

Celtic Feminism, TikTok, and *A Court of Thorns and Roses*

I was not a pet, not a doll, not an animal.

I was a survivor, and I was strong.

I would not be weak, or helpless again. I would not, could not be broken. Tamed.

—Feyre Archeron, *A Court of Mist and Fury*, 226

Fae, faeries, fair folk, elves: many names describe the otherworldly tricksters of Celtic folklore, who have a long and complex history in the Western imagination (Hutton 2014, Silver 1986, Wood 2006). England adopted fairy lore at the turn of the nineteenth century in order to recapture the fading magic of pre-industrial life and to culturally compete with France and Germany (Silver 1986:142). Meanwhile, “For the Irish, especially those involved in the Celtic revival, belief in fairies was a political and cultural necessity” (Silver 1986:141). In the twenty-first century U.S., “fairy” may bring to mind Tinkerbell or *Winx Club*, or girls wearing butterfly wings and eclectic handkerchief skirts at the Renaissance faire. Yet another kind of fae has gained popularity in the last ten years, one reminiscent of the old medieval tales in which a human girl is seduced by a charming faerie man (Hutton 2014:1140-1142). Love stories between mortal women and immortal men have become common within the Young Adult (YA) and New Adult (NA) Romance genres since the early 2000s, but the recent fae phenomenon may shine light on what the Celtic means to their audience.

This paper uses literary, historical, and ethnographic analyses of a well-known faerie romance series and its surrounding online culture in order to understand its popularity and appeal to the women who engage with it—aside from the heartthrob male love interests and whirlwind romances

which are a staple of the larger romance genre. My data comes from my own reading experience, nine volunteer interviewees, and a variety of online sources with an emphasis on TikTok. I find that faerie romance and related feminist Celtic fantasies allow women to escape to a world in which they are not free of misogynistic institutions, but instead have the freedom to fight back against them while being valued as women who do so. In other words, for these women, the Celtic is a site of female empowerment *dependent* on their oppression, as opposed to a Celtic feminism based on equality.

Celtic Courts

A Court of Thorns and Roses (ACOTAR) is a popular romantasy book (and series of the same name) by bestselling American author Sarah J Maas. The first book was published in 2015 in the YA genre, but the series was later relabeled as NA as subsequent books became more explicit. ACOTAR has an average of 4.19 stars (out of 5) from over 2.5 million ratings on Goodreads and was nominated for both the Goodreads Best Young Adult Fantasy & Science Fiction Award and Illinois Teen Readers' Choice Award in 2015. The rest of the series—*A Court of Mist and Fury* (ACOMAF), *A Court of Wings and Ruin* (ACOWAR), and *A Court of Silver Flames* (ACOSF)—all average over 4.45 stars from over 1 million ratings. ACOMAF and ACOWAR both received the Goodreads Best Young Adult Fantasy & Science Fiction Award for their respective publication years in addition to being nominated for the Best of the Best (2018), and ACOSF received the Goodreads Best Fantasy and Swoon Award for Fantasy Romance in 2021. While not yet rivaling the likes of Stephanie Myer or J.K. Rowling, these ratings make Maas's series comparable in popularity to Cassandra Claire's infamous *Mortal Instruments* or Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (Goodreads 2024).

ACOTAR follows nineteen-year-old Feyre Archeron, who is forced to live in the faerie realm with a man named Tamlin after unknowingly violating an ancient peace treaty between the humans and the fae. The first book is based on *Beauty and the Beast* as well as “Tam Lin,” a Scottish folk ballad originally documented in the eighteenth century. There are many versions of the ballad, but the basic structure involves a mortal woman rescuing her lover from the Faerie Queen by holding onto him while he undergoes multiple beastly and elemental transformations. The Queen often gets the last word, listing actions she wished she had taken such as replacing Tam Lin’s green eyes with wood or his heart with stone (Acland 2016). ACOTAR adopts many of these elements including Tamlin’s beast form, capture by the Queen, heart of stone, and rescue by a mortal lover. Other elements are scattered throughout the series such as another faerie, Lucien, having his eye replaced by the Queen. Many common Celtic and faerie tropes are also utilized such as cursed masks, riddles and binding words, fertility festivals, and divided seasons and courts.



Figure 1
Map of Prythian from *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015) by Sarah J Maas

The history between humans and fae in ACOTAR mirrors that of indigenous Celtic peoples and the British respectively – a questionable subversion of Celtic history, for a series based on romance between marginalized humans and “savage” bourgeois fae. ACOTAR is set in a land called Prythian—based on the Welsh name for Great Britain, Prydain—which is geographically identical to the British Isles. A wall just north of where London would be separates the faerie realm from the southern mortal lands – a condition of the treaty signed 500 years prior. Ireland is replaced by Hybern—based on the classical name for the island, Hibernia—and is home to evil fae who aim to subjugate humanity again. Prythian is separated into courts for each season as well as dawn, day, and night, with the mountainous Night Court replacing Scotland.

While the first book centers on the romance between Feyre and Tamlin, High Lord of the Spring Court, the rest of the series involves Feyre’s relationship with Rhysand, High Lord of the Night Court and Feyre’s “mate.” The Night Court is thus most popular amongst fans of the series both for being the main characters’ home and the underdog court, labeled as ruthless villains by the rest of Prythian. Lower class Night Court fae known as Illyrians—after the Indo-European tribe of the Balkan Peninsula, which intermingled with Celts as early as the fifth century BCE (Ellis 1995:80-81)—are portrayed as a very traditional, militaristic society with violent and misogynistic practices. Rhysand and his family, however, form a feminist counter-culture, attempting to change these customs through measures such as encouraging women to join the military:

“You’re training female Illyrian warriors?”

“Trying to.” Rhys gazed across the brutal landscape. “I banned wing-clipping a long, long time ago, but ... at the more zealous camps, deep within the mountains, they do it. And when Amarantha took over, even the milder camps started doing it again. To keep their women safe, they claimed. For the past hundred years, Cassian has been trying to build an aerial

fighting unit amongst the females, trying to prove that they have a place on the battlefield. So far, he's managed to train a few dedicated warriors, but the males make life so miserable that many of them left. And for the girls in training ...” A hiss of breath. “It's a long road. But Devlon is one of the few who even lets the girls train without a tantrum.” [Maas 2016:445-446]

As well as declaring Feyre High Lady of the Night Court, rather than consort:

“Not consort, not wife. Feyre is High Lady of the Night Court.” My equal in every way; she would wear my crown, sit on a throne beside mine. Never sidelined, never designated to breeding and parties and child-rearing. My queen. [Maas 2016:620-621]

A group of Night Court women later re-form the legendary Valkyries, an all-female group named for the warrior women of Norse mythology. As such, the Night Court fulfill their geographical role of Highland “noble savages,” and are romanticized accordingly (Stroh 2017).

COVID Escapism and Offline Engagement

2020-2021 TikTok was dominated by the Celtic. [Sarah Hester Ross's cover](#) of Wyndreth Berginsdottir's song, “My Mother's Savage Daughter,” garnered over half a million likes and has been used in 14.3k videos since being uploaded on April 14, 2020. The chorus repeats:

I am my mother's savage daughter,
the one who runs barefoot cursing sharp stones.
I am my mother's savage daughter,
I will not cut my hair, I will not lower my voice. [Unrein 2020]

Despite Bergindottir's statement that the song “is an anthem of empowerment--not a song meant to serve a specific blood or people or skin” (Unrein 2020), viewers identified it as Celtic with comments such as “The Irish in me felt chills ” ([mixedgirlgoddess](#)), “I felt this in my Irish soul” ([way2manyvoices](#)), and “I grew listening to Celtic music.... my mother got me in to it when I was

little!! This just reminds of her. 🙏🙏 ” ([Daniel](#)). Soon afterwards, a cover of Tom Lewis’s “The Last Shanty” performed by the Derina Harvey Band—a Canadian “Celtic Rock group... that offers a fresh take on traditional folk songs as well as a few originals” (Derina Harvey Band 2024)—exploded in popularity as users began setting the song to pirate cosplay videos. Examples include [lostgirlmikachu](#), [meganciafre](#), [piper.ally](#), [raarri](#), [dswizzlemybizzle](#), and [gillianfoxglove](#). The trend, dubbed [#birate](#) because most participants identified as bisexual women, has since accumulated 39.9k videos. These women turned to TikTok and the Celtic to fulfill their need for escapism in the face of a global pandemic, but specifically gravitated to content which allowed them to act out a rebellious fantasy.

ACOTAR is best known for its large fandom on BookTok, a TikTok-based community of readers predominantly made up of young white women who read YA and NA romance fiction. They use the app to share fanart, discuss book-related news, cosplay popular characters, and exchange book reviews and recommendations—often suggesting other Celtic books such as *Fourth Wing* (Rebecca Yarros, 2023), *Cruel Prince* (Holly Black, 2018), and Sarah J Maas’s *Throne of Glass* (2012-2018) and *Crescent City* (2020-) series. At the time of writing this paper, the [#booktok](#) tag has 32.8 million videos, and [#acotar](#) has 1.3 million. Although the first book was published in 2015, ACOTAR skyrocketed in popularity between 2020 and 2021 when many women—such as [thisbooks](#), [munnyreads](#), [pen.name08](#), [renbereading](#), [booked_up](#), and [stephanie_with_glasses](#)—picked up the series during the COVID-19 lockdowns and subsequently found a new love of reading.

Two fans [interviewed on Reddit](#)—where r/acotar ranks as the 59th largest community on the website, placing it in the top 1%—similarly reported that ACOTAR helped them reignite a love of reading after taking a break from the hobby in adulthood. One even credits ACOTAR with helping

them overcome their depression and leave their fiancé, who they say “was only in love with the idea of [them].” Two other users explained their love of the series based on its worldbuilding, with one describing it as “a world that feels like home.” A University of Chicago student described to me over Instagram how ACOTAR “changed [them] as a person;” they stated that from 2018-2021, as a high schooler graduating during the pandemic, “i was going through a real rough spot those years and the series was like one of the only real safe havens i had... 😊 escapism.”

Six out of nine people I spoke with between Reddit and Instagram mentioned ACOTAR’s poor writing, which has been thoroughly denounced by other members of BookTok and its neighboring BookTube (reading community based on YouTube). BookTuber Cindy Pham’s “[WTF is A Court of Thorns and Roses? 🌹](#)” video has received 961,628 views and over 41,000 likes since its release in April of 2019, and her series of ACOTAR “roast reviews” make up four of the ten most popular videos on her channel. However, what is considered a drawback by some appears to be regarded as an accessibility feature by others. As a local actress explained it:

this book feels like the equivalent of a made for tv historical movie?? In that the world building, big picture wise, makes sense to our sort of broad cultural idea of a ‘fantasy’ setting, but when you look at the details too hard you can really tell that it’s written from a very modern-feeling point of view. Which to one reader might be a turnoff (there are some parts of the book that feel so modern and colloquial to me that it took me completely out of the fantasy!) but it’s the PERFECT on-ramp for 20/30somethings that are either getting into reading, or getting BACK into reading

ACOTAR’s simplicity may appeal to non-readers or those unfamiliar with the fantasy genre. By helping readers feel more connected to the setting in this way, ACOTAR allows women to enjoy a genre which is too often hostile to them. A Columbia University student told me that “the quality of ACOTAR... was needed as a bridge to those previously uninterested in fantasy. I didn’t bother

[reading men's fantasy], I couldn't even read my uncle's books. One gross/demeaning description or introduction of a woman and I didn't see it as worth the time and energy." At a time when escapism was especially necessary, ACOTAR provided a digestible option that is more in-line with women's life experiences and desires.

With COVID restrictions now all but lifted, ACOTAR and BookTok have been brought into the outside world. Starfall Balls are ACOTAR-themed events that have been held throughout the U.S., Britain, and Australia since 2022 by various companies including [Bookish Events](#), [Book Bound Events](#), [The Fantastique Collection by Un Jour D'Amour](#), [Hush Fable](#), [Celestial Events](#), and [Alluxia Events](#). The [Gauntlets & Gowns Events Night Court Ball](#) is a version specifically focused on the Night Court. Attendees dress in cosplay or black tie attire and enjoy dancing, refreshments, photoshoots, live performances, and engagement with actors portraying the book characters. Some events also offer additional add-ons, markets, and workshops before or during the ball. These events are advertised on BookTok, which organizers and actors often credit for their success. Ashley Figlow, who represents Feyre for the Alluxia Starfall Ball, states in her bio: "I found the world of ACOTAR in a time of my life when I was in a very dark place, when I needed an escape, a distraction from the real world... The Booktok community has been such a welcoming place for me to live out my dreams" (Alluxia Events 2024). Raven Lowrey, who plays Emerie, wrote in her bio: "I read ACOTAR and loved it when I found Booktok in 2020. It wasn't until I met Emerie in ACOSF that I decided to try cosplaying, and I'm addicted! I love the sisterhood Emerie has formed with Nesta and Gwyn, and how fiercely she stands up for herself" (Alluxia Events 2024).

In the ACOTAR series, Emerie is an Illyrian woman whose wings were clipped by her abusive father, and who goes on to help re-found the Valkyries with Nesta and Gwyn. The Valkyries appear to play a prominent role in audience engagement for the Starfall and Night Court Balls. Attendees of the Book Bound Events ball could be [recruited by the Valkyries](#) after passing a simple training exercise, and the Gauntlets & Gowns ball was promoted using videos [portraying the Valkyries'](#) intimidating appearances. The May 2024 Alluxia Starfall Ball featured a Valkyrie training booth which hosted a morning “boot camp” exercise class as well as an afternoon “mind stilling” yoga class for guests, both based on how the women fight within the series. These classes had limited seats and were sold out by the time of the event. The Valkyrie training booth also offered exclusive ACOTAR-themed products such as the “30 Day Abs Like an Illyrian Workout Program,” the “12 Week Valkyrie Boot Camp Program,” and a “Blood Rite Qualifier At-Home Workout” based on the right of passage ceremony for Illyrian warriors. Their advertisement featured an image of two thin, smiling white women in tank tops and yoga pants, both with long hair, glasses, and tattoos. One woman is flexing her biceps and the other has her arms crossed over her chest behind a drawing of three feminine figures with spears and flowing hair (Alluxia Events 2024).

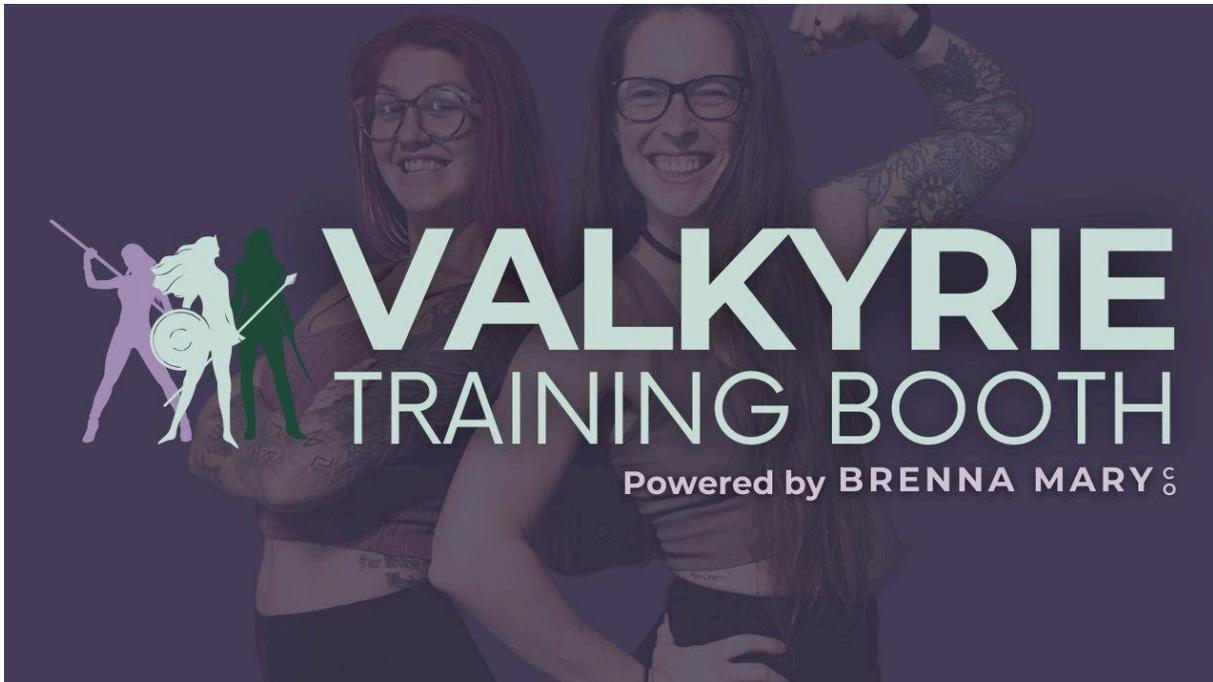


Figure 2
Advertisement for Alluxia Starfall Ball's Valkyrie Training Booth

The inclusion and popularity of Valkyries at ACOTAR balls highlights the fact that fan interest lies in more than a pretty gown and fantastical romance. Fans enjoy strong women who fight for what they believe in, rebel against patriarchal institutions, and overcome the sexual violence they've experienced in the past. Women turn to ACOTAR and similar Celtic fantasies not out of desire for a world of equality, but a desire for a world in which they can directly confront the harm that the patriarchy has caused them. These women want to fight, and they want to be valued specifically as women who do so while maintaining their femininity. Their reward is a hot faerie man who loves them precisely for their warrior spirit and aids them in their quest—not that they need the help. In the words of Mor, an exceedingly powerful High Fae woman of the Night Court: “They’ve got the instinct—the claws. It’s their stupid families that want them clipped and breeding” (Maas 2016:453).

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