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Beyond Gender Stereotypes:
A Feminist Analysis of Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass*

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The *Throne of Glass* series, by Sarah J Maas, is a collection of fantasy books set in a magical realm plagued by war and evil in which the characters must navigate to stay alive and save the world. These books follow the story of Celeana Sardothien, an unlikely heroine. The story introduces Celeana as a notorious assassin enslaved as punishment by the King of Ardan. Her fate shifts when she makes a deal with Prince Dorian Havillard to compete in a competition held by his father in exchange for her freedom. Celeana is thrust into the world of her enemies and embarks on a journey fighting for her life, uncovering secrets of the kingdom, and learning the truth about her past and future.

As the story unfolds Celeana is exposed as Aelin Galathynius, the lost princess of the conquered kingdom Terrasen and the one with the power to defeat the forces overtaking the world. Aelin travels across the various nations of her world to rally allies and obtain the tools to win against the evil forces in their land. Battling against magical creatures and evil forces Aelin and her diverse team of Fae warriors, witches, a shapeshifter, assassins, and more fight to save the world.

Maas creates a compelling series exploring female strength amidst great adversity. Each book is action-packed with battles, plot twists, love, and a journey of finding oneself. The *Throne of Glass* books have become a popular fantasy series beloved by readers for their intriguing plots and powerful heroine. From this series emerges a significant feminist narrative. Maas develops an ideal example of a feminist novel by characterizing Aelin as a powerful leader focused on succeeding. Utilizing the work of feminist scholars to understand how literature depicts women it is clear that Maas has written a female character, unlike these negative portrayals. This thesis

argues that Sarah J Maas' work subverts gender bias by challenging traditional representations of women in literature.

In the first part of my thesis, I will explore female archetypes in literature to demonstrate that Maas produces a feminist story by diverting from biased representations of women. Using Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature*, I will examine the concepts she presents and analyze how Aelin's character rejects such stereotypes. After looking at Aelin, I will introduce how *Cinderella* influenced this series and compare Disney's and Maas' stories. Cole Reilly discusses the constraints enforced upon the Disney princesses in *An Encouraging Evolution Among the Disney Princesses?*. Considering Reilly's theory in accordance with *Throne of Glass*, it is evident Maas forms a feminist retelling of *Cinderella*. Next, I will explore common romantic tropes in literature and how they can be problematic for the women involved. I will utilize Susan Weisser's *Feminism and Harlequin Romance: The Problem of the Love Story* and Megan Maas and Amy Bonomi's *Love Hurts?: Identifying Abuse in the Virgin-Beast Trope of Popular Romantic Fiction*. After contextualizing these sources, I will apply a close reading of the text to explore Aelin's romantic relationships. Upon analyzing each of Aelin's relationships, it becomes apparent that some are bound to fail as they embody negative aspects of the tropes outlined. Once we understand why these relationships failed, it becomes clear that Aelin's successful relationship signifies a feminist dynamic that rejects constraining tropes. After examining these different areas, the series is determined to be a feminist story that offers a representation of women to be upheld in the fantasy genre of literature.

I. Maas and Female Archetypes in Literature

Sarah J. Maas' *Throne of Glass* series challenges traditional female stereotypes in literature through the heroine Aelin. In *A Mirror for Men: Stereotypes of Women in Literature*, Cynthia Griffin Wolff recognizes prevalent stereotypes, advocating for more nuanced portrayals of female characters. Wolff's exploration of female archetypes in literature reveals how women are often used as tools to drive male narratives. In her work, she identifies five stereotypes: 'The Virtuous Woman and the Sensuous Woman', 'The Sentimental Stereotype', 'The Liberated Woman', and 'The American Girl' (Wolff). Through her analysis, Wolff prompts the need for broader representations of women. Maas affirms Wolff's stance by centering the storyline on Aelin, a powerful female protagonist who defies these archetypes.

'The Virtuous and the Sensuous Woman' represent opposites of each other yet neither are rewarded with their own autonomy. Wolff references Freud, noting his idea of "good" women that warrant respect and "bad" women whom he views sexually (208). From his ideas, 'The Virtuous and the Sensuous Woman' stereotypes are born. These stereotypes of women are based on how the female character affects the male. The virtuous woman brings positivity to the man's life, promoting his work or being a moral compass to which he follows. The sensuous woman does the opposite, causing the man to sin often by cheating on his partner (the virtuous woman) or disrupting his goals. Within these stereotypes women have no complexity; a woman is either bad or good and that depends on how she interacts with a man. These portrayals of female characters give no agency to the women. Women in either role are subjected to a man's story lacking any personal goal beyond him. Wolff's analysis of 'The Virtuous and the Sensuous Woman' highlights the failure to capture female identity. In these stereotypes,

women are reduced to instruments of male desires and actions (Wolff 208-209). In *Throne of Glass*, Aelin transcends these two stereotypes through her multifaceted identity that cannot be categorized in either portrayal. While Maas positions Aelin as the protagonist, the “good” side, she makes mistakes and can be considered a morally grey character. Aelin is an assassin and has killed numerous people, therefore she does not fit the category of ‘The Virtuous Woman’. Simultaneously Aelin is shown as a sexual being but this is not her entire identity, nor does it derail the story. Unlike ‘The Virtuous and the Sensuous Woman,’ Aelin has her own character arc and is not judged based on her impact on her male counterparts. Maas’ portrayal of Aelin denies these two stereotypes depicting her as a complex character that cannot be defined solely in either category.

Wolff states that ‘The Sentimental Stereotype’ is “described in terms of submission and suffering,” expressing the common notion of the passive roles and enduring hardships women are subjected to in literature (212). Female characters who fit ‘The Sentimental Stereotype’ are depicted as physically weak and helpless, often dying in these stories. Along with physical weakness, these women are shown to be emotionally weak. These characters are controlled by their emotions, yet only traditionally vulnerable ones; they are seen crying but not being angry or promiscuous. This, Wolff writes, culminates in the idea that “women are intended by Nature to be victimized” (212). The use of this stereotype is supported by the idea that it is female nature to be weak and male nature to dominate. The ‘Sentimental’ characters are essentially powerless and are forced to suffer, perpetuating the patriarchal narrative that diminishes female strength and ability to assert their autonomy in shaping their own

lives. The *Throne of Glass* series proves Aelin to be anything but weak. Despite her size, Aelin is the best assassin in the land. Throughout the books, she defeats men twice her size and outwits them too. Maas also writes Aelin as someone who experiences a myriad of emotions. In the books, Aelin is described in many ways. Sometimes she is smug and sarcastic, while at other times she shows vulnerability with those she loves. This depiction shows the potential for women to feel a vast range of emotions. Although she endures extreme hardships in this series, Aelin never succumbs, denying this stereotype of weak women.

Wolff then discusses a more modern stereotype popularized in the 19th and 20th centuries, 'The Liberated Woman': a portrayal of an intelligent woman. This portrayal denies any emotional side of a woman and focuses solely on her intelligence. Despite this woman with almost equal abilities to a man, she is doomed as she lives in a patriarchal society where her desire for intellectual recognition is impossible. Wolff explains this stereotype can be depicted differently depending on the author, if "the author is sympathetic to women, their intelligence is problematical but not bizarre; when he is not, her abilities... are seen as aberrations" (213). Her intelligence causes her to be viewed as unusual and not accepted by society. Because of her status as an intellectual, she is not seen as a valuable sexual object to men. Thus she becomes a sexual pariah. 'The Liberated Woman's' sexuality is ambiguous, sometimes inferring homosexuality or a lack of sexual interest whatsoever. This leads this type of character to be incapable of desiring a domestic life. 'The Liberated Woman' stereotype maintains patriarchal power by demonstrating that any liberation is met with social marginalization and a lack of any complexity of their needs or desires. Maas depicts Aelin as an

intelligent, well-read, and talented woman. She often outsmarts her enemies and forms intricate plans to execute her wishes. Yet she also maintains traditional feminine qualities like enjoying fashion and music. Instead of facing alienation she is upheld by those around her and is seen as a great leader. She also has multiple romantic relationships and marries at the end of the series. Her characterization offers an alternate depiction of complex female characters which promotes feminist ideals.

The last stereotype Wolff describes is 'The American Girl' whose "function... is to magnify the men who support her," again proving that often the female character's only purpose is to accentuate the male (215). 'The American Girl' depicts an educated woman, yet her intelligence is strictly for show. Her educated status reflects on her father's ability to pay for schooling and her father and husband's ability to have her not put her education to financial use (Wolff 215). Thus her intelligence is only ornamental and a way for the men in her life to use her as a tool for social status. Yet when she becomes too demanding of recognition she is dismissed, Wolff notes that "their persistent high-mindedness serves only to destroy their chances for personal happiness" (216). Expectations confine this stereotypical woman: she must be educated yet not overambitious, ultimately limiting her ability to find happiness. Through her analysis of 'The American Girl', Wolff assimilates that this stereotype is a denial of women's ability to provide any real impact besides being an object for men to use for their gain. Aelin's position as heir of her kingdom and eventually queen rejects this stereotype. Her late father and mother both loved Aelin and educated her not for status but to one day rule their kingdom. Aelin's education and leadership qualities emphasize her as a feminist character, a woman who is not ornamental but powerful.

Wolff's examination of these female stereotypes determines that generally female characters are used to accentuate a male character rather than given their own agency. In each stereotype she discusses, the woman is seen as a one-dimensional character. There is a lack of female complexity seen in literature perpetuated by patriarchal desires to limit women's autonomy. Maas's refusal to characterize Aelin to fit one category offers a new approach to feminist storytelling. Aelin emerges as a feminist symbol of the potential for female characters to be written as complex women with self-determination.

II. **Aelin as Cinderella: a Retelling**

The *Throne of Glass* series is a retelling of the fairytale *Cinderella*, re-imagined if the princess wasn't meant to marry the prince but to kill him. Cinderella transforms from a harmless princess into an assassin, reflecting a change in the common fairytale. In his piece, *An Encouraging Evolution Among the Disney Princesses?*, Cole Reilly describes the different tropes displayed in Disney princess tales and the gender biases they affirm. Instead of the basic Disney princess storyline— a princess being rescued by her one true love, a prince— Aelin becomes her own savior. This re-imagining offers a feminist telling of an age-old story.

Cole Reilly analyzes three Disney tales, *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty*, labeling them: "Prettiness Punished, Submissive Trophy Tropes Lacking Agency" and thus exposing the affirmation of gender bias (53). Reilly explains that these stories all follow the same formula: "conventionally pretty maidens of Euro-descent... doing a great deal of unpaid, domestic labor without complaint, all the while awaiting rescue by a handsome, unknown prince" (53). The princesses are defined by their beauty and youth, which makes them a target but also the reason they are saved.

These women are denied any power or agency over their story, becoming victims of evil witches or stepmothers and later saved by a prince. Throughout the stories they are not active characters, instead being helped by fairy godmothers or dwarfs, or comatose for the entire story. Even their “happily ever afters” are questionable if looked at closely. These women, after being saved from evil forces by a prince they do not know, are supposed to fall in love instantaneously, marry them, and assume a new role as wives. Snow White and Aurora are also both comatose when their princes save them with a kiss, begging the question of consent. Ella in *Cinderella* is the only woman in these stories not born a princess, instead becoming royal by marrying a prince. Yet this prince can’t even recognize her when she isn’t adorned in a gown and jewels as a princess would be. This pattern in Disney princess stories conveys the limited options these women have. Reilly emphasizes that what these stories convey is the “few options but to be domestic servants, lifeless mannequins awaiting resuscitation from a handsome stranger, and desirable visions of perfection - kiss-worthy trophies” (53). This Disney princess trope creates anti-feminist ideas, promoting women who lack agency and are domestic tools for the people around them.

By comparing her work with Reilly’s analysis of how these Disney princesses are negative representations of female characters in literature, it is clear that Maas transforms *Cinderella* into a feminist story. The character of Ella or Cinderella parallels *Throne of Glass*’ Celaena/Aelin yet their stories are quite different. Ella is a commoner by birth while Aelin is a princess and heir to her kingdom. Aelin possesses agency not only as a royal but also as a future ruler, granting her the power that Ella lacks. Aelin, while also described as beautiful, is not defined by this attribute and uses it to her

advantage. She is a trained fighter and uses her reputation as such to surprise her targets as they never suspect a young beautiful girl to be their attacker. While she is helped by others along her journey, she is the main progressor and not a passive character. Aelin is constantly masterminding plans and seeking knowledge to aid her cause. Unlike Ella, Aelin isn't rescued by a prince. Throughout the series, Aelin takes action to secure her freedom, epitomized by her leadership role in the battle against evil forces. Instead of falling in love with the first prince she meets, Aelin does not settle down until she is with the right person for her, who does not hinder her agency. Comparing Aelin and Ella it is evident that this retelling of *Cinderella* establishes a feminist world for a princess to succeed through a feminist lens.

III. Transforming Classic Romantic Tropes

Along with disrupting female stereotypes, Maas also works to dispel romantic tropes that negatively impact women. Using the romantic relationships in the series, Maas refutes these archetypes and offers an idea of what a feminist relationship would look like. Scholars describe how common tropes in literature often don't represent a positive relationship for women. Contextualizing Maas' depiction of romance with ideas posed by scholars, Maas presents an opportunity for female characters to have a positive relationship.

Romantic tropes can impose oppressive notions onto female characters by constraining their agency and glorifying harmful dynamics within narratives. Between feminists and other scholars, there has been much discourse on how heterosexual romance may hinder women. In her article, *Feminism and Harlequin Romance: The Problem of the Love Story*, Susan Weisser tells how in the late twentieth century the

conversations focused on the trope of the virgin bride which was used to “denigrate women and serve to keep them in their place, subordinate to men and to the marriage and family system” (132). This virgin trope compliments the dominant male trope depicting a problematic power dynamic within a relationship. Megan Maas and Amy Bonomi delve into this issue of what they call the “virgin-beast trope” in their article, *Love Hurts?: Identifying Abuse in the Virgin-Beast Trope of Popular Romantic Fiction* (512). They describe this trope as being problematic as it normalizes and promotes abusive relationships. This trope emphasizes a male character as physically and socially powerful while the female character is only powerful in her physical appearance. Megan Maas and Bonomi formulate that the portrayal of the “dominant male and submissive female whose only goal is to win the love of her man is pervasive and oppressive” (512). Along with these imbalances of power, the female characters are often forced to change themselves to receive love leading to more suffering. They reference the Disney film, *The Little Mermaid*, in which Ariel gives up her voice and family (M. Maas and Bonomi 512). Also mentioned are the films *Beauty and the Beast* and *Tangled* where the princesses are isolated and trapped in towers or castles (M. Maas and Bonomi 512). Despite the suffering that these female characters endure in this trope, these stories signify that “‘true love’ conquers all obstacles, romanticizing the compromising conditions a woman is in for the possibility of love” (M. Maas and Bonomi 512). The “virgin-beast trope” romanticizes suffering thus perpetuating narratives that are abusive towards women. This trope is problematic as it justifies the abuse of female characters under the guise of love.

Sarah J. Maas's series portrays a spectrum of romantic relationships, spanning from toxic to healthy, revealing how romantic relationships can impact a woman. The main character, Celaena/Aelin, experiences three romantic relationships throughout the series. The series explores how each relationship impacted her. While some of her relationships seem to mirror the negative tropes described, Maas uses this to critique these dynamics through their ultimate failure. Through her multiple relationships, Celaena/Aelin chooses her own beliefs and ambitions over romantic partners, taking a feminist approach to romance.

Celaena's initial romantic relationship highlights Maas' prioritization of the heroine's personal aspirations above conventional notions of romance. The series starts with Celaena enslaved in the salt mines of Dorian's kingdom. Dorian makes a deal with her that he will take her out of the salt mines if she enters a competition to become the King's assassin. Dorian assumes the role of a savior, thus a power imbalance is established between himself and Celaena. Despite Celaena's status as an assassin and an enemy of his kingdom, Dorian falls in love with Celaena. In the first book when she is brought to the castle to compete to become the king's champion, Celaena and Dorian engage in flirtatious banter and begin a relationship. Yet there is still a drastic difference in their positions. Celaena is simply a tolerated prisoner who must abide by the rules of the competition and is often forced into dangerous events to win her freedom. Even with his status as prince, Dorian has little influence over his father or the situation at hand. In the stereotypical tropes, Dorian would further rescue Celaena from this situation, yet Maas disturbs these constructs and has Celaena take control of her situation. This is shown to the extreme in the final battle of the competition. In a one-on-one fight, the

audience learns that Caleana was poisoned, however, Dorian could do nothing to save her. After Caleana wins the competition despite this she imagines her future as the King's champion. She realizes after she serves for the agreed-upon two years she and Dorian will never work because he is a hindrance to her freedom. Caleana dreams of leaving his kingdom, which would never be possible if she were romantically involved with him. Resolving what she must do, she breaks up with Dorian, thus securing her desires. This is a significant choice as she puts her wishes above their romantic connection. In the stereotypical savior trope, Dorian would have rescued Caleana and she would have been forever indebted to him, yet in the story, Caleana takes control of her own destiny, thus shattering this notion.

In her next relationship with Chaol, Celaena's unwavering commitment to her beliefs asserts her dedication to herself rather than a man. From the onset, Chaol, and Celaena are positioned on opposing sides: Celaena, a convicted criminal hailing from a conquered kingdom, harbors disdain towards the kingdom she now serves, the kingdom Chaol is the head of the king's guard. Yet they become friends and eventually more than that. At one point Chaol says he will run away with her and leave his duties behind because "[he] would be the greatest fool in the world to let her go alone" (S. Maas, *Crown of Midnight* 187). Despite this confession that she is more important than his duty as the King's guard, his actions prove otherwise. After the King informs him of a threat, Chaol holds back the vital information from Celaena which leads to the death of one of her closest friends, Nehemia. Chaol's actions prove that he will always choose his duty to his kingdom over Celaena even if it's not the right thing to do. Chaol unquestionably follows orders from a corrupt kingdom demonstrating a difference in his and Celaena's

values. He misplaces his devotion causing the ultimate issue between them. Celaena blames him for her death and in a confrontation attempts to kill Chaol telling him “You will never be my friend. You will always be my enemy” (S. Maas, *Crown of Midnight* 235). Celaena’s declaration of enmity creates a chasm between their characters accentuating their opposition. This is a key moment that shows their innate rivalry and inability to move past it despite their best efforts. Celaena’s ability to cut off this relationship emphasizes her strength in her values and refusal to bend them for a man. Unlike previously stated stereotypes, Celaena does not change herself for a man and submit to his will; instead, she forcefully denies any compromise to her identity or beliefs.

In this relationship, Celaena also shows resilience in not conforming to a man who cannot accept her for who she is. In the beginning Chaol, as Dorian’s best friend and head guard, is suspicious of Celaena, never fully trusting her. As their romance develops, Chaol struggles internally in observing Celaena carry out her duties as an assassin. Dorian, identifying Chaol’s conflict, advises him, “You cannot pick and choose what parts of her to love” (S. Maas, *Heir of Fire* 344). Following Nehemia’s death, Celaena seeks vengeance and kills those directly involved in her murder. Witnessing her assassinate one of the men implicated, Chaol reflects “There was nothing there, as though she’d been hollowed out. For a heartbeat, he wondered if she would kill him, too-just for being there, for seeing the dark truth of her” (S. Maas, *Crown of Midnight* 290). Chaol’s inability to accept Celaena for who she is reveals his desire for her to change into the woman he wants her to be. His refusal to accept all of her, including her less desirable parts, suggests that he was only in love with his idea of Celaena and not

who she truly was. When Chaol witnesses what he remarks as "the dark truth of her," he implies that his previous understanding of Celaena isn't accurate, and because she does not fit into this previous idea, he is unable to embrace her true self. Their dynamic reveals the significance of mutual respect and acceptance in a relationship. It is clear in these events that there is no capacity for her and Chaol to have a healthy trusting relationship.

Aelin's last romantic relationship with Rowan demonstrates a relationship founded on mutual growth that is fostered throughout the series revealing what an ideal feminist relationship would look like. When they meet Aelin is mentally exhausted and at one of her lowest points in the novels. Rowan, as one of the strongest Fae warriors, is tasked to train Aelin in her Fae form. Aelin and Rowan's relationship begins as very aggressive and strained as they mutually dislike one another. Aelin and Rowan physically fight and verbally abuse each other. Although this is a problematic start to their relationship and should not be overlooked, it is also a testament to their journey of growth. They start understanding one another more when they open up about their past. Their relationship continues to grow stronger when they become allies against dangerous creatures they encounter on their journeys. They learn to work together and help each other survive when in life-threatening situations. After they grow closer, Aelin remarks that their animosity was because at the time she hated herself and he was her mirror image of suffering, she says "in the weeks she had been looking at him it had been like gazing at a reflection. No wonder she had loathed him" (S. Maas, *Heir of Fire* 304). Their aggression towards one another was due to the perspective that the other reflected parts of themselves they hated most. Her realization of this indicates how

loving Rowan is a way of loving herself. Aelin's developing respect for Rowan parallels her journey of healing and rediscovering self-love. In her previous relationships, Aelin had suppressed past trauma, but with Rowan, she works through her issues, and by beginning to love herself she becomes able to fully love another. Their bond strengthens as they both heal from previous trauma. Their healing journeys lend significance to the challenging start of their relationship. Aiding each other through these journeys cultivates a deep understanding and mutual support, leading to a strong relationship. Maas writes, "They had walked out of darkness and pain and despair together" (S. Maas, *Queen of Shadows* 527). It is key to Aelin and Rowan's healthy relationship that their healing was together, not one-sided. Unlike her past romances, Rowan did not save Aelin, but they both uplifted each other and progressed together. Aelin and Rowan's relationship grows, spanning multiple books; this slow progression allows both Aelin and Rowan to heal from past trauma and fully ensure their mutual respect and love before taking each step. It takes them a book to become friends then another first to kiss and another to be intimate. Having the time to build a healthy foundation demonstrates that their connection exemplifies the values of a feminist relationship.

Aelin and Rowan's relationship is founded on trust and acceptance of each other, embodying traits of an ideal feminist relationship. Rowan's ability to completely trust Aelin is seen when he takes a blood oath to serve her as queen. This is especially significant as Rowan was coerced into taking the same oath before to Maeve who abused it forcing him to kill whoever she willed. Rowan asks Aelin to give him the oath and when she hesitates because she does not want to control him as Maeve did, he says to her "Trust me... I claim you Aelin. To whatever end" (S. Maas, *Heir of Fire* 516).

Rowan's dedication to Aelin is unmistakable in his claim of her as his queen and his complete trust in her not to take advantage of his oath. The juxtaposition of his relationship with Aelin and Maeve emphasizes the deep care Aelin and Rowan have for one another in this moment. Rowan respects Aelin's autonomy and trusts her to make her own choices. He supports her leadership, acting as her confidant rather than trying to control her actions. This extends to times when he is left in the dark about her plans or even when he disagrees with her. One of these instances is shown in the extreme when Aelin must sacrifice her life to save the world. Rowan tries to find anything to change this outcome but when it comes down to the moment he allows Aelin to do what she must. His unwavering backing of Aelin portrays him as the perfect feminist romantic figure.

Rowan, unlike her previous relationships, accepts all of Aelin. He tells her, "I see you. I see every part of you. And I am not afraid" (S. Maas, *Empire of Storms* 418). The comparison of this line to Chaol's "dark truth of her" line exemplifies Rowan as the right partner for Aelin— he is not scared nor appalled by even the darkest parts of her (S. Maas, *Crown of Midnight* 290). Rowan does not try to change her but loves her for everything that makes her who she is. Although both Aelin and Rowan are incredibly powerful and feared by many for their abilities, neither acts in fear of the other and each loves the other for their strength. Rowan's complete acceptance of Aelin and vice versa depicts how one should be viewed by one's partner in a healthy relationship. Their compatibility is ultimately shown as Maas reveals they are "mates": the perfect romantic pairing for fae. Along with their status as mates, Aelin and Rowan marry and rebuild Aelin's kingdom as Queen and King of Terrasen. Maas' decision to make Aelin and

Rowan the endgame relationship is important because it indicates them as the ideal feminist couple.

The three relationships depicted in the series show contrasting ideas of love and how different relationships can hinder or positively impact a person. Dorian, Chaol, and Rowan all affected Aelin in different ways, and in the end, it was clear that in her relationship with Rowan, she was able to be completely herself and prosper. Applying a feminist lens to each of these relationships, Aelin and Rowan were the most successful. Sarah J Maas' portrayal of romance emphasized the importance of a healthy, supportive relationship.

IV. Female Competition vs. Friendships

Another significant aspect of this series is the emphasis on female friendships, through which Maas writes an empowering story with positive dynamics between the female characters. Literature often pits women against one another for patriarchal reasons like fighting over a man's affection. Instead of pitting the female characters against each other Maas creates women confident in themselves that can build strong connections. Maas uses this common narrative in Aelin's relationships with Lysandra and Yrene. She depicts two kinds of rivalry in these relationships. Aelin and Lysandra are childhood rivals competing for the attention of the adult figures in their lives; Aelin and Yrene are romantic rivals who both have relationships with Chaol. After forming the narrative following this pattern, Maas then flips the script and crushes these patriarchal notions by allowing the characters to mature and become friends. Through the evolution of these friendships, Maas offers the potential for female solidarity and empowerment while also denying patriarchal norms.

One of the most significant feminist friendships in the series is between Aelin and Lysandra, as they begin as rivals but evolve beyond the patriarchal constructs that made them so and become best friends. Aelin and Lysandra grew up together; Aelin trained with Arobynn Hamel to be an assassin and Lysandra trained with Clarisse DuVency to be a sex worker, often used by Arobynn. As girls, they hated each other, competing for attention from Arobynn and not realizing the trauma they were both enduring. When they are reunited as adults they begin to understand how they both suffered from similar trauma and develop a friendship. Discussing their past they both apologize for playing a part in each other's suffering, Lysandra even says "We were both young and stupid, and should have seen each other as allies. But there's nothing to prevent us from seeing each other that way now" (S. Maas, *Queen of Shadows* 119). In their new allyship, they become important aids to one another. Lysandra helps Aelin rescue her cousin by spying on Arobynn and Aelin helps Lysandra kill Arobynn in retribution for what he did to them and the ones they love. This transition from vengeful rivals to allies explores the true reason why these women hated each other, not because of their own faults but because of a man who manipulated them to think so. By recognizing this they overcome their previous hatred and can recognize each other as strong women who have worth beyond a man. Lysandra's involvement in the later books also depicts her importance at Aelin's side. She becomes a main character as a valuable warrior and best friend to Aelin. Lysandra is revealed to be a shapeshifter who is a great asset to their war effort, shifting into sea dragons and cougars to kill their enemies. Her ability is a key aspect of the story. Aelin suspects she will have to die for their cause and confides this in Lysandra. She asks Lysandra if this happens to shift into

Aelin's likeness and become queen herself. When Aelin is captured by their enemies, Lysrandra shifts into her to uphold a strong battlefield. Lysrandra's devotion to Aelin and their cause is evident in her actions and depicts her as one of Aelin's most trusted and important friends. Their development is an important feminist narrative emphasizing how women should support one another instead of competing with each other.

Maas also writes a relationship that shows friendship and respect between two women who have loved the same man, Aelin and Yrene. In *Kingdom of Ash* when Aelin and Yrene meet they remember one another as someone who had given them hope years before. Aelin, when she was Celeana, had met Yrene in a dangerous town called Innish. When Yrene was attacked Celeana taught her to defend herself and gave her money to travel to become a healer. Yrene carried Celeana's words with her throughout her studies and credited her for the path she was put on. Celeana in a world of darkness and death was given hope that there were people whose goal was to heal others. Aelin and Yrene both remember this moment and hold each other in high regard for it. When Aelin finds out Yrene and Chaol are married she is extremely happy for them and "let[s] out one those choked, joyous laughs," not feeling jealous or angry (S. Maas, *Kingdom of Ash* 406). Yrene similarly, respects Aelin as a leader, fighting with her for their freedom. Both women were monumental in defeating the evil forces in their land, being represented as two sides of one coin, a killer and a healer who saved the world together. After saving the world, Aelin and Yrene's goodbye shows their friendship clearly: "'We're a long way from Innish,' Yrene whispered. "'But lost no longer,' Aelin whispered back, voice breaking as they embraced. The two women who had held the fate of their world between them. Who had saved it" (S. Maas, *Kingdom of Ash* 974).

Their interaction emphasizes their relationship is not built around their relationship with Chaol but as two independent women who saved the world. With mutual respect and even love for one another, these two women were the ultimate factors in the defeat of evil, not any man. Aelin and Yrene as the saviors stress not only the feminist idea of a woman doing the saving but also that two characteristically different women who would be otherwise pitted against each other did it together. Their dynamic allows them to work together toward their goal of fighting evil instead of deviating from it for the attention of a man. Aelin and Yrene's interactions hold significance in demonstrating women who prioritize their own goals and are not defined by their relationships with men. The relationships between these female characters demonstrate unity and strength, empowering readers to act the same.

V. Conclusion

The *Throne of Glass* series confronts patriarchal narratives seen in literature, offering a feminist approach to storytelling. Maas defies stereotypical portrayals of female characters thus presenting the potential for complex female representation in literature. Aelin emerges as a feminist icon, surpassing traditional gender expectations throughout her journey. Through an in-depth analysis of Aelin's development, this thesis uncovers how the series breaks free from engrained patriarchal stereotypes. Divided into four subsections—'Maas and Female Archetypes in Literature,' 'Aelin as Cinderella: a Retelling,' 'Transforming Classic Romantic Tropes,' and 'Female Competition vs. Friendships'—this examination reveals that *Throne of Glass* not only challenges biases but also offers an empowering representation of women in literature.

By beginning this thesis examining female archetypes in literature, Maas' deviation from these norms is evident. Cynthia Griffin Wolff's discussion of stereotypes was significant to the argument that Maas does not follow these gendered biases. By comparing Wolff's ideas to Maas' depiction of Aelin, I was able to determine that Aelin rejects such stereotypes. Then by comparing this story to *Cinderella*, Maas disrupts the typical narrative of Disney princess stories. In his work, Cole Reilly determines that these classic princess tales follow a patriarchal storyline which Maas rejects by making Aelin a powerful heroine in charge of her destiny. The next subsection on romantic tropes detailed the toxic portrayals of relationships in literature. Considering the work of multiple authors determined how romantic relationships in literature often benefit the male characters. Aelin's failed romantic relationships display her ability to leave unhealthy situations, which ultimately help her find her lasting relationship. Maas both refutes negative romantic archetypes and shows the potential for a feminist relationship. I end this thesis by discussing the female friendships in these novels and the significance of portraying the positive dynamics of female characters. Instead of pitting women against one another, as is often seen in literature, Maas overcomes these patriarchal notions and makes them friends. After creating a rivalry between characters, the characters evolve beyond their competition displaying female solidarity and empowerment. Each section of this thesis contributes significantly to the argument that this series is a powerful narrative to be upheld as feminist literature.

Sarah J Maas' *Throne of Glass* series has gained widespread recognition as a popular fantasy saga upheld for its drama-packed books and beloved heroine. From this story emerges a significant feminist narrative that highlights female strength. Its

popularity demonstrates the public's desire for more works like Maas'. The definitive contrast in this story to others indicates a need to reconsider our storytelling approaches. Previous generations had access to limited literature that explored female strength like *Throne of Glass*. From a young age, women are conditioned to adhere to societal norms dictated by patriarchy. Stories like the Disney princesses normalize and romanticize unhealthy experiences, shaping young girls' perceptions of the ideal life. By transforming the literature we consume we can cultivate new norms that uplift women. Maas' work offers a model of what stories like this could entail. In *Throne of Glass*, Sarah J Maas creates a story empowering the female characters and women reading the series, providing hope for the future of literature.

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