the genres of fantasy, romance, science fiction and more. Sarah J. Maas has written exclusively within the fantasy genre in both of her book series. Maas' first novel *Throne of Glass* was published in 2012 with an installment published every year since. Her latest series, *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, features many medieval themes and in particular the three themes to be examined.

A Court of Thorns and Roses is set in a world where humans live behind a wall that separates them from the fae lands of Prythian. The story begins when the main character, Feyre,

is hunting in the woods for her family and kills a large wolf. That wolf happens to be a shapeshifting fae, which she learns about from the high fae lord who comes to take his revenge. Tamlin, the fae lord, gives Feyre an ultimatum. She can either choose death or spend the rest of her life in Prythian. As she begins to adjust to life in Prythian, Feyre develops romantic feelings for Tamlin. She finds out that Tamlin and his people are cursed to wear masks and never leave their lands because he refused the ruling queen of Prythian. In order to end the curse, a human must fall in love with Tamlin, and she must then overcome a set of obstacles set by the queen within a certain time or else his people will remain cursed forever. Feyre does break the curse, with great struggle and almost dies in the process, but in doing so becomes a fae herself.

Along the way Feyre meets Rhysand, who is first portrayed as a villain as he has been forced into doing the bidding of the queen of Prythian. Rhysand is also a high fae lord like Tamlin, but of the more deceptive Night Court, another land within Prythian, responsible for many human deaths and known for savagery. Rhysand is characterized as the “dark and brooding bad boy,” which is a stereotype of young adult romances. He offers Feyre a deal to help her break the curse. This is a form of the medieval rash promise, in which a character agrees to a favor from someone but does not know what her end of the bargain will be until it is asked of them later in the story. She does not know what the consequences will be until after the curse is broken when he makes her promise to spend six months of the year at his court.

In the second novel, *A Court of Mist and Fury*, Feyre spends more time with Rhysand who reveals that he has fallen in love with her, except Feyre is promised to marry Tamlin. Rhysand and Feyre grow closer as the novel progresses until she learns that they are “mated” or soul mates and have been her entire life. The book ends with Feyre and Rhysand on opposite sides of a war with Tamlin. Feyre’s relationships with both Tamlin and Rhysand demonstrate all

three of the themes—forbidden love, insta-love, and love triangles—as well as medieval themes, which is interesting because of how many similarities Sarah J. Maas’s writing has to works by Chaucer. Maas’s writing demonstrates a knowledge of medieval literature through themes of romance and magic, but her work is very different because of its intended audience. The prevalence of forbidden love, insta-love, and love triangles shows that these themes are still entertaining and relevant to readers after centuries of literature.

While the phrase “insta-love” is a recent addition to the lexicon of romance and has become popular recently in discussing romances in young adult literature, the theme has been in literature a long time. Insta-love is characterized by the two love interests falling in love at first sight, whether they want to be in love or not, and who are then believed to be soul mates. Each character feels that the other is his or her one true love almost instantaneously after meeting. The romantic relationship is not developed before the two characters find themselves head over heels, professing their undying love for each other. This theme may be popular in teen fiction because it is a reflection of the fast nature of young love. It could also be a byproduct of the need for teen fiction to be shorter in page length for marketing. Or it is just that readers and writers find it entertaining and dramatic to read a fast paced romance and thus perpetuates insta-love.

The theme of forbidden love has been a basis of romantic literature since the genre began back in the twelfth century. Couples fall in love, but due to extenuating circumstances, cannot be together. In many cases this results in stories of death or separation and a tragic ending. There are many prominent examples of these love stories with Antony and Cleopatra, Tristan and Iseult, and Romeo and Juliet being just three of the classical stories. This theme is characterized by the couple not being allowed to fulfill their love because of social class, marriage to other

people, or a demographic difference that makes their coupling in opposition of societal norms. The relationship then must be kept secret, which in turn enhances the drama of the story.

The theme of love triangles pertains to romances in which a woman is in love with two men or two men are both in love with the same women (or vice versa). These types of relationships may contain both the themes of insta-love and forbidden love, but they do not have to. The romantic entanglements of three individuals heightens the suspense of who will end up together at the end of the story. Several famous examples of these relationships are Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, and Tristan, Iseult, and King Mark.

The root of these three themes lies in the first notions of romantic love in literature, which were described by Andreas Capellanus in the twelfth century. Capellanus wrote *The Art of Courtly Love*, which redefined the literary definition of romance. Prior to Capellanus, stories took the form of medieval romance that is characterized by knightly adventures featuring magic, exotic locations, and the supernatural. Medieval romances were written for a courtly audience to be shared at feasts for entertainment, but these stories only occasionally featured romantic love, as we know it today. Capellanus's writing about courtly love changes the elements of the genre as he defined love as a:

Certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other and to carry out all of love's precepts in the others' embrace. (Capellanus)

This definition portrays love as a visual experience because through the eyes the lover sees beauty. Love as defined by Capellanus is only physical. Love at first sight will later be called insta-love by readers of young adult fiction. Capellanus also considers love as suffering, which could be due to the fact that there is generally separation, a love that cannot be fulfilled, creates a

romance of frustration. Andreas Capellanus was a chaplain in the church and technically not allowed to have relations with women, be it marriage or sex, which can also explain his belief in love as suffering.

In *The Art of Courtly Love*, Capellanus lists the rules of courtly love; the first rule is that “marriage is no real excuse for not loving.” Many of these rules pertain to extramarital affairs. Capellanus’s ideas of courtly love were also described by French troubadours and established a heightened value of the lady in court as William George Dodd writes in *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower*:

Gathered about several small courts, there existed, as early as the eleventh century, a brilliant society, in which woman held the supreme place, and in which, under her influence, vast importance was attached to social etiquette and decorum. Definite rules governed the sexes in all their relations, especially in matters of love. (1)

In the Middle Ages, most aristocratic marriages were arranged for economic reasons and to benefit of the social hierarchy. Even individuals of the lower classes arranged marriages in order to increase land holdings. As Eileen Powers states in *Medieval Woman*, “women as an ornamental asset, while strictly subordinating them to the interests of its primary asset, the land” (1). All marriages were made to further or maintain land holdings. Since romantic love was rarely found in marriage, the concept of courtly love arose in which someone of an upper class seek a lover outside of marriage vows. This is why jealousy and secrecy are both emphasized in Andreas Capellanus’s *Rules of Courtly Love*.

Courtly love provides the basis for forbidden love. The English monarchy operated under primogeniture, which states that the first born male heir inherited the estate. Courtly love condoned affairs, but not the byproduct of those affairs—bastards. This created the precarious

theme of love triangles as Capellanus states, “nothing forbids one woman being loved by two men or one man by two women.” Capellanus asserts that while a person can only love one person at a time, two people love the same person. In *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower*, Dodd summarizes Capellanus’ many rules of love into three main ideas: “courtly love is sensual,” “courtly love is illicit and, for the most part, adulterous,” and “a love, sensual and illicit, must needs be secret” (5-6). By the use of the word “sensual,” Dodd is referring to the passionate and physical nature of love. Love, by Capellanus’ definition, is attraction and desire (though not necessarily sexual or sexually fulfilled). The lover is aroused at the sight of his or her love, which is exactly what insta-love is. Courtly love is inherently forbidden as Dodd states because it is an act of adultery, which is a sin under the law of the Roman Catholic Church. While courtly love condones this act of being in a relationship with two people, spouse and lover, it dictates that it must be secret because it counters the morality of society. This theme of forbidden love was established by Capellanus in *The Art of Courtly Love* and is seen throughout Chaucer’s body of work, and as demonstrated by Sarah J. Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series, forbidden love is still present in modern teen fiction.

III. Forbidden Love

Courtly love paves the way for the rise of the theme of forbidden love in the genre of romance with its condoning of affairs as an escape from arranged marriages. The forbidden aspect is the fact that the lover has a spouse, but not all of the literature uses marriage as the interference to the romance. In the three examples of Chaucer’s work, the romances are forbidden because of war, class, and marriage whereas in Sarah J. Maas’ *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, the romances are forbidden because of race, class, and other romantic entanglements.

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* written in the 1380s is a tragic love story set during the Trojan war. Troilus, the prince of Troy, falls in love with Criseyde, the daughter of a Trojan traitor, which creates the issue as to why they never plan to marry. They keep their love a secret because of their different status. Troilus is a prince, and Criseyde a wealthy widow whose father has disgraced their name in Troy. Criseyde has no need to marry Troilus because she has more agency as a widow than she would have as a wife, especially as a wife to a prince. There are many instances of the two perpetuating the secrecy of their relationship through their meetings and letters. Until the exchange of Criseyde for Antenor, the couple is able to carry out their affair in secrecy. Other than Criseyde's father's betrayal and Troilus' status, the two could have been together. There is no evidence to suggest otherwise. But it is the Greek and Trojan trade of the Antenor, who in many classical writings of the Trojan war is the character who opens the gates of Troy for the Greeks and is a traitor, that seals the forbidden nature of their love. The emotional pain of their separation is evident in the lines:

Criseyde unto the Grekes oost to lede,
 For sorwe of which she felt hir herte blede,
 As she that niste what was best to rede.
 And trewely, as men in bokes rede,
 Men wiste never womman han the care,

For Criseyde, leaving Troilus is the most sorrow she has ever experienced. This shows that she loves Troilus even more than her first husband, who is dead. She mentions that in books that men read, and are written by men, describe women as unfeeling but that is not true. Chaucer then describes Troilus's reaction to Criseyde's leaving:

Ne was so looth out of a toun to fare.

This Troilus, withouten reed or lore,
 As man that hath his joyes eek forlore,
 Was waytinge on his lady ever-more
 As she that was the soothfast crop and more
 Of al his lust, or joyes heretofore.
 But Troilus, now farewell al thy joye,
 For shaltow never seen hir eft in Troye! (5.16-28)

Troilus feels lost without Criseyde and states that he will never know joy again. In fact, Troilus speaks truly here; the rest of the text details his suffering while apart from her. The love of Criseyde and Troilus is ended in this moment as the narrator notes that she will never see Troy again. The introduction of the Trojan war ensures the two young lovers cannot be together, which is why their love is forbidden.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, The Knight's Tale follows Arcite and Palamon, two knights who are cousins and have been taken as prisoners of war, as they both become obsessed with a maiden they see. Arcite and Palamon are Theban knights who fought in the battle against King Theseus and are recognized as they lie on the battlefield because of their "cote-armures" or coat of arms signifying they are of noble birth (Chaucer 1016). The two are sent "To Athenes, to dwellen in prisoun / Perpetuelly" and dwell in a tower for several years (1023-1025). These two men fall in love with the same woman, Emelye, that they see outside of their window in the tower. They physically are unable even to talk to her. It is later revealed that Emelye is Theseus' sister-in-law, which is another reason these relationships cannot be realized. There is also the detail that Emelye has no knowledge of Arcite and Palamon and does not know of their love for her until they all meet later in the text. Theseus does recognize that the two cousins are of noble

birth, which makes them eligible for Emelye's hand in marriage, so he has them enter a tournament to win her. The forbidden aspect of this relationship is not one of social hierarchy, but of the conflict between two warring states. Arcite and Palamon are traitors to Theseus, who has conquered them, which makes them unsuitable matches for Emelye.

In *The Merchant's Tale*, May is a young girl married to an elderly wealthy man. May seeks romantic love through an affair with a squire named Damian. May is of a lower class and marries January for his wealth as was common for the time. Though the text does not explicitly say so, her marriage was likely arranged by her family to further their social or financial ambitions. When Damian becomes smitten with May and approaches her with his love letter, May accepts his pursuit. May actively chooses Damian as a lover. May decides to love Damian regardless of his wealth, "though he namore hadde than his sherte," or lack thereof as it is stated that he has only the shirt on his back (1985). Damian is considered less than May because she has moved up in status and wealth as a gentleman's wife. When the two act upon their love, it is to be kept in secret because May is married. Their escapades in the pear tree show the lies that need to be told to maintain their love because it is forbidden. May asks January to help her climb into the pear tree because she claims to crave it greatly in her condition:

I moste han of the peres that I see,
 Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me
 To eten of the smale peres grene.
 Help, for hir love that is of hevene queene!
 I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit
 May han to fruyt so greet an appetit
 That she may dyen but she of it have. (2331-2337)

She implies to January that she is pregnant to motivate her husband to help her be with her lover which is both outrageous and ironic (yet very funny). This humorous act is a direct representation of forbidden love.

In Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, Feyre enters into two romances that are taboo for her culture and status in the world of this series. When Feyre is forced to live with Tamlin, she begins to fall in love with him. As Tamlin is a fae, their relationship is difficult for Feyre to come to terms with since for centuries faeries acted as overlord to humans both enslaving and killing many in a war. Before Feyre meets Tamlin, she overhears a character say, "Don't you idiots understand what those monsters did to us all for all those centuries? What they still do for sport, when they get away with it?" (23). The two characters are of different races, but there is also the social class divide that enhances the forbidden romance. Tamlin is a high fae lord, which makes him in charge of the entire spring court and the wealthy owner of a large lavish estate. When Tamlin brings Feyre to Prythian, her fear of him is only subdued by her awe upon looking at the grounds. Feyre describes the lands by saying "to paint it would be useless, would never do it justice" which shows how grand it is because she can hardly put it into words (47). In contrast, Feyre comes from poverty with the novel's inciting incident being that she had to go out hunting just to provide meals for her father and two sisters. Feyre was originally born into a wealthy merchant class family, but her father lost all their money in gambling debts. There is a class distinction of wealth that is beyond the immediate race difference. This is seen in the way Tamlin's inferiors treat Feyre. Feyre and Tamlin's romance is plagued by reasons the two should not be together, making it forbidden.

There is a second romance in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series that follows Feyre's relationship with Tamlin's enemy Rhysand. Rhysand's character is first introduced in the novel

as a villain or at the very least as someone aiding the central villain. He is not introduced as a love interest until the second novel, despite the sparks of chemistry in the first novel. Rhysand has Feyre make a rash promise to stay with him for one week of every month, so he will help her defeat the evil fae queen. It is revealed that he has romantic interests in Feyre that fueled this deal, but when she promises him this Feyre is in a very devoted relationship to Tamlin. Feyre is planning to marry Tamlin but must carry out her promise to spend a week with Rhysand, which causes those plans to be interrupted. Rhysand, who in the previous novel, has questionable morals and helps with the oppression of many fae by working for the queen, is also from a court that is mysterious and shrouded in lies. Rhysand is also of the same class as Tamlin so the same conflicts of social hierarchy in the relationship apply to Rhysand and Feyre's romance. In *A Court of Mist and Fury*, Rhysand and Feyre are revealed to be mates, which is the truest form of love in the world of *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. Rhysand recounts Feyre's death and rebirth into an immortal fae at the end of the first book and through his own perspective, "If you were going to die, I was going to die with you. I couldn't stop thinking it over and over as you screamed, as I tried to kill her: you were my mate, my mate, my mate" (526). Despite Rhysand's knowing that Feyre is his mate, he does not tell her until the end of the second book. Rhysand and Feyre's romance is characterized as one that cannot be fulfilled because of Feyre's relationship with Tamlin, social class, and the moral consequences of Rhysand's involvement with the evil queen.

In all four of these stories, the forbidden nature of the romances between the love-interests creates another layer of conflict within the plot line. In three of the stories, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Knight's Tale*, and *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, there is an overarching narrative of war between nations, or in the latter case, species. The lovers in each of these stories are on

the opposite sides of a larger conflict, but their love for each other is a strong force through the story that takes the reader's attention away from the war. Troilus is a prince of Troy in the infamous Trojan war, and Criseyde, a daughter of a Trojan traitor, which makes the romance between the two disastrous to begin with when the fall of Troy is inevitable. The relationships in the stories mirror the conflicts of war creating destructive romances that are unhealthy because characters are in desperate situations. The theme of love in these three stories of war is a driving force of hope in situations the characters are unable to escape. Much like courtly love, the unity found in forbidden romance creates agency for the characters who have been bystanders in wars they had no part in creating.

The Merchant's Tale is the outlier of these stories of forbidden love that are centered in war because there is not a greater plot line that May and January are operating within. As a fabliau, The Merchant's Tale is less serious because of the crude humor it displays, but it follows the rules of courtly love, like the other stories do. The romance of May and Damian does represent a form of hopefulness for the reader with a war going on in the background. The characters of Troilus, Criseyde, Arcite, Palamon, Emelye, Feyre, Tamlyn, and Rhysand are pulled into romances with little choice because of the climate surrounding them, whereas the realization of forbidden coupling between May and Damian of The Merchant's Tale occurs for the entertainment and pleasure of May. In this case, the forbidden romance provides power to the female character rather than taking it away.

Forbidden love creates the conflict and need for secrecy, which adds motivation to all of the characters, not just May and Damian, because they are all operating under the rules of courtly love. These affairs can only take place if no one else knows about them. Both Chaucer and Maas

use forbidden relationships to heighten the drama of the stories they are writing, which persuades the audience to believe in the hope of a happy ending.

IV. Insta-Love

Andreas Capellanus defined love as physical in nature and brought on by the sight of one's beloved. The theme of insta-love allows for romances to have faster pacing if the characters are instantaneously in love. Insta-love as a more modern theme is characterized as an immediate all consuming and excessive romance. The relationship is heightened to the "soul-mate" status, where these two characters who just met automatically assume the other is their one true love. This theme is highly dramatic, but creates a seductive and entertaining romance as exhibited by the stories written by both Chaucer and Sarah J. Maas.

In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Troilus is not interested in romance and even jokes about his friends being interested in it, but his opinion of love takes dramatic turn when he meets Criseyde. Troilus falls instantly in love with Criseyde where he sees her, "his eye percede, and so depe it wente / Till on Criseyde it smot, and there it stente" (1.272-273). His gaze falls upon Criseyde and there it stays, because he has fallen madly in love with her with only one look. Love is shown as a visual action, which is a rule of courtly love. Troilus knows he loves Criseyde before he ever meets her and talks to her. Criseyde is completely unaware of his love, and when she notices him staring at her, she says, "What may I nat stonden here?" (292). She eyes him as if to ask if she is not allowed to be standing there because she does not know why he is looking at her. This relationship is very much one sided at first until Criseyde meets Troilus and begins to be persuaded into spending time with him. Troilus's display of his love for Criseyde recurs many times throughout the story, in which he goes to sit alone in his room and

either swoons or cries, “and whan that he in chambre was alone, / he doun upon his beddes feet hym sette, and first he gan to sike, and eft to grone” (357-360). Troilus truly meditates on love and suffers because of it. This is just one example of Troilus’s encountering Criseyde and going back to his room depressed. Troilus feels that Criseyde is his one true love without getting to know her. It is not only Troilus who falls in love at first sight, but Criseyde does, too, after being set up and manipulated by her uncle Pandarus. Criseyde is initially not interested in pursuing a relationship with any man. It is from her window that Criseyde sees Troilus returning to Troy from battle, this causes her change of heart. Through the vision of Troilus who “sat on his baye steede / Al armed, save his hed, ful richely...As was on hym, was nought, withouten faille / To loke on Mars, that god is of bataille” (2.625-626, 629-630) moves Criseyde to feel affection for him. To Criseyde, Troilus is god-like on his horse in full armor, which causes her to say to herself, “Who yaf me drynke?” (2.651). She compares the experience of seeing him to a love potion and feels inebriated by the sight of him. This shows the theme of insta-love with its heightened and obsessive nature. Insta-love is very superficial as it is a romance constructed from gazing upon one’s lover, but that does not make it any less powerful.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, The Knight’s Tale follows Arcite and Palamon, two knights who are cousins as they both fall in love with a maiden that they only catch a glimpse of from the tower window where they are imprisoned. As soon as Palamon sees Emily, he is enraptured: “He cast his eye upon Emelya, / And therwithal he bleynte, and cryede 'A!’” (1077-1078). Palamon cries out because he has been struck by love’s arrow. The same then occurs with Arcite:

And with that word Arcite gan espye
Wher-as this lady romed to and fro,
And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so,

That, if that Palamon was wounded sore,

Arcite is hurt as moche as he, or moore. (1112-1116)

These two cousins spend years being in love with a woman that they see from a window. They are struck by the arrow of love, that is, Cupid's arrow from Greek mythology. This is a visual depiction of insta-love occurring because here "love is conceived as a god whose power is absolute" (Dodd 234). This love is so strong that it pierces their hearts and inflicts pain. This sentiment is also showed by Andreas Capellanus, who describes love as suffering. Arcite and Palamon's love for Emelye negates their family ties before they ever meet her and then fight over who can marry her. Their lives instantly focus on this great love they have for her from the moment they see her. The moral question asked by the Knight at the end of part one is whether the cousin imprisoned who can see her has a better life than the free cousin who cannot see Emelye. This examines the all consuming nature of the cousins' love and the importance of being able to look at one's love because freedom from jail and the ability to see Emelye are seen as equitable. Arcite and Palamon's love for Emelye is so strong that they would rather be imprisoned than not see her, even though they have never spoken to her.

In Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*, Damian falls in love with May at first sight. The act of insta-love is described in the lines "He was so ravished on his lady May/That for the verry payne he was ny wood" (1774-1775). For Damian, love occurs with first sight of May, which also creates agony. This occurs after May and January are married, which is another aspect of the instant nature of the relationship between May and Damian. The time from the wedding until the consummation of the affair in the pear tree is never specified. It appears that May and January are still newlyweds when this all take place, demonstrating the short timeline in which May and Damian fall in love. After January and May's wedding night, the narrative switches to describe

Damian, who is sick because of his suffering over his love for May. Damian sees May and then initiates an illicit romance via the letter he gives to her. As Margaret Schlauch remarks:

He goes through the motions expected in fashionable literature from a youth newly in love; he covets May at once, takes to his bed, writes verses, as to the consummation of his desires merely does as he is bid, and after the exposure leaves the exculpation to May.
(222)

There is no consequence that can be attributed to Damian because he has nothing to lose and leaves May to lie about their tryst in the tree. May would receive all of the blame if she were discovered, though January might think the baby is his. There is never a sign that Damian plans to end their affair after their tryst in the tree. May and January will remain married, and it is assumed that Damian will continue to be May's lover.

While January does display symptoms of the definition of love as written by Andreas Capellanus, which states that love is "excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex," he never displays an inborn suffering because of his love. January's choice in marrying May is not because of insta-love, but because he wants to be married. He never yearns specifically for her like the male characters of the other stories, because he is an old man who wants a young bride. In courtly love, love between married couples is not requisite because of arrangement. So while he does show feelings of admiration and possessive towards his wife, it is not the same all-consuming passion that is reflected in Damian's love. Both January and Damian have a physical desire for love. In the case of May and Damian the desire for love's fulfillment is enhanced by insta-love. The genre of *The Merchant's Tale* also plays a role in its depiction of insta-love. As fabliau, this tale offers a more sexual portrayal of romance. Dodd calls it "all grossness without any of the refinement [of courtly love]" which is an overgeneralization of what the story offers in

terms of its commentary on love and marriage (232). January does fall in love with May upon seeing her beauty, and after their wedding night, he is extremely jealous. But, as a husband, January does not have to love his wife. Under the rules of courtly love, true love is only reserved for extramarital affairs. Ironically, January acts as a source of resistance for the insta-love of May and Damian, and even further is an aid to the fulfillment of May and Damian's love.

Sarah J. Maas's series prominently features insta-love in the fantasy world she has created. In *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, the fae fall in love and marry as humans do except in some cases there is an even stronger magical bond beyond spouse, which is mate. Tamlin explains to Feyre that, "High Fae mostly marry...but if they are blessed, they'll find their mate—their equal, their match in every way. High Fae wed without the mating bond, but if you find your mate the bond is so deep that marriage is...insignificant in comparison" (176). Feyre and Tamlin do not like each other when they initially meet. It is not until the mating ceremony that the sexual attraction initiates a romantic plotline between the two. Tamlin is required to find a mate during the night and finds Feyre, which is when "his teeth clamped down on the tender spot where her neck and shoulder meet...and [Feyre's] world narrowed to the feeling of his teeth on her neck" (196). This moment of physical intimacy changes the dynamic of their relationship. While Feyre and Tamlin do fall in love, and plan to marry, it is Feyre and Rhysand who are true mates. Feyre's first encounter with Rhysand establishes her immediate interest in him because of how beautifully he is described as opposed to Tamlin, who is first introduced as a monster and is humanized as the story progressed. Feyre "stepped out of the shelter of [her] savior's arm and turned to thank him. Standing before [her] was the most beautiful man she had ever seen" (188). She is instantly taken by his beauty instead of her fear of his power, which is unlike any of her other experiences with the fae. In *A Court of Mist and Fury*, Feyre finds out that she is not mated

to Tamlin but Rhysand, “Rhysand was my mate. Not lover, or husband, but more than than that. A bond so deep, so permanent that it was honored above all others. Rare, cherished. Not Tamlin’s mate. Rhysand’s,” which causes her to question everything (492). Once Feyre learns this, she no longer has any romantic feelings for Tamlin and fully commits herself to Rhysand. The magical quality of the mating bond forces Feyre to give up her feelings for Tamlin because of the all consuming nature of insta-love.

The mating bond of Sarah J. Maas’s series is a literal interpretation of love at first sight depicted in Chaucer’s works. For the medieval characters, there is a divine interference that is beyond their control when they see their beloved for the first time, which is similar to Maas’s concept of mating. There is a significant lack of free-will in the choice of partner and whether they want to be involved: Troilus’s eye falls upon Criseyde; Criseyde sees Troilus in armor; Arcite and Palamon are hit by love’s arrow; Damian sees May; May reads Damian’s letter; and Feyre’s mating to Rhysand. Insta-love takes away self-determination that allows for individualism. The characters do not find something special in their beloved are struck by the visual appearance of their beloved. There is no development of their emotional connection after the point in which they are forever tied to each other.

V. Love Triangles

Troilus and Criseyde is a tragic love story that is forbidden because of the Trojan War. Criseyde as the daughter of Calkas, a Trojan traitor, is sent to the Greeks in an exchange. While in the Greek camps, Criseyde is pursued by Diomedes. Diomedes, a Greek soldier, is Criseyde’s escort when she leaves Troy. His intentions are not serious and only flirtatious. He speaks to her

using the medieval poetic language of love:

And wondreth not, myn owene lady bright,
 Though that I speke of love to you thus blyve;
 For I have herd or this of many a wight,
 Hath loved thing he never saugh his lyve.
 Eek I am not of power for to stryve
 Ayens the god of love, but him obeye
 I wol alwey, and mercy I yow preye. (162-168)

Diomedes calls her his lady and tells her that he speaks to her out of love, despite the fact that he claims to love her even though he just met her. He tells her that the gods of love are responsible so he must obey them and then asks for her mercy, which is a common phrase used by medieval men when they are courting a woman.

Ther been so worthy knightes in this place,
 And ye so fair, that everich of hem alle
 Wol peynen him to stonden in your grace.
 But mighte me so fair a grace falle,
 That ye me for your servaunt wolde calle,
 So lowly ne so trewely you serve
 Nil noon of hem, as I shal, til I sterve. (169-175)

Diomedes pledges his service to her and tells her that he has fallen for her. He is more intent on seduction and views love as a game rather than an honorable act. Despite her love for Troilus and her desire to return him, Criseyde enters into a relationship with Diomedes.

As Priscilla Martin, feminist scholar, writes in *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons*, Diomedes “is a travesty of the courtly lover and his wooing is full of echoes of Troilus” (186). Troilus is the superior character, but his circumstances make it impossible for Criseyde and Troilus to be together. While Diomedes is not the most romantic character, he offers protection for Criseyde in the precarious situation of war. This relationship is very different from that of Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye or May, June, and Damian because Criseyde is actively choosing to enter into a secondary romance that does not have the same romantic love as the first. Unlike May who never loved January, Criseyde loves the man she is first with and then chooses another relationship out of necessity. Priscilla Martin describes the difference in lovers with her assertion that “the affair with Diomedes, however understandable, is wrong. It is a betrayal of a better lover and a better relationship. It seems highly improbable that the philandering Diomedes would welcome her a permanent fidelity” (186-187). In the moment, Diomedes is the better option for Criseyde because of the safety he can offer with the imminent fall of Troy. Criseyde does not want to be in a relationship at all when the story begins but later enters into a relationship with Diomedes out of necessity. While this love triangle does not have a “happy ending,” it shows the dynamics of two relationships that have very different motivations.

The Knight's Tale prominently features the conflict of the love triangle as the cousins Palamon and Arcite fight over the woman they have both fallen in love with. To solve the question of who should marry Emelye, King Theseus decides that the men should fight in combat for her hand. Emelye longs to remain a maiden and goes to the temple of Artemis to pray, but she does not have the agency to leave or to choose not to marry either man. She is considered property of her king and brother-in-law. Arcite is the initial victor of the trial by

combat, but divine intervention from Saturn and Venus strikes Arcite with a deadly blow. On his deathbed, Arcite says this to his beloved Emelye:

I have heer with my cosyn Palamon
 Had strif and rancour many a day agon
 For love of yow, and for my jalousye.
 And Juppiter so wys my soule gye,
 To speken of a servaunt proprely,
 With alle circumstances trewely --
 That is to seyen, trouthe, honour, knyghthede,
 Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kynrede (2783-2790)

Arcite gives his blessing to Palamon and provides Emelye another option with Palamon, and Arcite honors their family ties of brotherhood. Arcite ends the love triangle with his death, but provides a happy ending for Palamon and Emelye.

The love triangle of *The Merchant's Tale* operates on a "dichotomy between marriage and love" (Martin 105). May's two lovers are a representation of the ideals demonstrated by courtly love. Marriage for love was not the case for many people in the Middle Ages, because marriage was about money, land, and politics. Even for craftman, who were apart of guilds, practiced arranged marriages to maintain their businesses. Individuals stayed within their own guild and, for the most part, their own social class. The first rule of courtly love is: "marriage should not be an impediment to love," which is seen in *The Merchant's Tale*. May seeks love outside of her marriage through her tryst with Damian, which is warranted under the rules of courtly love. For most of *The Merchant's Tale*, January is the active character who is the lens through which the reader learns about the characters until the wedding night. May's encounter

with Damian makes her an active participant in the story. As Priscilla Martin, feminist scholar, writes in *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons*, “the first thought of May’s to which we are admitted is her fantasy about Damian” (105).

At the end of *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, Feyre is betrothed to Tamlin and is completely committed to him. Feyre dies for Tamlin and becomes a fae to save him, but in order to do so she has a rash promise to Rhysand. Feyre promises a week every month of her life, which is now eternity as an immortal fae, spent in the Night Court that Rhysand rules over. The love triangle takes shape as the queen’s death takes away the reason Tamlin needed Feyre to love him, whereas Rhysand is only under Amarantha’s control to protect his people. Rhysand makes it known that he has feelings for Feyre when he tells her that he did not want her to “fight alone. Or die alone” (413). The book ends with Feyre knowing she will have to leave Tamlin for Rhysand a week every month. The triangle changes through the revelations of Rhysand and Feyre’s mate-bond that quickly turns Tamlin into a villain.

The love triangle is a representation of courtly love’s rules that perpetuates the need for extramarital affairs to escape unwanted marriages. Two people can love one person, but one person cannot love two people. Criseyde and Diomedes become a couple, but there is no evidence in the text that Criseyde loves him in the way she loved Troilus. Criseyde is with Diomedes out of necessity. Emelye does not love either Arcite or Palamon, but both men love her, and of these female characters she has the least agency. The story is not concerned with her happiness in the romance or in her opinion of either of the two men. May loves Damian, but she does not claim to love her husband, January. Feyre does love Tamlin, but she leaves him to fulfill her promise to live with Rhysand. Once she learns of her mating-bond to Rhysand, her love for Tamlin dissipates.

VI. Medieval Woman vs. Modern Woman

The literary portrayal of medieval women puts forth a much more empowered image of the historical woman than the modern reader would expect. After nine centuries, women have gained autonomy in society with the right to vote and live freely with all of the same rights as men. However, women still lack equal treatment in many areas of society and lack equality in many places around the world. Modern readers expect medieval women to have no voice in their literary portrayals, but that is not the case. As shown by Emelye, May, and Criseyde, the literary medieval woman was not silent nor was she passive.

Criseyde is a widow and powerful in that. She does not want to be with Troilus and is persuaded to do so. Criseyde is not silent about her own agency and her need for sovereignty of herself in her soliloquy she states:

I am myn owene woman, wel at ese,
 I thank it God, as after myn estat;
 Right yong, and stonde unteyd in lusty lese,
 Withouten jalousye or swich debat;
 Shal noon housbonde seyn to me "Chek mat!"
 For either they ben ful of jalousye,
 Or maisterful, or loven novelrye. (2.750-756)

Henry Ansgar Kelly, author of *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer*, describes this as Criseyde's declaring that "She is free and wants to keep it that way. No husband is going to checkmate her. For husbands are either always jealous, or domineering, or unfaithful woman-chasers" (65).

Literacy is an interesting theme to examine within all of the texts. Both May and Criseyde are literate. May is fascinating because she is of a lower class than January and has to have learned how to read prior to her marriage. Criseyde is of a higher class than May so it is less surprising that she is literate, but it is interesting because her love for Troilus develops through their exchange of letters. On the other hand, Feyre, a character written recently, is illiterate. Feyre's lack of knowledge puts her at a disadvantage to Tamlin. Her lack of "intellect" creates a power imbalance further distancing the two characters. Chaucer is writing in the 1380s when the middle classes in towns and cities were becoming educated, and women were still considered the legal property of men. The wealthy aristocratic women may have had some knowledge of reading earlier in the Middle Ages, but these women would account for a very small portion of the population. However, Sarah J. Maas is writing a fantasy novel in the 2010s and actively chooses to write a female main character who is illiterate. Maas takes away a basic right that is provided to all modern women. Feyre's illiteracy weakens her, whereas literacy provides May and Criseyde agency.

Sexual promiscuity is an important theme in several of these stories. According to modern views, the medieval woman has less sexual agency, but those notions of women's modesty began much later. When at Pandarus' home, Troilus and Criseyde share a night together. It is Criseyde who initiates the kiss between them. She takes the power in the moment to move their relationship forward into a more physical direction. This act by Criseyde describes an agency that young female characters are only now regaining. The same is seen through May, who openly has sex in a pear tree with a man that is not her husband, and continues on happily ever after. The two female characters written by a man in the 1380s do not face any punishment for their sexual encounters. Criseyde does not end up with Troilus, but she does survive and is

with another man at the end of the war. May is able to lie and escape persecution from her husband, and the two remain married. Whereas Feyre, a young woman written by another young woman in a modern society, has sex outside of marriage as an escape from her poor and lonely life with a young unmarried boy from her village. Feyre describes the moments as “Stolen hours in a decrepit barn with Isaac Hale didn't count; those times were hungry and empty and sometimes cruel, but never lovely” (3). She does not love Isaac, but finds sexual pleasure in her moments with him. This is a similarity between May and Feyre, except Feyre is looked down upon by her two sisters for carrying out this affair, while May is completely accepted.

In many ways the medieval depictions of women have more agency than a contemporary story. While medieval women had no legal rights, their fictional representations show progressive ideas. It is regressive that a young woman in a novel for young people written in the twenty-first century is both illiterate and punished for having sexual relations. Feyre is a “strong female character” because of her hunting abilities and physical strength, but she lacks the innate feminine power that both May and Criseyde of the twelfth century have.

VII. Reception in Young Adult Literature

The three themes of forbidden love, love triangles, and insta-love often appear in many recent teen romance novels. There is a negative critical reception to these tropes in young adult fiction because they are not feminist. It is ironic that in modern fiction these tropes grant female characters less agency when in medieval literature women had more power. In recent teen fiction, these three themes portray relationships that create imbalanced power dynamics, consistently where male characters have more power over female characters. This is especially true in the examples of forbidden love with power and strength residing in the male characters.

Love triangles in many ways are unrealistic, just as courtly love is unrealistic. Of course, jealousy is a human instinct but the yearning for another person outside of the committed monogamous relationship creates the inevitable downfall of one of the characters. Insta-love is unrealistic in its portrayal of fast paced romances that are caused by divine measures. These young characters are faced with all consuming love that does not mature and grow over time. It is more of an instant infatuation and passion than a true and heartfelt care for another human being, especially when the individuals involved have never met before this moment where they fall in love.

The theme of love triangles escalated immensely in teen fiction after the bestselling and box-office success of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series. An article in the *The Guardian* examining the phenomenon of love triangles in young adult fiction shared their opinion that "love triangles are not healthy nor are they something readers should dream about. The one being loved is forced to decide between two people, two people he/she forged a bond with: this is not healthy. It is also not healthy to dream for two people to love you. In my opinion, you need to accept who you love and who loves you." Love triangles establish that one male and female of the three will end up together, and one male character will not receive his happy ending. The conflict of the narrative is the female character being forced to choose between two people she has romantic feelings for, which is not a healthy mental or emotional state one should have to endure.

In *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, Feyre falls in love with both Tamlin and Rhysand after being taken by them against her will. This is an example of Stockholm Syndrome, which is when the captive is falling in love with her captor. Sarah J. Maas romanticizes the abuse that occurs within her novels with the themes of forbidden love, insta-love, and love triangles. In some

ways, the unhealthy relationships of Maas's books are similar to stories of the Middle of Ages that operated on the rules of courtly love, but the glorification of possessive and obsessive male behavior is no longer an escape for readers who are in loveless marriages. Sarah J. Maas's books offer an escapism through the romance and the fantastical elements, but these do not provide healthy relationships for young women to aspire to.

Forbidden love, love triangles, and insta-love all move the romantic plot of a story forward and create conflict. In a post on *YA Highway*, Leila Austin states "if you want to write a story about a relationship, then conflict within that relationship is essential. Especially if the relationship stretches over more than one book. No one wants to read a love story where two lovers meet, make gooey eyes, declare undying love immediately and then live happily ever after. We like our love stories more complicated than that. That's what makes them satisfying." Forbidden love and love triangles create conflicts that elongate a story more than insta-love. The need to overcome the aspect that prevents the characters from being together is why forbidden love works so well. The same can be said for love triangles because it is expected that the character must eventually choose between their two loves. However, realistic relationships do not operate on the same rules of fictional ones because there should not be a conflict in order to make it last.

VIII. Conclusions

The three themes of forbidden love, insta-love, and love triangles are depicted first in *The Art of Courtly Love* by twelfth century writer Andreas Capellanus, then later in the fourteenth century in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and in *The Canterbury Tales*, and are still reflected in modern fiction as seen in young adult author Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and*

Roses series. These romantic themes demonstrate relationships that are not viable in reality and can only exist in the realms of fiction. Fictional romances require an agent to push two characters together and then need an element to prolong the story. Fourteenth century stories of romance feature the ideas of courtly love, but these ideas were not based in reality. Affairs that caused forbidden romances and love triangles went against religion and the law, but were entertaining. The overwhelming presence of these themes in a bestselling young adult series shows that readers still find these themes just as entertaining as they were several hundred years ago. However, with such a young audience, these themes reflect romances that are unhealthy and not aspirational for readers, especially young women as these stories often put women in difficult situations. Upon close reading of the modern text, it appears that fictional women of the Middle Ages had more agency in their respective stories as May and Criseyde are literate and have more sexual agency. Contrastly, Feyre who was written in the 2010s, is introduced as a character who cannot read and is verbally belittled for having sex for pleasure. As a modern character, she does not possess the agency of a young modern woman. The prevalence of forbidden love, insta-love, and love triangles goes to show that reader's taste never truly change and that human nature does not change. But young female readers need other examples of romance besides ones that feature these three themes to show them healthy relationships and not just entertaining ones.

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