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# Violet Sorrengail's Growth Narrative and the Feminist Remaking of Romantasy in Rebecca Yarros's *Fourth Wing*

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**Abstract:** Rebecca Yarros's *Fourth Wing* (2023), the first book in the Empyrean series, has become a representative work of the recent development of "romantasy", and this paper explores how the protagonist Violet Sorrengail in the novel represents a significant revision of the female hero in contemporary fantasy. Feminist fantasy criticism, disability studies and genre theory are employed to trace the development of Violet from a chronically ill, politically conscripted cadet to a dragon rider whose authority stems from tactical intelligence, adaptive embodiment and truth-telling, rather than inherited power or magical exceptionalism. *Fourth Wing* has introduced three new developments in its genre: first, fragility and chronic pain are no longer depicted as weaknesses to be overcome but as sources of knowledge and strength; second, the structure of romance has been changed to consent-based, transparent and chosen partnerships, moving away from the "fated mates" model of many paranormal and fantasy romances; third, by setting the coming-of-age story against the backdrop of institutional criticism of militarised education and state propaganda, the academy plot has been transformed from a neoliberal meritocracy fantasy into an exploration of systemic violence. The article places the novel within the larger feminist genealogy of fantasy, tracing from Joanna Russ's analysis of the heroine's limited scripts to contemporary disability-feminist systems, and concludes that *Fourth Wing*'s commercial success is not a decline in feminism but rather the mainstreaming of feminist narrative strategies in mass-market fantasy.

**Keywords:** *Fourth Wing*; Feminist fantasy; Disability; Chronic illness; Female hero; Military academy fiction

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## 1. Introduction

When Rebecca Yarros's *Fourth Wing* was released in May 2023, few people expected that a novel about a dragon-rider academy would become one of the top commercial successes of the decade and, as the publishing industry quickly dubbed it, the "romantasy" phenomenon [1-2]. Violet Sorrengail is a twenty-

year-old scribe who, according to her mother General Lilith Sorrengail's wishes, has been sent to the Riders Quadrant of Basgiath War College; this place is known to be extremely harsh, and its unofficial motto is "fly or die". Violet is not physically fit for the military life here, with joint problems, long-term pain, a tendency to faint under pressure, and a life of being told she is too weak. She lives, binds the two dragons (the largest and most feared dragon alive), discovers a state conspiracy, and falls in love with the rebellion's heir apparent; how she does so is the feminism of the novel.

*Fourth Wing* is not only a popular work of fantasy but also a significant formal and ideological development in contemporary fantasy literature. I believe that the novel has updated the story of female growth—what earlier criticism referred to as the "female hero" tradition [3-4]—by adding the three elements that mass-market fantasy has often kept separate: a disabled body as a source of agency rather than pity; a romance plot based on consent and informational equality; and an academy narrative that has been transformed from a merit-playground into a critique of the institutions producing soldiers and lies. Violet Sorrengail is noteworthy not because she is a replica of the tough-as-nails action heroines in the 1990s and 2000s, but because she refuses to be one and will not be a damsel either.

## 2. Romantasy and the feminist genealogy of fantasy

The term "romantasy"—the fusion of romance and fantasy into a single market category—has been mocked in some quarters as a marketing confection, but the fusion it names has a respectable critical genealogy. From the Gothic novels of the 18th century to Anne McCaffrey's Dragonriders and the romantic fantasy of the 1980s and 1990s, these genres have been continuously popular; what is new is less a combination and more the scale, cultural importance, and readership of these works, which are overwhelmingly women and increasingly demand emotional and moral fulfillment from their fantasy [2]. Early feminist critics of fantasy identified the exclusion of women from the genre in detail. Joanna Russ's First Essay: *What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write* (1972) observed that the heroine was limited to a small number of plots—marriage, suffering, and the exceptional-woman exception—while the hero enjoyed the open road of adventure. Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope's *The Female Hero in American and British Literature* (1981) have identified the compensatory archetypes of the altruist and the artist for women characters who achieve heroic agency indirectly.

Fantasy studies has since tracked the genre's partial emancipation of its heroines: the swordswomen and questers of post-Tolkien popular fantasy, the feminist high fantasy of the 1970s and 1980s, and the recent wave of dark academia and academy fantasies in which young women negotiate magic, institutions, and desire simultaneously [5-7]. Farah Mendlesohn points out in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) that formal innovation is also a type of representation [8]; a woman who is the hero of an unaltered story can change the world without changing the language. Therefore, the question posed by *Fourth Wing* is not whether its heroine is strong, but rather how she is not strong, and whether the narrative grammar of the hero's journey has been altered to accommodate a different kind of strength.

It is also worth pausing on the medium through which *Fourth Wing* became a phenomenon. The rise of the novel was not due to traditional review coverage but rather to BookTok and Bookstagram communities, where young women readers predominantly engage in public discussions and collective interpretations of their reading, rating romances by their consent practices, treatment of female friendship, handling of violence, etc., using a vernacular yet genuine critical vocabulary such as "red flag", "green flag", and "spice

level". Feminist criticism has sometimes seen the readership of mass-market romance as an ideological trap; at the same time, the readership of romantasy functions as a self-organizing critical apparatus, and *Fourth Wing* provides this apparatus with material for adjudication by making its consent scenes explicit enough to be clipped and quoted and its moral dilemmas legible enough to be argued about. The work of fiction is also in line with the reading culture of society for learning by doing.

Romance novels have become popular in recent years. In this way, the rise of romantasy can be seen as a redistribution of genre power rather than a merger of fantasy and romance. Mid-century fantasy criticism often viewed romance as a weakness of "serious" fiction, and thus, *Fourth Wing* presents courtship, sexual desire and emotional negotiation as events in world history that are no less important than battles. The two parts of the novel, the deadly trials and the emotional encounters with Xaden Riorson, are not in opposition; both are skills Violet needs to learn and both are politicised. At the bottom, this denial is feminist in character because it rejects the traditional space for women's lives and is not limited to the genre ghetto. However, it is also formally feminist in that it gives equal narrative attention to scenes of dialogue, negotiation and consent as well as to scenes of conflict. Therefore, the famous "slow burn" of the Violet-Xaden arc is not for show but aims to teach readers how to experience desire as a process of mutual learning rather than as a goal to be achieved or attained.

## 3. The fragile body as heroic instrument

The fourth revision of *Fourth Wing* addresses problems with the body of its heroine. Violet Sorrengail is first mentioned in Basgiath without any mention of a disability in the story; Yarros has confirmed that Violet's joint dislocations, chronic pain, dysautonomia-like fainting, and soft, easily bruised skin are based on hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (hEDS), and the author shares this with her sons—but it is also the foundation of life. Genre-wise, it is almost unprecedented: the heroine of an action-fantasy blockbuster is, according to the repeated descriptions in the novel itself, frail. Feminist disability studies provide the tools for analysis of this strategy. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's Extraordinary Bodies (1997) presents the division of bodies in contemporary culture into "normal" and "extraordinary" [9], and treats non-normative bodies as spectacles or objects of pity and medical problems; Alison Kafer's Feminist, Queer, Crip (2013) believes that disability is a political and relational category, and the problem of disability is produced by environments and expectations as well as by the bodies themselves [10]. *Fourth Wing* shows Kafer's idea literally: Violet's body is not the problem; it's Basgiath's environment—cliffs to be climbed, saddles built for other bodies, a curriculum that values strength above all else.

The work does not need to be moved. Violet is not a subject for inspiration porn, a disabled character celebrated merely for existing, a figure of tragedy, or a hope for a magical cure. Her relationship with the dragons sharpens her senses but also weakens her joints, and by the end of the novel, her body is still the same as when she arrived. Tobin Siebers (2008) thinks that the representation of disability is emancipatory when it treats disabled people as complex [11], desiring, flawed subjects instead of as metaphors, and *Fourth Wing* achieves this by making Violet's disability ordinary in the narrative—it is present in all the scenes but is not the subject of the theme. There is no emotion; therefore, the long-term pain she has is shown in the specific details of daily life: she suppresses the pain and locks it away in a "wall", manages her energy, dislocates her shoulder during a fight, pops it back in, and adapts. The story also shows the application of

assistive technology. The custom saddle her friends designed for her to ride Tairn, the largest dragon in existence, caused a crisis of internalised ableism in Violet. She first refused the accommodation and insisted on riding like everyone else. Tairn believes that because one does not look like the other students, they are not less deserving of a good place. Living in the dormitory is not a favour or a gift but the foundation for achieving excellence.

The political ideas in this work are more pronounced when compared with those of typical heroes in the genre. The traditional fantasy heroine who keeps up with the men does so by erasing the specificity of the female body or by obtaining magical compensation for it; the body is still a problem to be solved, and the solution is generally assimilation into a masculine norm. Violet is not so good. Given the demands of her body language, she does not wish to fight and chooses to observe and prepare instead. When she defeats an opponent by using an allergy instead of wit, it is not endearing; rather, it is the implementation of a fighting system that values knowledge, planning and environmental manipulation as martial arts. Among other reasons, it is also a theory of intelligence as female-coded strength that the romance plot then validates: Xaden, the novel's ideal of traditional martial masculinity, falls in love with her mind first—with her research, her memory, her nerve. Feminist critics have long pointed out that the acceptance of the female hero generally requires her to give up the very qualities that made her outstanding [4]. Violet is not a bad person; she wishes only to be free of shame and otherness.

The Dragon bond also extends the idea of human-animal relationships to other species. Dragons in *Fourth Wing* are not horses; they are rulers who choose their riders and can end or alter the relationship at will through telepathy. Violet Bonds are not a single dragon but two; Tairn is the strongest in his generation, and Andarna is a young dragon of an unknown lineage, and this is not a story of power but of inheritance. Both dragons choose the gentle scribe over the empire's most formidable warriors, which is the main irony and theme of the book—that the creatures with the most refined judgment in the world of Navarre value worth based on qualities imperceptible to Basgiath's human hierarchy. The bond is also mutual in its effect on disability reading: Tairn gets to live in the world of people and meet a reliable companion, while Violet gains a new body but is left out of the loop. Flight in this economy is not about overcoming disability but about enhancing it; a disabled body is taken into the air by an alliance, not by healing.

## 4. The scribe as subject of knowledge

Violet's growth narrative is, at its core, an epistemological one. She starts the novel as a history student and a writer of the "History of the Isles", and this study of history is used as the main political tool in the book. Basgiath is an institution based on the myth of the rider and the dragon bond, and Violet's counter-narrative is archival. She reads the propaganda she was raised on and finds the flaws in it and she hears the oral history of the Tyrrish rebellion—Xaden's people, whom her mother helped suppress—and discovers that the official chronicle of Navarre is a forged document supporting an ongoing political crime. *Fourth Wing* is a genre that often has heroes with swords and crowns, but here, the heroine has a research method.

There are some feminist implications. First, it moves the heroine's agency from the body to the mind without devaluing the body. Violet fights constantly and fights well, but she fights as a strategist. Secondly, it creates romance through epistemic intimacy: The relationship between Violet and Xaden deepens with each piece of knowledge they come to learn about one another, starting with their initial disagreement over Tyrrish history

and ending with the discovery of the venin and the fading wards. Where the traditional romance plot is based on misunderstanding and concealment (the heroine does not know what the hero is), *Fourth Wing* is different. Violet needs to learn, and the suspense of the plot comes from what she will do with that knowledge. Thirdly, the archival motif connects the narrative of personal growth with institutional criticism. Violet's growth is shown by her survival of the gauntlets and her choice to follow the truth over duty to her mother and the founding story of the kingdom. Growth in this novel is the ability to change one's mind in public.

The academy plot is the traditional way to show such development, and *Fourth Wing* deliberately uses the Bildungsroman structure of the school story but darkens it. Basgiath's educational philosophy is lethal triage: the curriculum kills the weak to strengthen the strong, and the Threshing, the War Games, and the Parapet function as a Foucauldian machinery for producing obedient elite bodies. Violet's resistance is not rejection or conformity, but is a type of tactical residence—she has learned the rules of the institution well enough to live there, but she does not give it the consent of a subject. Her well-known defiance of hierarchy includes refusing to carry out the orders of the higher-ups for unarmed prisoners, protecting the weaker cadets, and eventually escaping with Xaden's marked ones. Thus, the story has reversed the usual allegory of the academy. If the school story traditionally presents the meritocratic legitimisation of hierarchy (the hero rises to succeed through the system), then Violet's rise shows the opposite: the survivors of the system are not the best, but the luckiest and most adaptable, and its deepest lesson is a lie. The story of her growth does not end with her graduation from the school; instead, she leaves the institution and crosses the border to join the rebellion with the evidence she has obtained. That is to say, the goal of the female hero is not to rule but to reveal corruption.

The plays of the school's annual drama present this epistemological problem in a mechanical way. Firstly, there is the parapet. If one cannot control their fear and composure, they will fail, so Violet has prepared by studying and observing. The Gauntlet, the combat assessments, and the Threshing all teach the same lesson under different circumstances: the institution rewards what it can measure (speed, strength, nerve), but the plot rewards what it cannot (pattern recognition, lateral thinking, loyalty). Violet's usual victories are forensic in nature. She knows about her opponents' lives in advance from research on them, as well as their allergies and grudges, and treats every fight as a problem of information asymmetry. Thus, the novel has quietly subverted the official epistemology of the military academy and rejected the idea that knowledge belongs to the command and obedience to cadets. Violet's survival shows that the cadet who knows more than the commanders is the cadet the institution cannot handle, and the story's sympathy is entirely for her unsuitability.

## 5. Romance after the bond: Consent and the erotics of equality

Any account of the feminist innovation in *Fourth Wing* should also be romantic, and it is as well-planned as the fighting scenes. Xaden Riorson is the opposite of Violet in every way. He is strong in body and spirit, politically powerful despite being the son of the general, and connected to the rebellion that her mother suppressed. He is also her enemy by birth. His father led the uprising that Lilith Sorrengail defeated, and Violet's family name is listed in his people's execution warrants. The scaffolding of enemies-to-lovers is well-known; what Yarros does inside it is not.

The key is the collateral effect of the dragon bond: riders bonded to dragons can feel the proximity and emotions of others through the bond with their dragon's mate, so Violet and Xaden are involuntarily

connected and can sense desire, fear, and arousal from afar. In the grammar of paranormal romance, this connection is fate; it is the trope of "fated mates" that eliminates the need for choice because the universe has already made a selection. *Fourth Wing* is not the same. A bond induces indirect disclosure rather than obligation and eliminates the possibility of deception at the level of emotion by increasing the cost of non-disclosure. Because Xaden can feel Violet's wishes and she is aware of his feelings, any increase in the intensity of these emotions must be expressed through words; thus, their connection functions as a system of openness rather than a way to draw nearer. All the famous intimate scenes in the novel are conducted with explicit verbal consent—Xaden's repeated check-ins and Violet's clear "yes"—and the relationship develops through shared sensations rather than the negotiation of wills.

This is a substantial revision of the love story. For a long time, feminist romance criticism has investigated whether the heroines of this genre satisfy readers through patriarchy or provide resistance, and *Fourth Wing* has shifted the focus of erotica from conquest to recognition. Xaden's charm is consistently shown to be the very qualities that Violet's world does not like: intelligence, tactical intelligence, stubbornness and a lack of pity. The power imbalance in the opening chapters (he could kill her; he knows about the rebellion) is systematically dismantled and redistributed: Violet saves Xaden as often as he saves her; her knowledge repeatedly surpasses his strength; and the discovery that her family's history is connected to the rebellion of the betrayed founders places her at the moral center of the story by the end. Therefore, the fantasy of romance is no longer about submission to a powerful man but about partnership with such a man, and this fantasy explicitly desires a man who can be outsmarted, outwitted, and occasionally saved by women. Given the current trend in the genre of "romantasy" to feature physically invincible immortal heroes, Xaden's role as a man who learns to share power and discovers that sharing is erotic rather than emasculating is a genuine ideological innovation.

It should be pointed out that the work is not told from Xaden's point of view. *Fourth Wing* is told in the first person by Violet, so the reader is also in her position and learns about Xaden's intentions, his loyalty, and what the bond transmits. Critics of romance have often pointed out that the genre's emotional education is carried out through the heroine's interpretation work; learning to read the hero is the plot. Yarros radicalises by means of literalism. Violet's task is not to decipher the mysterious behaviour of the other children, but to judge based on her own feelings and observations; therefore, the novel shows that strong emotions are not always facts. The climax of the trust crisis occurs when Violet learns about the extent of Xaden's concealment of the venin and the marked ones, and it is resolved not through coercion of the bond, but by a conversation where both parties disclose, both choose, and the choice is explicitly reaffirmed. Desire is not fate, as the novel says; rather, it is a repeated choice by the two people who are still dangerous to each other and have all the information.

## 6. Matriarchy, militarism, and the ambivalence of power

*Fourth Wing*'s feminist credentials are complicated—productively, I would argue—by its treatment of female authority. The novel's most terrifying figure is not a man but General Lilith Sorrengail, Violet's mother, who consigns her chronically ill daughter to a war college with the breeziest cruelty in the book and presides over the execution of a surrendering enemy commander in the opening pages. Lilith embodies a familiar dilemma for feminist criticism: she is a woman who has risen to the summit of a patriarchal institution by out-performing its violence, and her power is exercised almost exclusively against other women—against Violet,

whom she tries to break into a soldier; against the memory of her own sister, whose death haunts the family. The novel offers her no absolution. Her matriarchy is not sisterhood but command, and *Fourth Wing* is clear that representation at the top of a violent hierarchy does not feminize the hierarchy.

This denial of the "girlboss" alibi also extends to the depiction of female rivalry and solidarity among the cadets in the novel. The Riders Quadrant is a pressure cooker of competitive violence in which women are not exempt from predation by sisterhood—and should not be, the narrative suggests, because exemption would be its own condescension. Violet's closest friends are formed out of necessity in difficult times: Rhiannon is reliable; Liam is faithful but not romantic; Sawyer and Imogen are intelligent and competent. Imogen is an older student who is initially not liked by Violet but eventually becomes a teacher; thus, the novel presents a particular feminist model of seniority: a strong woman who has succeeded in the institution chooses to create a path for the next generation rather than Lilith, who chooses to cause trouble. Between these two poles, the mother who is broken and the mentor who supports explores the ethics of female power in *Fourth Wing*: strength is not about fighting against the violence of the institution, but choosing how to use one's own strength.

The work of fiction also seeks to connect the analysis of gender with a critique of state power. Navarre's Wards, the magical shield of the kingdom, are crumbling; the official explanation is that it is a war of attrition against the venin, soul-draining wielders of forbidden magic, and the kingdom's historical narrative is a collection of falsifications that criminalised the very province providing the resources for the Wards. Violet learns of this plot and, in turn, spreads the news among the public; thus, the private lesson of "trust your body, trust your mind" is extended to "distrust the state's story". *Fourth Wing* is often called "escapist comfort fiction" in the current era, but its story of state propaganda, militarised education and a ruling class's sacrifice of peripheral populations for security is almost a contemporary allegory. The novel does not resolve this allegory; instead, at the end, Violet defects across the border to join the rebel group, and there is no closure, leaving the series as an ongoing exploration of loyalty, evidence, and the ethics of resistance.

The novel's distrust of power is not limited to women. The marked ones are the children of the executed rebels that Xaden is secretly training to learn how institutions create legible enemies and then recruit them. After the rebellion was crushed, there was no reconciliation; instead, the children of the defeated were forced to join the college that had taken in their parents, and their collars and marks made their subordinate status impossible to hide. Violet is taught that her own privilege as the general's daughter and the archive's favourite student is also part of this system of inherited punishment. The feminist reading of this material is that gender and class analysis go hand in hand; the same narrative logic that has Violet be grateful for her mother's brutal faith in life also requires that the marginalised people be grateful for the empire's mercy. The answer of the novel is the same in both registers: gratitude is a leash, and its end shows that Violet refuses the leash in both directions at once, refusing both her mother's command and the empire's story; thus, the growth narrative has a structural symmetry, and she leaves Basgiath as she refused to enter it, on her own terms.

## 7. Conclusion

*Fourth Wing* has been a great commercial success and is now a model for the state of feminist fantasy: has the rise of romantasy diluted the radical spirit of the genre, or has it finally reached the attention of the public? The latter has been proposed, but not always. Through Violet Sorrengail, Yarros has created a heroine whose strength lies in character rather than magic—the patience of a scholar, the shrewdness of a strategist, and the

self-awareness of a disabled person about their own limitations and strengths [4]—and has thus opened a new path for women readers in the genre of historical romance. The three directions of the renovation of the novel are: the body (fragility is rewritten as strategy), the mind (archival knowledge becomes heroic agency), and the heart (consent and epistemic equality are the conditions for romance). None of these are new in isolation; their combination at the centre of a mass-market blockbuster is.

Qualification refers to the political economy of the achievement of success. A feminist text that has sold millions of copies is now merely a commodity in a market eager for new innovations, and the shelf of romantasy is already crowded with dragon academies and scarred generals. However, the feminist paradigm of *Fourth Wing* has also been strengthened—difference without a cure, romance without destiny, growth without institutional loyalty—and set the stage for imitators to negotiate now. The purpose of feminist criticism is to continue to read these works thoughtfully; it is not that there are no defects in them—*Fourth Wing*'s class politics, the eroticisation of lethal pedagogy, and the omission of named disability representation are all valid subjects for criticism—but because their readers, mainly young women, are engaged in a narrative-level exploration of fundamental issues: whose bodies are valued, whose knowledge is acknowledged, and what kind of love demands power. Violet Sorrengail does not live up to the expectations of the institution at Basgiath; instead, she refuses to be judged by it. Millions of readers have refused to create a feminist model in practice after that refusal.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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