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Otherness and Intertextuality in *The Witcher*. The Duality of Experiencing
Andrzej Sapkowski's Universe

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	4
Introduction.....	5
I. A Hero, an Anti-hero, a No-hero. The Witcher As a Misfit.....	14
Misfit, or Description of a Witcher.....	15
Literary Background.....	16
Hero, or Description of Geralt.....	19
Monstrum, or Description of a Witcher.....	23
The Professional, or Description of Geralt.....	26
II. Slavic-ness and Intertextuality in <i>The Witcher</i>	30
Cultural Background: The Mythology Which Is Not.....	31
Literary Background: Polish Ghosts of The Past.....	32
<i>The Witcher's</i> Slavic Demonology, Legends and Customs..	35
Author's View: Trifling Slavic-ness.....	37
Western Fairy Tales vs Anti-Fairy Tales.....	39
The Implied Author, the Storyteller, the Erudite. Three Levels of Reading.....	44
III. Polish-ness. National and International Reception of the Franchise..	49
About the Author.....	49
Is <i>The Witcher</i> Polish?.....	50
<i>The Witcher</i> as a Part of Polish Identity.....	52
Geralt and the Contemporary World.....	54

Foreign View: Masculinity.....	56
Foreign View: Feminism.....	58
Entertaining Hole: Netflix’s Adaptation.....	59
Conclusion.....	63
Works Cited.....	67
Appendix 1.....	75
Appendix 2.....	76

Abstract

Andrzej Sapkowski's saga *The Witcher* has been popular amidst Polish audience for nearly thirty years. It was an inspiration for the CD Projekt Red's games, but the books became bestsellers abroad only after the release of the new Netflix show (*The Witcher*, Lauren Hissrich, 2019-). The recent developments in the franchise shifted the focus back to the novels.

In this paper, I zoom in two ways of experiencing *The Witcher*: native and international. Firstly, I put my attention to the original texts and describe the duality of the morally ambiguous main character. Geralt is not a hero, nor an anti-hero; his neutrality categorises him as a middle-man, whom I will call a no-hero. Secondly, I write about the saga's Slavic folklore which is mixed with (Western) (anti-)fairy tales and creates an interesting cultural melange. Thirdly and lastly, I look at the whole franchise and analyse both native and foreign reactions to the Netflix show. I discuss elements important to these two audiences and explain the reasons behind *The Witcher's* Polish-ness. This closer look at the saga's cultural and literary backgrounds explains not only its popularity in Poland but also the reasons behind its re-discovery by foreigners.

Introduction

"No,"¹ said Andrzej Sapkowski shortly after being asked whether he felt accomplished when he heard his surname enumerated together with Tolkien's, Rowling's or Martin's (Czyż and Szymborska 46). To the Polish writer, the sudden worldwide attention his fantasy books have been receiving after the recent success of *The Witcher* is not a reason to be smug. After all, the Netflix's show (Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, *The Witcher*, 2019–) and the CD Projekt Red's game (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015) based on the stories about Geralt of Rivia written by Sapkowski are *adaptations*, and he himself has nothing to do with them. In the same interview with Czyż and Szymborska (46), he underlined that one cannot correlate the saga with its adaptations as there are no significant similarities between them. Even though "adaptation studies are so often comparative studies," Sapkowski treats the show and the games not as reproductions but as "autonomous works that can be interpreted and valued as such" (Hutcheon 6). Different media produce different art which, according to the author, should not be compared to the text. To make himself clearer, the writer quoted Rudyard Kipling: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (*The Ballad of East and West*, 1889).

The Witcher describes adventures of Geralt of Rivia, a mutant whose purpose in life is to kill monsters for money. Although he helps people, his swordsmanship skills

1 Citations taken from texts written in Polish were translated by the author of this thesis. Citations from *The Witcher* are quoted in Danusia Stok's or David French's versions.

are frightening, and he is believed to be an emotionless killing machine. This story full of fantastic creatures, epic battles and complicated love affairs makes for a great saga the (Polish) audience has been appreciating for nearly thirty years. The eventful adventures of a monster slayer who questions his morality are also an interesting material for an action role-playing game. Created by Warsaw-based CD Projekt Red game series in which the users impersonate Geralt (and make decisions on his behalf) was an international and commercial success. Even though Andrzej Sapkowski personally does not see any advantages and similarities between the books and their adaptations, it is undeniable that he gained a lot by having his works transposed into different media. Thanks to their success on the local market, some of the publications about Geralt (*The Last Wish* and *Blood of Elves*) already had their English versions. However, the publishers took the incentive to introduce the Anglophone audience to *The Witcher* after 2007, so after the release of the first part of the CD Projekt Red's games.² It is therefore possible to conclude that Sapkowski's books became popular amidst Western/Anglophone audience after the great success of the games, and the making of the Netflix's show was possible thanks to the producers of the *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.

After Netflix aired season one of *The Witcher* in December 2019, the first two books (which the show is based on) about Geralt received enormous attention and became international bestsellers. They were even featuring for a few weeks in the top five of *The New York Times'* bestseller list (*The New York Times*, Jan 2020). Never before, during nearly three decades since *The Last Wish* (1993) and *Sword of*

2 *The Witcher* was translated into more than 20 languages. In this thesis, only English and Polish versions are analysed.

Destiny (1992) have been published, were the stories popular on this scale outside of Poland. Since the adaptations and the original text have such an impact on one another, the comparisons between the adaptations and the text are unavoidable, even though the writer himself might be opposed to it.

Sapkowski's clear distancing from the elements of his own franchise is somewhat unusual. This abnormality is especially enhanced when one remembers for example J. K. Rowling's involvement in creating the films and expanding the *Harry Potter* franchise, or George Martin's position as a screenwriter and co-executive producer of the HBO's *Game of Thrones*. At times, *The Witcher's* creator view on adaptations might even come across as offensive. Infamously, during a 2016 edition of a fantasy convention, Polcon, Sapkowski stated that he mostly surrounds himself with intelligent people, and therefore knows only a few who played the CD Projekt Red's games (Fijałkowski). To further distance himself and to contend against the belief that his novels are game-related, he makes a point of not allowing the publishers to use images from the games as covers for his books. In an interview conducted by Marcin Zwierzchowski (*Polityka*, 25 Sept 2016), the writer also underlines the fact that the books—not the games nor the TV show—are the source of the "real" and original witcher. Only he, as the author, is able and empowered to tell the true story. He takes no responsibility for the making of the adaptations. However, at the same time, he points out the superiority of his books and their attractiveness to other creators who base their art on his texts.

The audience's attention shifts from the books to the games through the TV show

and back to the novels. The fact that people, in the words of Michel Foucault (*What is an Author?*, 1977), return to the text after discovering either the game version of Geralt or the one with the actor Henry Cavill's face allows them to get to the root of the story and clear it of any influence:

The phrase, 'return to,' designates a movement with its proper specificity, which characterizes the initiation of discursive practices. If we return, it is because of a basic and constructive omission, an omission that is not the result of accident or incomprehension. (...) In addition, it is always a return to a text in itself, specifically, to a primary and unadorned text with particular attention to those things registered in the interstices of the text, its gaps and absences. We return to those empty spaces that have been masked by omission or concealed in a false and misleading plenitude. (Foucault 134-135)

The presence of so many adaptations—as besides those mentioned before, there are also comic books, a film, and even musicals based on *The Witcher*—adds up to the “noise” created around the original stories. Certainly, the fans can explore the additional material which helps with bridging the gaps in the text. Filling the empty spaces with images created by other producers and artists is a non-personal way of “aesthetically realising” the text (Iser)³ and the franchise. However, Sapkowski criticises the distorted or filled up versions of his books. He treats his stories as the only rightful source of *The Witcher* and therefore, as the writer wants, the text

3 Iser talks about realising a text by bridging the gaps, ergo: connecting the facts from within the text to understand the full story—a process that should be the reader's mental effort.

should be the “base” for every fan and an element separate from the games and the TV show (as in opposition to the games and the show, as those cannot be entirely dissociated from the books). Therefore, the main focus of this thesis will be put on the text as the primary source of the story, however, the most famous adaptations will not be omitted.

Through the plot of the stories, as well as recent reactions to the Netflix’s show and the games, I will try to explain what makes the novels interesting enough to grasp today’s audience attention. This will be done in three steps, which will correspond with three different aspects of *The Witcher*, examined from the perspectives of an insider and an outsider. The arguments will be discussed in the context of “otherness”, that is the elements that make the story stand out from other franchises. The term should be understood literally, as facets of *The Witcher* which differ the saga from other fantasy stories. It is important to note that “otherness” will not be discussed here according to postcolonial theory, even though the local and foreign perspectives will be used in order to highlight the dual way of experiencing *The Witcher*.

The first point of view will focus on the main protagonist of the saga, Geralt of Rivia. I will discuss the witcher’s uniqueness both in the context of Sapkowski’s universe and in the context of literary theory. As a mutant and a misfit, Geralt is an outcast and “the other” unable to find his place in a society. Moreover, his moral ambiguity makes it impossible to classify him as either a hero or an anti-hero. This inability will lead me to categorise Geralt as a no-hero, a category of a character who combines both heroic and villainous features which I will explain in Chapter I

of this thesis. The uncertainty of his literary status will be discussed in a comparative way by using Joseph Campbell's *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* and a paper entitled *Antihero in Popular Culture: Life History Theory and The Dark Triad of Personality Traits* (Peter Jonason et al.).

Secondly, I will look at *The Witcher* through cultural and intertextual perspectives. Some of the tropes used in the novels, as well as references to other texts, will highlight both the repetitiveness and the originality of the novels. Chapter II will be divided into two parts. The first one will focus on the "Slavic-ness" of the stories. It will describe elements of Slavic culture and mythology present in the saga, which might seem exotic to a foreign reader and give a feeling of familiarity to a native reader. This chapter will also introduce the native literary background of *The Witcher*. The "Slavic-ness" of the saga will be complemented with Western tropes found in the novel. Sapkowski also rewrote the fables of for example *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* and updated them to anti-fairy tales fitting with his gore universe. By doing so, his books play on the readers' expectations. Just as Geralt is a hybrid of a man and a mutant, a hero and an anti-hero, *The Witcher* is a hybrid of Western and Eastern cultures.

Lastly, the focus of Chapter III will shift from the text to the franchise and *The Witcher* will be discussed in a social context. The national reception of the games and the Netflix show will be set in opposition to international reactions. I will consider if the "Polish-ness", i.e. the origins of the saga, can be viewed as something potentially attractive to both sides. By comparing Polish and English materials, I will highlight the differences in talking about the franchise and point

out aspects particularly significant to these two groups of audience. Therefore, I will use mostly reviews, newspaper articles and interviews as my resource. I consider using opinion-based materials as a most reliable way of showing the public's reactions to the franchise. Another reason behind using non-scholarly materials is the lack of academic papers discussing the series due to its being released only a few months ago.

Since *The Witcher* has been present and popular in Polish culture for nearly thirty years, Sapkowski's stories have been thoroughly discussed on the local academic field. The saga has been already analysed in the context of its intertextuality (Katarzyna Kaczor), referenced mythologies (Elżbieta Żukowska,⁴ Tadeusz Linkner)⁵ or demonology (Katarzyna Kaczor). Małgorzata Roszczynialska described the formal aspect of the books and there have been written numerous articles dealing with the ideas of racism, feminism and ecology omnipresent in the novels, as well as linguistics and film/game adaptations. I would like to add, in a limited form, the subject of irony and the presence of implied author, underlining that this aspect of *The Witcher* deserves more attention from other researchers. Considering Sapkowski's involvement in the saga and his status of an author-celebrity, describing the books in the context of postmodern literary theory would also be an interesting take. The unreliable narration of the novels, their dark humour and function as a pastiche would make for an alluring analysis.

The release of the Netflix's show and the attention *The Witcher* is now

4 Żukowska, Elżbieta. *Mitologie Andrzeja Sapkowskiego*. Gdański Klub Fantastyki, 2011.

5 Linkner, Tadeusz. "Fantasy Andrzeja Sapkowskiego i Mitologia Słowiańska". *Tradycja i Nowatorstwo w Kulturach i Literaturach Słowiańskich*. Ed. Izabela Kowalska-Pasz. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego 2004.

receiving is a great opportunity to introduce the saga into a more international (Anglophone) academic field. This could be done by, for instance, creating in-depth comparisons between the media (*The Witcher* books, comics, games, musicals, film and the TV series). Since the saga has not been popular amidst English-speaking researchers, tackling further the issue of adaptations mentioned in this thesis would be a good start. However, hopefully, the problems highlighted here will bring to attention the complexity of the whole franchise. Signalled later similarities between Geralt, Hellboy and Punisher also deserve a closer look. The Netflix show has already sparked a lot of comparisons with *Game of Thrones* (see: Chapter III of this thesis), so it would be also interesting to see in the future an exhaustive side-by-side reading of these two sagas.

To conclude this introduction, I would like to briefly organise information on the books' order of publishing. Geralt's adventures are described in an episodic way in multiple short stories and novels. "The saga" here is limited to and understood as seven books originally published from 1992 to 1999; two collections of short stories: 1) *Sword of Destiny* (1992) and 2) *The Last Wish* (1993); and the main plot described in: 3) *Blood of Elves* (1994), 4) *Time of Contempt* (1995), 5) *Baptism of Fire* (1996), 6) *The Tower of a Swallow* (1997) and 7) *The Lady of The Lake* (1999). There is also one additional novel, *Season of Storms* (2013), which although placed before the action of the main plot, is not considered to be a prequel by the author.⁶ To make the matter easier, the pentalogy and the two collections of

6 „*Season of Storms* does not tell the story of the early years of the white-headed monster slayer, nor about his (not)death at the end of the last part of the saga. It's not a prequel nor a sequel, but something entirely separate" (yes [pseudonym], *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 24.10.2013).

stories mentioned before (*The Last Wish* and *Sword of Destiny*), as well as *Season of Storms* will be mostly taken into account in this thesis.

I. A Hero, an Anti-hero, a No-hero. The Witcher As a Misfit

Polish audience has been introduced to *The Witcher* in 1986, when the first story about Geralt of Rivia was published in a fantasy magazine *Fantastyka* (1986, no. 12 (51)). Since then, the character gained a lot of fans and the stories were expanded into a pentalogy and a few additional books. A series of such an impressive size is somewhat unusual for Polish culture. This accomplishment is especially underlined by the fact that the saga was published in the 1990s, at the time when the fantasy genre was not very popular in Poland. Even though Andrzej Sapkowski was influenced by Western writers, his novels were created in Slavic environment which also affected the books. Hence, *The Witcher* is a saga which combines many cultures and traditions. This melting pot is transposed to the character of Geralt, in which features of a traditional hero merge with those of a rebellious and a wrongdoing protagonist.

Geralt is a misfit in two different ways: as a witcher and a mutant, he does not have his own place in the society. What is more, he is also an outsider when it comes to literary theory; he does not quite fit the traditional definitions of a hero nor this of an anti-hero. Rather, he is somewhere between those two categories; he is a "no-hero". He can be a hero and can be not, Geralt is suspended between someone admired and despised. His extraordinary and unique skills do not elevate his social position, but neither do they degrade him. Although being a witcher results in people treating him with aversion, it also makes it possible for him to fight for what he believes is right.

Misfit, or Description of a Witcher

Witchers, the mostly white-haired half-men half-mutants are professionals whose job is to kill monsters.⁷ Usually homeless and alone, they wander through different lands in hope of receiving commissions and finding creatures to slay. Thanks to the special training and education witchers receive in Kaer Morhen, they are skilled in swordsmanship and are very knowledgeable about animals, monsters and plant species. They are able to perform basic magic, talk in different languages and even adjust their bodily functions according to circumstances; for instance, their pupils are like cats' and they can control their diameter in order to see better in the dark. As capable alchemists, the witchers can brew for themselves potions which enhance their skills or regulate their blood flow.

These abilities are very useful in fights and thanks to them the monster slayers are very difficult to defeat. However, these unusual qualities come with a price. The boys who are trained to be witchers need to undergo dangerous trials and tests which often end with their death at worst and sterilisation at best. It takes a lot to become a witcher. Such unusual characters would seem to deserve appreciation, admiration or at least respect. However, these professionals are despised by many. People find their scars and swords frightening, and the belief that in Kaer Morhen the witchers are deprived of emotions results in the majority viewing their trade as disdainful.

Being a witcher means being an outcast: as mutants, they are rejected by

7 The witchers are always male. The rare exception would be Ciri, the princess, who was also trained and educated in Kaer Morhen, the witchers' fortress. However, she was not a subject of any mutations or trials, and therefore was not a „real” witcher.

humans, but they are not like monsters they are trained to kill either. Although they help people in leading their lives peacefully, their demands for payment for their services are not welcomed and contribute towards the witchers' reputation as greedy killers.

Literary Background

Although Geralt's otherness in the context of his universe causes him pain and confusion, in the context of literary traditions it makes the protagonist an interesting example innovation. However, quite typically for a work of pop-culture, Geralt is not an entirely unique character. A Western reader and a fan of fantasy (like Ed Power from *The Telegraph*, 23 Dec 2019) might see similarities between the witcher and Elric of Melniboné, a character created by an English writer Michael Moorcock in 1961.⁸ Similarly to Geralt, Elric is a white-haired sword master nicknamed White Wolf and the emperor of the civilization of Melniboné. Just like Geralt, his empathy makes him different from others. Whilst the witcher enhances his strengths before fights by consuming potions, Elric resembles a drug addict who needs herbal mixtures to sustain his health. They both know magic, but compared to the emperor, Geralt is a novice much more reluctant to use his powers. These two characters mostly bear similarities in the way they look...

GERALT: "(...) had hair as white as milk, tied back from his forehead with a leather band, and a black, woollen cloak (...) [He] fixed [his]

8 Elric first appeared in a novella called *The Dreaming City* in 1961, however, his adventures have been described by Moorcock in many different books. What is interesting, the British publisher Gollancz reprinted this novella in various story collections in 2001 and 2013. Gollancz is the same publishing house which released English translations of *The Witcher*.

dark, narrowed, piercing eyes, as sharp as a spear tip, on him”.

(*Something More in Sword of Destiny*, 315-316)

ELRIC's: "(...) bone-white face was revealed, surrounded by flowing, milk-white hair. Crimson eyes looked coolly down at the..." (A *New Emperor and an Emperor*, chapter II, ebook version)

...however, among Moorcock's fans there has been a lot of controversy around the issue of plagiarism.

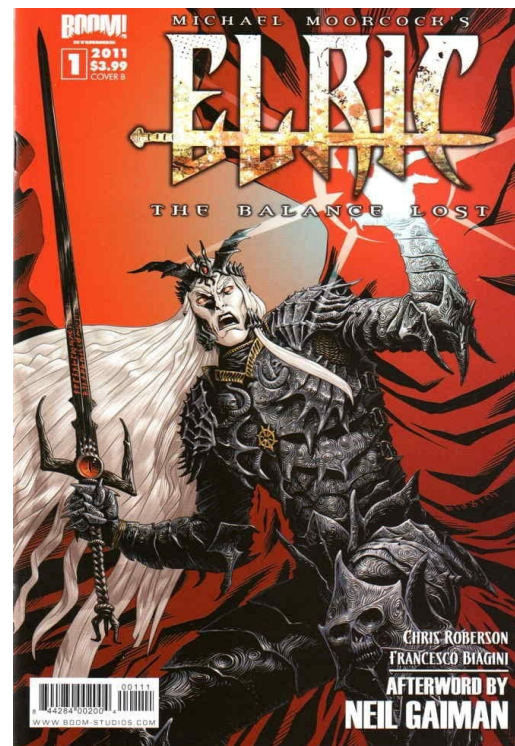


Illustration on the left: Motyka, Aleksandra. *The Witcher: Of Flesh and Flame* #4. Illustrations and cover by Marianna Strychowska. CD Projekt Red, April 2019. <<https://www.darkhorse.com/Comics/3002-145/The-Witcher-Of-Flesh-and-Flame-4#prettyPhoto>>.

Illustration on the right: Roberson, Chris. *Elric: The Balance Lost*. Illustrations and cover by Francesco Biagini. Boom!, 2006. <<https://www.amazon.com/Elric-Balance-Lost-Boom-comic/dp/B07661Q5Z9>>.

To a Polish reader, on the other hand, the saga about the witcher might bring to mind a short story written by Adolf Dygasiński called *Syn Boginki* (Eng. *Goddess' Son*, in: Jodełka 1961, 221-239). Although Dygasiński was popular among his contemporaries in the second part of the nineteenth century, nowadays, he would be recognised mostly by literature and history experts. His obscure story describes the adventures of a boy, Wojtek, who was believed to be swapped with a child of a goddess, as his head was abnormally large. Wojtek grew up to be an outcast, rejected and laughed at by his family and community. However, it turned out that he was skilled in dealing with ghosts and monsters which were bothering the people in the village. Wojtek helped his neighbours with, amidst others, a striga and a drowner (see: Chapter II of this thesis), but he was smart enough to not work for free. He made sure people knew his worth: "I can trash the monsters, but I ain't work for nothin'", said Wojtek (229).

It seems that Wojtek is a prototype of a witcher with looks taken from Elric. However, there is no evidence of Sapkowski actually drawing inspiration from these two characters. Although both Moorcock and Dygasiński created interesting protagonists, the aim of referencing them here is to show that Geralt, although obscure and alternative, is not a completely original character. What makes him stand out is the fact that *The Witcher* is now considered mainstream, and that described later in detail Geralt's moral ambiguity and refusal to be heroic make him unique in popular culture. Geralt seems to be a character more complicated and emotionally developed than most pop-culture heroes, even when compared to *Marvel's The Punisher* (Steve Lightfoot, 2017-2019), a vigilante on a quest to

avenge his murdered family, or the commonly recognised character Hellboy (Mike Mignola, 1993), a half-man half-daemon, a mutant brought to Earth to fight monsters.

Hero, or Description of Geralt

As a character in mainstream entertainment, it is possible to name some heroic qualities of Geralt and his adventures. His story in many ways is compatible with categorisation presented in Joseph Campbell's work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004). In there, Campbell describes mythical and fairy tale heroes who usually have humble origins, yet from the very beginning display some sort of powerful features. After the initial denial of the "call for adventure", they leave on a quest to acquire wisdom or an object needed to achieve their goal: saving the world. During their journey, they undergo difficulties, but thanks to their powers and other characters' supernatural aid they can succeed in their mission and victoriously come back home. Their adventures help them discover strengths within themselves, visit new worlds and, finally, redeem humankind. Parallely to the actual journey, the hero goes through spiritual changes, reunites with his mother-goddess and often slays (or reconciles) with his father-god.

This summary is by no means comprehensive, but it highlights the most important aspects of the heroes and their journey. Geralt's life is similar to this scheme. He is a miracle child of an unknown father⁹ and a sorceress, Visenna

9 It is suspected that Geralt's father was a warrior named Korin, introduced in a story *A Road with No Return*. It was published in the magazine *Fantastyka* in 1988, but as Sapkowski says in the introduction (sapkowski.wordpress.com), it was written before developing plans to write the saga about Geralt. The only link between the saga and this story is Visenna. The idea of Korin being Geralt's father is explored in the comics made by Maciej Parowski and Bogusław Polch.

(*Something More 5* in *Sword of Destiny* 315), even though in Sapkowski's universe people with magical abilities are infertile. After his mother gave him away to Kaer Morhen, Geralt was raised by the witchers in a secluded area. He was a subject of tests, trials and mutations until finally he was able to leave the fortress and start his own journey. At one point in the saga, he meets his mother and her healing powers save Geralt's life, but after this incident she does not appear in the story anymore. In her place, it is Yennefer, a sorceress and Geralt's love, who appears as the "goddess" whose supernatural abilities help the main character. The power within Geralt, which distinguishes him from others and allows him to fulfil his mission, is his witcher-ness. However, this "power" is also a source of confusion as during his journey Geralt tries to define himself and stop questioning his humanity. The "call for adventure" galvanizing him into action, on the other hand, would be the destiny which ties him with the princess of Cintra, Cirilla, but this aspect of Geralt's heroism starts diverging from Campbell's scheme.

Ciri is a "child of surprise" and was destined to be Geralt's protégée before she was born. After helping her parents and saving her father's life, as a way of settling the debt, the witcher asked for something unexpected they already had but did not realise. As it turned out, princess Pavetta, Ciri's mother, was at the time unknowingly pregnant. According to the ancient law of surprise, Ciri was meant to be Geralt's, even though initially he did not want to take her away from her family and was ready to cancel the debt. The witcher did not believe Ciri to be his destiny; rather, he treated the situation as an honourable agreement. Only after spending some time with the princess and finding out that the last from her family died in

the starting war, Geralt decided to take care of her. The witcher felt responsible for and pitied the orphan, and therefore wanted to find her and protect her life, which he later justified with destiny. As it turned out, it was Ciri who played a crucial role in the development of the saga's plot, not Geralt. He was not a volunteer nor the chosen one picked to redeem humankind. Even though the reader follows the story mostly by reading about Geralt's adventures, his importance in the plotline, compared to Ciri's, is marginalized.

After overcoming many obstacles, the witcher finally succeeded in finding Ciri, but they do not save the world together nor live happily ever after. The future of the main characters is unknown; the grand final battle is over, but the tension in the society does not ease. The saga ends with the slaughtering of non-humans during which Geralt is seriously harmed. His alleged death again separates him from the princess:

All he [Geralt] could do was watch as the three-fanged fork flew towards him (...).

'It's not working at all.' She [Yennefer] heard Ciri's voice emanating despair. 'Your magic isn't healing him at all, Yennefer.' (...)

'We've sent for a physician' (...)

'It is too late for a physician (...) He's dying'.

Geralt trembled once more, coughed up blood, tensed and went still. (...)

Yennefer's spells were only exhausting her. (...) [She] fell silent halfway through the next magical formula and slumped down onto the

cobbles beside the witcher. (*Lady of The Lake* 512, 523-524)

Even though it seems that Geralt died together with Yennefer, a few pages later the witcher opens his eyes and finds himself lying next to the sorceress. Like Geralt, the reader does not know where the characters are. One can believe they were saved by Ciri and transported to a safe spot, but it is more probable that the two died and their talk is a dream-like projection:

'Where are we, Yen?'

'Is it important?'(...)

'Where is Ciri?'

'She's gone away. (...) Lie still, my darling. Lie still. I'm beside you. It doesn't matter what happened, doesn't matter where we were. Now I'm beside you. And I'll never leave you'. (*Lady of The Lake* 528)

Sapkowski's universe is not "healed" at the end of the saga and Geralt's involvement in the war does not have any real impact on the universe. Even though during the course of the plot many people encouraged the witcher to get involved and take a side, claiming that the situation demands being decisive and honourable, his morality (or the lack of it) made no difference. It is Ciri, her royal position and magical powers which played a decisive role in the plot line. Geralt's heroism is pushed aside. Although he fights bravely and is motivated by a pure cause, it does not matter. He does not reconcile with the ordinary people, has no home to return to and does not save humankind. Humankind stabs him with a pitchfork and leaves him to die instead.

Monstrum, or Description of a Witcher

Although Geralt has good qualities, he is not a role model; multiple times he has done things which prove the stereotypical view of a witcher. After all, he is sometimes referred to as the “Butcher of Blaviken” (see the story *Lesser Evil* in *The Last Wish* 75-113). This infamous nickname is a reminder of the carnage he caused in Blaviken, when he killed Renfri, a rebellious princess turned assassin, and her companions. Geralt’s attack was justified, as he chose to fight with the ex-princess and her entourage to prevent her from taking revenge on the sorcerer, Stregobor, responsible for Renfri’s miserable life (see: Chapter II of this thesis). According to her threats, her encounter with Stregobor would have been much more bloody and have affected many innocent people. Therefore, Geralt decided that the lesser evil would be to stop Renfri and hopefully save others, rather than allowing her to face the sorcerer. The reasoning behind this choice and the context of the situation was not entirely clear to the bystanders. Thus, to the citizens of Blaviken, the witcher was just a murderous machine which for no reason brutally killed many people they knew.

This hostile behaviour pushes Geralt away from his status as a hero, and his dishonesty, disagreeableness, aggressiveness and “a number of indicators of a short term mating style” (Jonason et al. 192) put him closer to the category of an anti-hero. From a psychological point of view, here supported by the paper *The Antihero in Popular Culture: Life History Theory and the Dark Triad Personality Traits* (Jonason et al., 2012), an anti-hero is someone whose life history led to developing the Dark Triad of personality traits. These are: narcissism, psychopathy and

Machiavellianism, all three of which can be partially found in Geralt. Although he does not seek admiration *per se*, he would like to be appreciated for his work and seems conceited when he is given praise (for example, when Queen Meve knights him in *The Tower of a Swallow*).¹⁰ His antisocial behaviour is often an involuntary result of people's reaction to him, but he himself uses cynicism to keep his distance from others. He misleads people by referring to the witcher's non-existing code of conduct. What is more, Geralt sometimes believes that the ends justify the means, which leads to situations like that in Blaviken. Despite that, he rarely is impulsive. He is not a psychopath; his job requires him to be cold and distant, but Geralt is too emotional and emphatic to fit this description.

There is a quotation taken from a fictitious text *Monstrum, or Description of the Witcher* at the beginning of chapter V in *Blood of Elves*:

They roam the land, importunate and insolent, nominating themselves the stalkers of evil, vanquishers of werewolves and exterminators of spectres, extorting payment from the gullible and, on receipt of their ignoble earnings, moving on to dispense the same deceit in the near vicinity. The easiest access they find at cottages of honest, simple and unwitting peasants who readily ascribe all misfortune and ill events to spells, unnatural creatures and monsters, the doings of windsprites or evil spirits. Instead of praying to the gods, instead of bearing rich offerings to the temple, such a simpleton is ready to give his last penny

¹⁰ Geralt was knighted by Queen Meve after courageously fighting by her side. However, not long after joining her army, Geralt, together with his companions, robbed them and ran away to continue their quest to find Ciri (*The Tower of the Swallow* 75-79).

to the base witcher, believing the witcher, the godless changeling, will turn around his fate and save him from misfortune.

Anonymous, *Monstrum, or Description of the Witcher (Blood of Elves 165)*

According to this quotation, it would be more accurate to describe the monster slayers as villains who abuse those less fortunate for their own profit. A discussion on the topic of witchers' morality and function in society broke out between Geralt and a "lawyer" with questionable morals, Codrigher, who for a good payment would do anything (legal or not). In *Time of Contempt* (chapter I), the witcher hires the "lawyer" as a spy. During their meeting, Codrigher calls the protagonist a "professional colleague" (17), and when Geralt is annoyed, the lawyer says: "Did it bother you to be called a colleague? But it's true. I'm also a witcher. I also save people from monsters and from monstrous difficulties. And I also do it for money" (17). Codrigher believes that the witchers, just as lawyers, need to be modern and move "with the spirit of the times (...). Soon there won't be any strigas, wyverns, endriagas or werewolves left in the world. But there'll always be whoresons" (18). He calls Geralt anachronistic and his business a relic; he also suggests that he should switch to killing not only monsters but target people too, and make money from being a hitman. For that Geralt is too honourable; although the Butcher of Blaviken killed people before, it was always a form of defence. Doing it just for money is not an option. Even when it comes to monsters, Geralt is picky in his commissions. Usually, he slays only these creatures which are brainless and dangerous. Therefore, Geralt himself is not a villain; he may sometimes act morally

wrong but he usually has a morally good (not: financial) reason to do so.

However, even this principle is discredited. Ironically, before visiting Codrigher, Geralt needed to prepare payment for his services.

Fifty for a werewolf. That was plenty, for the work had been easy. The werewolf hadn't even fought back. Driven into a cave from which there was no escape, it had knelt down and waited for the sword to fall. The witcher had felt sorry for it. But he needed the money. (*Time of Contempt* 15)

The Professional, or Description of Geralt

The character's actions, both the good and the bad ones, justify categorising him as a(n) (anti)hero. The air of mystery around the witchers' origins and the brutality of their upbringing and profession makes them seem hostile and aloof. At the same time, the witcher has the potential of being a loved and admired hero. Ironically, the reasons why people would appreciate the witchers are also the reasons why they treat them with aversion. Geralt himself contradicts these convictions and refuses to be described as heroic. Jaskier, the bard and Geralt's friend, describes him as "always a modest, prudent and composed man, with a soul as simple and uncomplicated as the shaft of a halberd" (*The Tower of a Swallow* 77). Geralt keeps his distance by being witty and ironical, but he rarely truly succeeds in separating himself from emotions, opinions and troubles. Even though he is told by many that the witchers are not capable of feeling, his self-reflecting nature, the sentiment for Yennefer and Ciri, as well as the strong compassion he has for other creatures

make him one of the most emphatic characters in the novels. Although he is expected to be aggressive, resorting to violence is never Geralt's first choice. Before reaching for the sword, he first makes sure that negotiations or counter-spells are not effective. In fight, "his frequently declared neutrality" (*The Tower of a Swallow* 76) is usually contrary to his actions, even if his efforts to not get involved in conflicts are real.

Geralt tries to be neutral and therefore stay away from troubles, but it does not mean that he is insensitive. To make sure he stays ethical, he created for himself a code of conduct which helps him legitimise his actions. Just like a hero, the witcher "live[s] by a fierce personal code" (Brombert 3), but it is important to note that the code is not something common for every witcher. Geralt is the only known monster slayer who created norms for himself, and yet he never wrote them down. As Adam Olczyk states (40), the ostensible existence of the code allows the protagonist to make sure he keeps making moral decisions. By not writing the rules down and not making them official, Geralt makes sure to stay perceptive and judge every situation separately. This self-imposed personal code of conduct allows the witcher to justify his decision to accept a job or not. The appearances of being regulated also help people to feel safe around Geralt, as the code eliminates the possibility of the witcher acting unpredictably. However, the code never orders the protagonist to do something he would be opposed to. Thanks to that, Geralt is able to maintain his independent thinking and therefore negate the belief that witchers are brainless mutants:

If Geralt behaved according to people's expectations; if he was the witcher

people want to have; if he was the witcher, whose life is reduced to being obedient to the code, he would represent what people accuse him of: he would be a fatuous, deprived of emotions monster (Olczyk 45).

The fact that Geralt's code is just a farce underlines his moral superiority over those who strictly obey rules (Olczyk 49). In *The Witcher*, a group who does not take the effort to make independent decisions is represented by knights. Geralt's interaction with them showcases their conformity, the unreasonable logic of their behaviour and the absurdity of the orders they follow (see: *The Bounds of Reason in Sword of Destiny* 1-82). Although technically Geralt himself has the title of a knight, he does not act like one. He is not "defiantly committed to honour and pride" (Brombert 3) and the witcher's code does not resemble a knight's code of chivalry in any way. Geralt is courageous, but he has the possibility to choose his own fights. Thus, he seems more like a lone ranger who travels from town to town with his sidekick (Jaskier) to condemn outlaws. He does not romanticise his actions nor try to rationalize them. Geralt realises that doing bad things in the name of good is still evil ("Evil is evil, Stregobor", *The Last Wish* 90). He also knows that sometimes doing the bad thing is necessary, even if it is followed by dire consequences.

The character of the witcher does not quite fit the definition of a hero, nor this of an anti-hero, so Geralt is situated somewhere between these two. To describe him as a no-hero is to highlight his, after all heroic, actions, as well as his refusal to be idealised and the reduction of morals to professional responsibility. As a no-hero,

the witcher rejects the abject ideas and in a way downgrades himself from a hero/villain to a collected middle-man. Through his code of conduct, he makes sure to stay ethical and calm. Geralt acknowledges his flaws and reflects on his own social position, and the reader is invited to do the same. The premise of his spiritual journey, which takes place parallelly to his adventures, is to better form his own identity. Estranged from humans, monsters and other witchers, Geralt refuses to be put into a box, just as he struggles to be neutral. He always ends up acting either in a good or a bad way. However, he never acts out of hatred. He says to Ciri: "To be neutral does not mean to be indifferent or insensitive. You don't have to kill your feelings. It's enough to kill hatred within yourself" (*Blood of Elves* 155).

By refusing to choose sides, Geralt has the position to ridicule those who excessively try to set an example. His neutrality also exposes people's deplorable intentions and it allows him to have strong opinions on ideas and issues portrayed in the novels: like chivalry, racism, justice, and power. Moreover, his trials to find the *aurea mediocritas* and his outsider perspective allow him to be a great observer of the society. Thanks to his dark humour and sarcasm, the scrutiny that humankind is subjected to is presented in an inviting and assimilable way. He "challenges our assumptions, raising anew the question of how we see, or wish to see ourselves" (Brombert 2).

II. Slavic-ness and Intertextuality in *The Witcher*

In the context of the witcher's adventures and the novels' plot, Geralt is portrayed as a protagonist unable to be easily categorised, one that combines two ways of thinking. This observation can be also applied to the broader context of *The Witcher* universe as a whole. Similarly, the manner in which the world within the saga was built is a result of fusing two traditions: Slavic and Western. Moreover, just as Geralt might be considered an alternative character, Andrzej Sapkowski himself is somewhat of an outsider. Not only did he acquire a reputation of a "grumpy Pole" (Ed Power, 23 Dec 2019), but his views on the franchise and his books make him an eccentric writer who makes sure to put (his) novels first. His love for literature is visible through the interviews and throughout the saga. Therefore, in this part of the thesis, Sapkowski will be presented as an erudite author who fills his books with multiple intertextual layers. By using sources from different mythologies and cultures, Sapkowski creates a universe with elements new to both the native and the foreign audience.

Intertextuality is one of the most interesting aspects of *The Witcher*. Although Sapkowski references many texts from different cultures, he does not just quote them. Rather, he uses familiar motifs, which he later twists to hopefully shock the audience. *The Witcher's* resistance to the fairy tale's banality and the incorporation of Slavic culture in a genre dominated by Celtic, German and Nordic

mythology make the books different.¹¹ At the same time, however, *The Witcher* does not reject classical fantasy tales; in a way, it pays homage to them.

Cultural Background: The Mythology Which Is Not

In the saga, Western creatures like elves, dwarves and banshees are mixed with Slavic strigas (pol. *strzyga*, a monster which Adolf Dygasiński's Wojtek also fought), *rusalkas* similar to water nymphs, and drowners/vodnicks (pol. *wodnik*, *utopiec*). This melange is delicate enough to be intriguing, yet not too confusing, to the foreign reader. On the other hand, to the native reader this combination can be refreshing and somewhat calming, since hearing about these fantastical creatures brings back memories of stories known from childhood. The fantasy's escapism plays here a dual role—not only does it allow the readers to immerse themselves in a different, imaginary world, but it also presents them with a romanticised version of the past.

Although Western fantasy often takes inspiration from mythologies, *The Witcher* is not based on Slavic mythology *per se*. There are not many documents describing this part of the Eastern European culture and most of the known myths were based on oral/residual sources. Slavic mythology by no means has the literary presence comparable to the Greek or Roman traditions. Rather, the pagan beliefs and gods were reconstructed on the basis of folklore customs and obsolete rituals, as well as archaeological works and findings in semiotics. The differences in local

¹¹The Arthurian legend and many other mythologies included in *The Witcher* were described by Elżbieta Żukowska in her book *Mitologie Andrzeja Sapkowskiego*. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, I have not been able to get a hold of this title and therefore in my paper I focus only on Slavic folklore and fairy tales.

traditions and the lack of evidence make it nearly impossible to agree on one version of Slavic mythology (Gieysztor 23-31). Therefore, in this paper "Slavic" would be at times best understood as "Polish".

The pagan myths are not commonly known in Poland (or at least not as known as Western myths) and the folklore culture is told through fairy tales and legends which were also used in *The Witcher*. The less formal character of these literary genres could make the reading more pleasurable, as it connects not to the scholarly education but to an experience of telling stories at home. This also brings the saga closer to a Polish genre called *gawęda*,¹² which is an imitation of spoken storytelling and it is characteristic for its fable-like nature. Having its source in primary oral cultures (Ong), the open composition of this kind of literature popular in 19th century invites the author/the story teller to tell the story in many and usually lengthy ways (*Popularny Słownik Terminów Literackich i Gramatycznych* 67). It also enables the reader to take active part in reading and to immerse into a "story which never ends". *Gawęda*, just like a legend or a fairy tale which gave the orality a "new respectability" (Ong 17), has many "tellers". Thanks to its conversational character, multiple different versions of the same tale can exist. In *The Witcher*, the perspective constantly changes and the reader is presented with the story through the adventures of Geralt, Ciri, Yennefer or Jaskier.

Literary Background: Polish Ghosts of The Past

Gawęda is not the only 19th century element present in the saga. The folklore and spirituality, so popular amidst the artist of that time, are also important aspects of

¹² Seems like the closest translation in English would be *a chat*

The Witcher. However, to the Polish reader, the Slavic-ness, the ghosts and spirits are not only reminders of Romanticism as a cultural period. They are also reminders of Poland's non-existence on the maps of Europe, the anger after the partitions and the passionate exhortation to rebellion, which were the driving forces for the Poles of that time. The lack of formal state and the repressions Poland experienced forced the nation to cultivate their culture through music, literature and paintings. Reaching back to motifs associated with these times is therefore, according to Anna Gemra, a way of regaining some parts of the national identity, lost during the partitions and subsequently watered down during the postwar communist regime (Gemra 84). Reading *The Witcher* brings back the idealised version of the past, when the nation bravely stood together against the enemy, used storytelling to express prohibited ideas and communicate with others behind the oppressors' backs.

The agreed beginning of the Romantic era in Poland took place in 1822, when the main national poet Adam Mickiewicz published his collection of ballads (*Ballady i Romanse*). His literary heritage is one of the most important for Polish culture and Mickiewicz became one of the most renowned poets Poland has ever had. Amidst other poems, he created two ballads which play on the Gothic themes so widely spread in Europe in the 19th century. *Świtezianka*¹³ tells a story of a young hunter who was infatuated with a mysterious "girl from nowhere". She is wary of his empty promises of devotion and asks him to prove his faithfulness to her. She disappears and the saddened hunter wants to leave, when suddenly a

13 Świteź—a lake located in today's territory of Belarus. The ghost's name—Świtezianka—comes from the name of the lake.

beautiful woman appears from the nearby lake. She lures the man into the waters with her beauty and words of encouragement. When the enchanted hunter gives in and wants to grab the lady of the lake, she turns into the “girl from nowhere”. Angry with the hunter for breaking his promises, she punishes him by changing him into a (conscious) tree.

A beautiful young woman who turned into a deceitful ghost is also a motif in Mickiewicz’s ballad called *I Like It*. It is a tale of a young, brave man who is scared of nothing. He purposefully goes to a haunted bridge during the night, even though many people tell him about the supernatural and scary experiences they have had in the area. When the ghost of a girl called Maryla appears at midnight, instead of cursing it and running away, he is amazed by the weirdness of the situation and says “I like it!”. By doing so, he lifts the curse off the girl. Maryla tells him how she was hexed by the spirit of a boy who committed suicide. He loved her, but she cold-bloodily rejected him and therefore was punished. The ghost would be freed only if someone expressed any form of affection to her.

These two poems show two different kinds of spirits and correspond with the dilemma *The Witcher’s* Geralt confronts. The girl from *Świtezianka* was a being without any clear connection to ever having lived as a human. Although she was an intelligent and conscious succubus, her actions hurt people. The girl from *I Like It*, on the other hand, was a soul doing a penance, who was seeking the passer-by’s’ attention, and her doings were accidentally harmful. It is up to the characters interacting with the ghosts, and the readers, to decide whether the spirits were monsters or not. Not every unexplained being deserves to be killed; sometimes all

that is needed is a counter spell to lift the curse. The decision to kill or not to is a difficult one, as the differences between scary monsters and beings deserving pity are wearing off. This situation makes Geralt face a choice every time he reaches for his sword. However, as Katarzyna Kaczor (65) suggests, for the witcher the interactions with the fantastical creatures are much easier than those with people. He knows the world of monsters and while fighting for instance a striga, every attack is anticipated. What is truly scary and unpredictable is every human interference. It is humankind which is the source of evil in Sapkowski's world. According to this *modus operandi*, Mickiewicz's unfaithful hunter and Maryla, when she was still alive, deserve condemnation. The ghosts deserve pity, and so does the striga, a creature damned to be a beast as she is a result of an incestuous relationship.

***The Witcher's* Slavic Demonology, Legends and Customs**

Adam Mickiewicz's ballads make for an interesting (Polish) literary background to the creation of *The Witcher*, but the motifs used by the Romantic poet are universal. The familiarity of them makes for an interesting re-discovery for both the native and the foreign reader, who would, rather than to Mickiewicz, link them to topics and artists known from their own traditions. In the local folklore the spirits are maybe less terrifying or sexual than the creatures from the ballads and poems, but they have a more familial character. The kikimora, known only in Eastern cultures, is a "female domestic spirit (...) [who] would lose small items, spoil food, and wake the children at night by tickling them" (Dixon-Kennedy 150). It is not a vengeful ghost but rather a prankster and a pixie, which Sapkowski turned

into a thoughtless and hurtful monster. Żywia, one of the goddesses of the Slavic pantheon, the equivalent of the Greek Demeter, is also represented in *The Last Wish* (in the story *The End of The World* 163-206). She is a beautiful, quiet girl who protects other natural beings. Called Danamebi, Dana Meadhbh or the Queen of Fields, she takes the form of a young woman who the villagers know as Lille (Zaborowski 23). She uses her knowledge and powers to save Torque, a half-man/half-goat who steals from people. This silvan, also known under the name rokita, is in the Slavic folklore believed to be a devil or a czort.¹⁴ Although viewed as a harmless and a bit of a stupid creature, in *The Witcher* Torque turns out to be a clever “double agent”, who ends up being morally better than the villagers and elves with whom he works.

Even though dragons are not typically Slavic creatures, they also play a part in local customs. There is a Polish legend which presents the tale of Skuba, a cobbler from Kraków, who saved the city from a dragon. In a story entitled *The Bounds of Reason* (in *Sword of Destiny*) Sapkowski describes how the king organises a hunt to kill the creature which found her way into a nearby area. Just like in the legend, one of those who takes upon this task is a shoemaker:

The local master cobbler, a certain Sheepbagger, came up with a way of dealing with the brute. They killed a sheep, stuffed it full of hellebore, deadly nightshade, poison parsley, brimstone and cobbler’s tar. (...) Then they stood the poisoned sheep among the flock, held up by a stake. If truth be told, no one believed the dragon would be lured

¹⁴ Czort is an evil daemon, a bies nowadays synonymous to a devil. A czort (*chort*) is presented in *The Witcher* games as a separate to silvan being.

by that shit, which stank to high heaven, but reality surpassed our expectations. Ignoring the living and bleating baa-lambs, the reptile swallowed the bait and the stake. (*Sword of Destiny* 17)

In Sapkowski's version, the cobbler fails to kill the dragon, even though according to the legend his idea should work. Nevertheless, this clever way of dealing with the creature is treated with disdain by those with more experience and skill in slaying monsters. The cobbler becomes the laughing stock in the novel, even though in the Polish legend he is treated as a hero. This well-known story traces back as far as to the 16th century (Plezia) and Sapkowski twists the ending to reveal its naivety. The writer exposes the legend's happy ending as one that should not be trusted as it would never exist in the "real" world.

Author's View: Trifling Slavic-ness

The demonology and folk tales which have their source in the changeability of nature drive Sapkowski's plot(s). These subjects are often described by scholars as obscure, which creates an interesting problem. Although many researchers clearly see a connection between *The Witcher* and Slavic mythology, the intentional fallacy of the author creating "Slavic fantasy" is not so eagerly supported by Sapkowski. The author himself views his work rather as a classic (Western) fantasy with a few Eastern European touches. In his opinion, the traces are so faint that they should not be focused on. He says:

Geralt's name is indeed rather "Slavic", there are "Slavic" tones in the

ono- and toponomastics. There is a leshen¹⁵ and a kikomora—but there is also Andersen’s siren and a beast taken from Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont. It should be repeated: the saga about the witcher is a fantasy, classic and canonic, the Slavic-ness in it is [trifling—AM].
(*Książki*, 01/2020)

In the same interview with Czyż and Szymborska (64), he later proceeds to state that trying to find any Slavic-ness in *The Witcher*, which here is alluded to be equal to Polish-ness, is an example of megalomania. According to Sapkowski, this is not a term which should be associated with his books. He also goes on to suggest (though he does not say this straightforwardly, as “his modesty doesn’t let him”) that it is not the Slavic-ness that made his books popular amidst Western audience but the sheer quality of writing. This comment seems logical in the view of the recent success of the Netflix show. The saga had to be at least in some way “Western” in order to be understood and accepted by Western audience. However, it is important to realise the ambiguity of Sapkowski’s statement. The author criticises the readers and researches who treat (their) Slavic culture as an attractive part of *The Witcher*, yet at the same time he pushes forward his own genius. By doing so, the writer is just as megalomaniac as the scholars and audience. This is not the first time Sapkowski negates himself or tries to set an “official” interpretation of his novels, which often varies depending on circumstances. This authorial intent should make the reader wary. In a way, Sapkowski cannot be

15 Leszen (pol. *leszy, borowiec*), male daemon of a forest, protector of the trees and animals.

trusted and he constantly keeps the readers on their toes. Besides that, acknowledging the connection between *The Witcher* and the local cultures is important to consciously evaluate the writer's skills and to point out how the elements of the saga's otherness compare to different fantasy stories. The links between local and global traditions also add to the value of universality of the novels and help with assessing their reception in other countries.

Western Fairy Tales vs Anti-Fairy Tales

Not recognising described earlier elements or losing them in translations does not diminish the reading (or gaming) experience. Although the saga requires from the reader a certain insider knowledge about the Slavic culture, the references can be treated as fun facts rather than actual crucial input to the story. What to a native reader would be an interesting intake on their everyday surroundings, to a foreign reader might be an unknown and exotic element which makes the story different yet easy to follow. However, as Sapkowski claims, his fantasy is not Slavic but rather a canonic one, so there are more traces in the saga leading to the mostly Western tradition of fantasy writing.

There are elves and dwarves in the story, vampires, sorcerers, and even djinns. There are fights between good and evil, there is magic and destiny, and tropes overall commonly known. However, Sapkowski exposes their fairy tale-like qualities and naivety. In his work, the fantastical elements, which usually add to the feeling of escapism, are treated with irony. The tales' artificiality is exposed by retelling them from a different point of view and by updating them to fit the brutal world of *The Witcher*. The morality of legends and fables is looked at with cynicism

and the tales' credibility is challenged. However, as Katarzyna Kaczor says, the basis of a fairy tale, so the pureness of intentions, is still held by Sapkowski. What he does is rewrite the old tales and enrich them with a new motivation (121).

Sapkowski incorporated a few tales in his stories which are an obvious retelling of literary sources. As mentioned before, he refers to Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale about a little mermaid, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's version of *Beauty and The Beast*, Charles Perrault's (and popularised by the Grimm brothers) tale about *Sleeping Beauty*, as well as the one about *Snow White*. Thanks to their many adaptations, these stories are a part of the global literary canon and are known in some form by the majority of the world's population. However, *The Witcher's* gruesome take on the fairy tales reminds of their initial nature as a horror story.

Snow White is presented in the novel as mentioned earlier Renfri, who instead of seven dwarves is accompanied by "seven gnomes whom she'd managed to convince it was more profitable to rob merchants on the roads than to pollute their lungs with dust from mines" (story *The Lesser Evil* in *The Last Wish* 89). Just like in the literary source, Renfri is hunted down on her step-mother's command but is not murdered. The hitman, rather than showing her mercy and being moved by her beauty as it is in *Snow White*, rapes and robs Renfri. She kills him in self-defence. The step-mother later tried to poison her "with an apple seasoned with nightshade" (100). She survives again, but the constant hostility she is faced with changed Renfri from a princess locked in a tower into a revengeful person skilled in fight and ready to kill.

The story about Adda (story *The Witcher* in *The Last Wish*), another princess who turned into a murderous monster, reminds the tale about Sleeping Beauty who waits in a tower for a prince's kiss. Adda, the child of an incestuous relationship between siblings, supposedly died right after being born. After being locked in her sarcophagus for seven years and falsely being believed to be dead, she turned into a striga who would hunt and kill anyone stupid enough to come close. Geralt was hired to try to lift the curse off of Adda. He was supposed to fight with her until dawn without killing her, and the rising sun would change her back to a human. However, the fight with striga turned out to be a bit more difficult than expected. The creature, with her last bit of energy, attacked the witcher and he defended himself by biting the striga's neck. After this play on a healing kiss from a prince, the princess "wakes up" and returns back to her girly form. She was skinny and underdeveloped but no longer a monster.

Although Adda was lucky enough to survive, Vereena, another beauty, was not so fortunate (story *A Grain of Truth* in *The Last Wish*). In Sapkowski's retelling of *Beauty and The Beast*, it was a man called Nivellen who turned into a furry creature as a punishment for profaning a temple. As in local tales, he suspected that he can lift the curse by having a (human) girl fall in love with him, so he managed to "rent" a few girls in exchange for money. Even though some of them eventually got used to him and liked him, none of them was able to love him and therefore to cure him. It was a bruxa¹⁶, Vereena, a kind of vampire whom Geralt first suspected of being a harmless rusalka, who turned Nivellen back to his true form. These two "monsters"

¹⁶ *Bruxa* in Portuguese means a *witch*.

started coexisting and later they became infatuated with each other. However, Vereena was not able to fight her true nature. She attacked Geralt and he was forced to kill her. Just before she died, she managed to profess her love to Nivellen and turn him back to his human form. Just like in the original, the beast was not the real monster of the story and it turned out that there are people with looks far more pleasing and characters far more evil. In Sapkowski's version, only beasts are able to love beasts (Kaczor 117).

From these examples it can be concluded that the fairy tales known and loved by everyone are rewritten to become anti-fairy tales (see: *Fairy Tales vs Anti-Fairy Tales*, a comparison prepared by David Calvin. McAra, Calvin; appendix 1). Their optimism is replaced with pessimism, the "once upon a time" narration was changed into a "real world" context, i.e. the context of *The Witcher* universe. The saga does not try to enchant the readers, but rather to disenchant them and force them to start questioning known themes. Bourgeois setting of *Sleeping Beauty* was turned into an avant-garde tale of incest, where the witcher played the role of the knight in a shining armour. The patriarchy of the beautiful Snow White saved by a man was upgraded to a feminist Renfri who is able to defend herself and fight her own fights.

Although so far the fables were presented in their dark versions, the story about the mermaid is presented differently in the novels (story *A Little Sacrifice* in *Sword of Destiny*). Sh'eenaz falls in love with a prince Agloval¹⁷ and Geralt was hired

¹⁷ Name taken from one of the Knights of The Round Table. As mentioned before, there are many references in *The Witcher* to the Arthurian legends, but this aspect of the saga is not being considered in this thesis.

as a mediator between those two. The prince tries to convince the beauty to marry him and agree to a surgery which will change her tail into legs, whereas the mermaid tries to talk the prince into turning his legs into a fishtail. After some adventures, the story about these two ends with Sh'eenaz walking on her new legs to meet her lover. The bard Jaskier, however, has a different take on this tale:

'In my ballad the mermaid will sacrifice herself for the duke, she'll exchange her fishtail for slender legs, but will pay for it by losing her voice. The duke will betray her, abandon her, and then she'll perish from grief, and turn into foam, when first rays of sunshine...'

'Who'd believe such rot?', [asked Geralt].

'It doesn't matter,' [Jaskier] snorted. 'Ballads aren't written to be believed. They are written to move their audience'. (*Sword of Destiny* 187)

In *The Witcher* Sh'eenaz says "I have lost nothing" (240). On the contrary, thanks to the sea witch she gained legs, a lover and even the ability to talk in Common Speech, the language of the saga, and communicate with the prince. This is the only retelling of a story which presents the events in a more positive way. Although the original moral of the fairy tale of sacrifice in love is also present in *The Witcher*, the relationship between the siren and the prince lacks the tragic drama. It is in Sapkowski's books where the mermaid and her lover can live together happily ever after.

The Implied Author, the Storyteller, the Erudite. Three Levels of Reading

The happy ending of the mermaid's story seems inadequate for Sapkowski's books, but it is an interesting example of confounding expectations. This time it is not *The Witcher*, but Andersen's original version, so a part of literary creation which has nothing to do with the "real world" (*The Witcher's* universe), that takes the form of an anti-fairy tale. In the saga, the Andersen's tale corresponds with Jaskier's ballad which confirms the story's literature status; both factually and in the fiction the anti-fairy tale was created by professional storytellers (the Danish writer and the bard). The fact that the anti-fairy tale is just an artistic creation is also underlined by Geralt's calling it "a rot" and Jaskier's comment explaining that this "rot" is meant to move the audience, not be believable.

In the quoted exchange between the two friends, Jaskier is the one who represents the implied author of the story. Just as the tale about the mermaid (as told by Andersen and Jaskier) is a literary creation meant to emotionally affect the reader, the tales about Renfri, Veerena and Adda were written by the implied author to do the same. Through Jaskier, *The Witcher* is exposed to be just a fictitious story. This is something different than what the reader is used to. Whereas the actualised versions of *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Beauty and The Beast* are somewhat of an innovation, they are still familiar stories which the audience can immerse into. This sudden change of structure, as well as Geralt's question, challenges the readers. It should alert the audience and help them notice the game the implied author is playing in. By exposing himself (?) through Jaskier, the implied author ironically disturbs the readers with the question if they really

believed his story. If the reader decides to answer this challenge, they need to give up the fantasy's escapist nature and notice the presence of the author. This brings the reader to a decision whether to trust the narrator and to accept the text as it is, or to try to find other examples of being led on.

Not recognising described earlier topoi does not take away from the experience. However, the pleasure of reading does come in some way from the ability to understand the references and to place them in a broader context of culture. The game where the implied author winks at the reader can make discovering *The Witcher* exciting, but at the same time it underlines the imbalance of the author-reader relationship. Using irony and placing so many references to other cultural texts in the books put their implied author in a position of power. He showcases his cultural and literary knowledge and stylises himself to be an erudite and an expert (Roszczyńska 72). This demonstration of intellect challenges the readers, but it is left up to them to either ignore or accept the dare.

Magdalena Roszczyńska in her book on Sapkowski's poetics (*Sztuka fantasy Andrzeja Sapkowskiego: Poetyki*, 2009) presents the implied author's dominating position through an analysis of the mottos placed before chapters. Some of them – like cited in the previous part of this thesis *Monstrum*, or *Description of a Witcher*, are made up by the writer and have their source in the fictitious universe. These mottos are meant to convince the reader of the originality and reality of the created universe. The reader agrees with the fact that if there is a reference, it must concern a "real" world. Before chapter VII in *Time of Contempt* there is a quote by Roderick de Novembre from his *The History of the*

World, volume II:

When the fire was lit at the foot of the criminal's pyre and the flames began to engulf her, she began to hurl abuse (...) 'Death, death and vengeance to all of you and your kin!' Only this much was she able to cry out before the flame consumed her. Thus perished Falka; such was her punishment for spilling innocent blood.

- Roderick de Novembre, *The History of the World*, volume II
(*Time of Contempt* 287)

The provided historical context should trick the reader into thinking these events were real. However, a careful or a curious reader should fact check the information and notice that there never was anyone named Roderick de Novembre. Both him and his works are fictional.

It is not easy to spot the implied author's tricks. Some of the mottos are more obviously fake than others. For example, a motto referencing elfish culture would be easily categorised as fictional, whereas *The History of the World* could be more problematic. The difficulty occurs from the juxtaposition of quotes taken from non-existing works and those from actual writers and poets. Before chapter V in *Lady of The Lake* there is a fragment of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Erlkönig* (cited in English in the English publication and in German in the Polish publication):

"(...) And if thou'rt unwilling, then force I'll employ." –

My father, my father, he seizes me fast,

For sorely the Erl-King has hurt me at last. –

- Johann Wolfgang Goethe (*Lady of The Lake* 151)

By combining real artists with fictional ones, the implied author confuses the readers and questions their knowledge. Naturally, a person culturally conscious would immediately recognise Goethe as an actual German poet. A more educated reader would, subsequently, provide more context to the poem: they would not only be familiar with the ballad, but they would also be able to recollect its ending and compare it with chapter V of *Lady of The Lake*.

The multiplicity of references which vary in the level of difficulty to recognise (as for instance William Shakespeare is more recognisable than Bruno Bettelheim)¹⁸ leads to three different modes of experiencing *The Witcher* (Roszczynialska 51-77). These depend on the reader's cultural education and willingness to scrutinize the text. To the casual reader, the mottos and references to other cultural texts do not provide any context and do not influence the reading experience. After all, noticing the author's game is not necessary to understand the plot of the books. In this case, the reader accepts the author's position as a mentor and an educator. A reader less naive would correctly link the references to the actual plot and notice the irony in the text, whereas a reader most involved in the novels and ready to treat them not as relaxing fantasy, but a close reading material, would level the relationship with the implied author.

By providing so much context and proof of his cultural awareness, the implied author/Sapkowski tries to create an image of himself as an erudite, a storyteller

¹⁸ Bruno Bettelheim was an Austrian child psychologist who wrote a book called *The Uses of Enchantment. The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976), which Sapkowski read and was inspired by (Roszczynialska 70).

who takes inspiration from literary traditions. However, the reader is invited to challenge this image and question the credibility of the story. Actualising the Grimm Brothers' or Andersen's texts meant to trick the reader into thinking *The Witcher* is an innovative saga. The anti-fairy tales make the novels seem like attention grabbing and original, but the implied author, through the character of Jaskier, exposes the books as ones that use known poetics. The novels are just another artistic creations, but ones with rich intertextuality. This chapter by no means exhausts the topic of referencing in *The Witcher*, but it highlights the two different traditions the novels take from. By combining Western fairy tales with Slavic folklore, the saga becomes a comforting text updated with exotic elements from other cultures. By doing so, Sapkowski's books not only pay homage to literary classics, but they also treat local legends and customs as an interesting resource.

III. Polish-ness. National and International Reception of the Franchise

Incorporating native traditions and folklore in texts was a new way of writing fantasy and Sapkowski was the first one (in Poland) to do so.¹⁹ Before the political changes in '89, it was (Soviet) science-fiction that was most commonly read. Since the first short story describing the witcher was published in a magazine *Fantastyka* in 1986, Sapkowski started his literary career at a time when very few artists focused on fantasy. Not only was the writer partially responsible for introducing the genre into the Polish market, but he was also the first one who targeted it especially towards native audience by incorporating Slavic culture to it.

The introduction of *The Witcher* to a broader, international audience resulted in the need to adapt the story to a new environment. Netflix had to adjust the storyline for it to be more suitable for TV, but the media provider also had to deal with challenges like respecting the original text, the games, and trying to be popular in the post *Game of Thrones* world. In this chapter, I will consider if the Polish-ness of the franchise matters. I will also compare the foreign reception with native reactions to the show and try to find reasons behind *The Witcher's* cultural significance.

About the Author

Andrzej Sapkowski has been writing stories about Geralt of Rivia for twenty-seven

¹⁹ Folklore was also used by „Slavic fantasy” writers—a genre which was officially recognized in the 2000s, but was already created by some in the previous century. Slavic fantasy is mostly identified with Russian fantasy, therefore *The Witcher* is not a part of it.

years, but it is worth noting that *The Witcher* is not his only work. He also created a series of successful historical fantasy books, *The Hussite Trilogy*, for which he was nominated for the Nike Award in 2003, the most prestigious Polish literary award. Despite the fact that Sapkowski also focuses in his work on other areas of literature, he cannot say goodbye to *The Witcher* and he treats it as a story that never ends. He dedicated his life to this series which most definitely became an important element of Polish culture. However, Sapkowski was not planning to be a writer. He studied to be a tradesman and his career as a writer seems like a coincidence. He was a big fantasy fan which inspired him to translate some stories, but he soon discovered that he was more suited to be a writer. When *Fantastyka*, back then mostly a science-fiction magazine, organised a writing competition, his story entitled *The Witcher* took third place: the jury decided it was good, yet not the best. However, it was voted the readers' favourite and thanks to his fans' support, Sapkowski had the opportunity to write more stories about Geralt and be featured in *Fantastyka* more often. Since then, *The Witcher* has had a huge base of fans who come from many different backgrounds. There are those who grew up with the stories and have been loyally supporting Sapkowski since his debut in *Fantastyka*, and there are those who discovered him after engaging with the games or even after viewing the Netflix show.

Is *The Witcher* Polish?

Although at times he might come across as ungrateful, the author realises that the fans play a crucial part in creating a successful (book) franchise and admits that they "made him who he is" (Kaczyńska). Thanks to the fandom, he was able to

make his way to Western pop-culture. Or rather, mostly Anglophone pop-culture, as his works had already been quite popular in for instance Germany and France. This is an accomplishment that should not be underestimated. Jakub Demiańczuk (*Wprost*) says in his article *Is the witcher Polish?* that although there have been other Polish artists whose names are globally known (like Fryderyk Chopin, Stanisław Lem or Olga Tokarczuk), Sapkowski is the first who managed to create a pop-culture brand which hopefully could be compared to the French *Asterix* or Swedish *Minecraft*. It is worth noting that besides the games and the Netflix show, there are also less popular elements of the franchise. There are comics (Polish version published by Prószyński i S-ka; an English version published by Dark Horse Comics), *Gwent*, a card game created by CD Projekt Red, a 2001 film made by Marek Brodzki and even a musical directed by Wojciech Kościelniak.

The West's appreciation of a "product" created by a Polish author makes Poles proud and it reinforces the socio-cultural aspect of *The Witcher*. The franchise is therefore often talked about in the Polish context, even though there is no Polish-ness in the books *per se*. In contrast to *The Hussite Trilogy*, there are no clear allusions in the novels' plots to Poland's (not: Slavic) history or culture other than the usage of language and certain mentality described later. It is rather the discourse around the franchise which adds the nationalistic value to it. As Jakub Demiańczuk claims, the Polish-ness of *The Witcher* is underlined mostly by the native fans and journalists, whereas for the foreign audience the fact that Sapkowski is Polish probably makes no difference; just like it does not matter to a *The Lord of the Rings* fan that Tolkien was born in the territory of today's South

Africa.

What is more, Demiańczuk also says that for the readers who just now start to discover *The Witcher* novels, the Netflix show is based on the games' narrative rather than on the original books, even if the producers claim the opposite. The games are simply more popular than the texts and although the digital *The Witcher* derives from Slavic culture, its Polish-ness is irrelevant for the average gamer. However, *The Witcher's* global success does not stop native audience from claiming the series as theirs:

(...) the witcher is a character which Polish pop-culture has never had before. As for today, it's a success with a capital 'S'. Therefore, we [Poles—AM] fight to prove the alleged Polish-ness of *The Witcher*. And to, by the way, use its popularity. (Demiańczuk)

***The Witcher* as a Part of Polish Identity**

The Witcher is a story liked and popular, one that has been connecting people from different generations and backgrounds. If that was not enough to make people intrigued in the Netflix adaptation, the fact that such a big American company was interested in transposing the books into a show is already a quite big distinction. Thus, national pride and loyalty to native products draws Poles' attention to *The Witcher*. The show contributes to the mentality of "It's good, because it's Polish".²⁰ Moreover, watching *The Witcher* can be a way of expressing patriotism similar to supporting Polish footballers or actors playing in foreign films. Even though the

²⁰ „Dobre, bo polskie” is a popular phrase used for example as a name for a project promoting local music or a TV documentary focusing on Polish businesses.

story was taken over by Americans, *The Witcher's* heart remains Polish, as Tomek Bagiński says (Czyż). This acclaimed Polish graphic designer was responsible for introducing to Netflix the idea of adapting Sapkowski's text and he also is one of the show's executive producers. He wishes for *The Witcher* to become a "Polish brand" just like vodka, kiełbasa, Lech Wałęsa and Karol Wojtyła.

Not only is *The Witcher* unique thanks to its intertextuality and character building, but the attention it is receiving is also unusual for Polish culture. Hence, the spotlight put on the saga makes for a great opportunity to shift the focus from the franchise itself to its place of origin, in order to market the country and its customs. This is partially done by the Polish branch of Netflix itself, as the company makes the effort to promote the series with native audience in mind. To market the show, they for instance organised the series' premier in Warsaw and uploaded to their YouTube accounts videos which focus on introducing the cast of *The Witcher* to Polish traditions, language and Sapkowski's original texts.²¹ These marketing strategies are a great way of acknowledging Geralt's "birthplace" and inviting the native audience to watch the series. The international recognition gives Poles not only the reason to be proud, but also the opportunity to introduce themselves to foreigners as people able to laugh at themselves (as the videos are often humorous and play on stereotypes). Poland is also represented as a country able to produce good entertainment and one full of beautiful scenery (parts of *The Witcher* were filmed nearby Kraków, Poland).

"Poles' national identity," says Kazimierz Łastawski in his essay on historical

21 See: e. g. "Jaskier I Yennefer vs. polskie eliksiry". *Youtube*, 24 Jan 2020.

and contemporary values of Polish-ness, "is strongly determined by collective memory of conflicts between generations of Poles and their neighbours, especially with Germany and Russia, present in culture and art" (284). Thanks to *The Witcher*, Polish culture is represented in the international art community not as a victim or participant of wars, but a separate unity able to produce art and entertainment. This helps with creating a new, post '89 identity. Poles, rather than being dominated by their neighbours, want to be appreciated by the US and the rest of Europe. When *The Witcher* became popular, Poland's valuable input in the global culture has been acknowledged.

Geralt and the Contemporary World

Tomek Bagiński claims (Czyż) that the fact that Poland has always been a battlefield located between two military powers also results in Polish mentality of there not being any greater good or bad in the world. This somewhat nihilistic viewpoint transposes to *The Witcher* and Geralt's neutrality described in the first chapter of this thesis. "Evil is evil, Stregobor", says Geralt in the story *Lesser Evil* in *The Last Wish* (90) to the wizard who tried to commission the witcher to kill Renfri. "Greater, lesser, middling. It's all the same". Geralt, rather than trying to take a stance and support big ideologies represented by Stregobor, makes the futile effort to be neutral and respect the people he finds himself in the company of. Tolerance towards others and trying to understand everyone and every creature is key for the main character, as being a mutant himself he often is exposed to hasty misjudgements.

This outlook corresponds, according to Bagiński, with medieval times

(around the 13th century, when *The Witcher* is set), when Poland was supposedly one of the most liberal countries in Europe and “we had our arms open for the travellers from every country, culture and religion” (Czyż).²² Located on the border of East and West, there was a variety of influences that made Polish culture what it is now. Whether the acceptance of others is still present today is irrelevant. What matters is the fact that the openness towards everyone is a mentality which presently is “resonating globally” (Czyż).

Geralt’s world is corrupted by money and war, but at the same time his code of conduct prevents him from a complete moral decay. He is the one who would oppose crass jokes and abasements, and sternly reject racism, sexism and rape so normalised in his universe. Often, the witcher would react to situations like these with sarcasm, a kind of sneering humour which “doesn’t make any sense, because people around us die and we laugh. But we have no other choice, life just goes on”, says Bagiński. This fierce criticism of misconduct and Geralt’s way of dealing with trauma resonates with today’s young adults from generations Y and Z who (just like Geralt) are faced with ecological and economical tragedies. All they can do is to laugh and create memes about the problems they run into. Bagiński explains, that

[in the last 30 years—AM] it’s not *The Witcher* and Sapkowski’s novels that changed, but the world. We are tired of ideologies and of preaching only one truth. We are tired of conflicts in media and storms

22 Although Bagiński says that Poland was most liberal in medieval times, and that it corresponds with *The Witcher’s* setting, I believe it to be a small mistake. Most probably the period Bagiński was talking about was not the 13th century (times of feudal fragmentation) but the 16th-18th century, so the period of The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

in the teacups. When it comes down to people, all of this doesn't matter, because here [in *The Witcher* universe - AM], people of two different beliefs can sit together, drink beer and come to an understanding. The Andrzej [Sapkowski - AM]-esque, the witcher's philosophy has become more universal during the last 30 years and became easier to understand abroad. (Czyż)

The Witcher was created almost thirty years ago on the wave of liberal ideas, but in a country faced with economical and political changes. Sapkowski had been in his forties²³ when his books started being published, which means that he spend his youth on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Writing a fantasy saga so progressive for that time and conditions makes for a great base for modern day adaptations.

Foreign View: Masculinity

This progressiveness rooted in Poland's history is what Bagiński believes to be the most interesting factor for the international audience. Even though Sapkowski's world makes for a great place for misogyny and harmful stereotypes, this universe is strongly criticised by its inhabitants. Lucy Mangan in her review of the first season of *The Witcher* summed it as "Netflix's fantasy epic [in which Henry Cavill stars—AM] as a magical warrior battling monsters, mutants... and medieval toxic masculinity" (*The Guardian*, 20 Dec 2019). This view is also supported by Dawid Matuszek in his paper *The End of Masculinity, or a Sketch of the Witcher (Koniec męskości albo wiedźmina opisanie)*.

²³ Sapkowski was born in 1948, same year as George R. R. Martin.

Mangan underlines Geralt's criticism of toxic masculinity through his progressive views on gender and race. This awareness is juxtaposed by the witcher's looks which would suggest that the protagonist usually uses force ("Geralt is woke as well as large"). In the Netflix show, Geralt is portrayed by Henry Cavill, a muscular actor known mostly from his role as a Superman (*Man of Steel*, dir. Zack Snyder, 2013). However, rather than taking the dignity and heroism of Superman, the witcher is "a big silent softy who agonizes over the monsters he dispatches" (Mike Hale).

Dawid Matuszek, on the other hand, says straightforwardly that the (book and game) Geralt does not fight with toxic masculinity, but lacks it. As a mutant and a half-man he cannot fully accept himself as someone manly. Therefore, he tries to hide behind stereotypes: "he swings his sword, he kills the monsters, he has casual sex, yet he continues to dream about his potential masculinity" (Matuszek 189). The character himself admits that the dream of brave, heroic manliness was quickly destroyed by the reality. After leaving Kaer Morhen, the first monster the witcher met "was bald and had exceptionally rotten teeth" (*The Voice of Reason 4* in *The Last Wish* 115). Together with his companions, the man wanted to rape a girl, but Geralt killed him in her defence:

I wanted the girl, sobbing with gratitude, to kiss her savior on the hands (...). [Instead, t]he girl, drenched in the bald man's blood, threw up, became hysterical and fainted in fear when I approached her. (*The Voice of Reason 4* in *The Last Wish*, 116)

Since then, Geralt tries to stay away from troubles and distances himself, but his

cynicism and (anti)heroism are exposed as a hoax either by other characters or by the information we get about his own thoughts (Matuszek 193). In the Netflix show, the cited fragment of *The Last Wish* is also depicted. In episode 1, *The End's Beginning* (dir. Alik Sakharov), Geralt tells this story to his horse in a vulnerable moment of solitude. The irony of this melancholic scene, where the expectations clashed with reality, is again enhanced by Geralt's looks. The usually full of contempt man was showed as emotional and caring, only to face Renfri a few scenes later and earn the nickname the Butcher of Blaviken.

Foreign View: Feminism

The female characters are also progressive in this fantasy. Besides described earlier beauties who turn into warriors, there are many other characters who reject the stereotypical representation of women. Calanthe, a queen known as the Lioness of Cintra, was praised for her bravery and swordsmanship skills. Visenna, Geralt's mother, decided to give her baby away to Kaer Morhen instead of "a suitable spell", but the choice was hers, "[a] choice which should be respected, for it is the holy and irrefutable right of every woman", Sapkowski writes (*Sword of Destiny* 345). Ciri grows into a young woman incredibly skilled in fighting, and one that plays a role far more important in saving the world than Geralt. She also expands the universe's sexuality spectrum as a bisexual girl and disobeys the gender expectations by becoming an actual witcheress, an unusual and initially troublesome sight for other witchers in Kaer Morhen.

Ciri's story is one of the most adventurous in the saga, but it is Yennefer of Vengerberg which I would like to highlight as an interesting character. Since the

first season of Netflix's *The Witcher* focuses on the introduction of the story and characters, the audience meets young Yennefer. Born in poverty as a hunchback with magical abilities, she was bought out from her family and made into a sorceress (episode 2, *Four Marks*, dir. Alik Sakharov). In exchange for education and the illusion of beauty, she had to pay with her uterus, and throughout the show she goes on different quests to find a cure for her infertility. Although Yennefer's longing for motherhood has been criticised by some feminist reviewers as a step back, others explain that the acceptance of being a mother as a conscious choice is a great representation (Moore). This view is also enhanced by the fact that it is Yennefer who wants to be a mother. Egoistic and unable to appreciate the sentiment people (Geralt) have for her, she is a sorceress who bravely fought in the final battle of Soden (episode 8 *Much More*, dir. Marc Jobst). She is also an important figure in the Lodge of The Sorceress, a female-led political organisation set up to preserve magic. As Katarzyna Kaczor says (44-50), Sapkowski created multiple female stereotypes in *The Witcher*, and "Yennefer as a sorceress has a lot of negative qualities connected to womanhood, but at the same time she is constantly presented in the opposition to described stereotypes and opinions about her in the universe" (50).

Entertaining Hole: Netflix's Adaptation

The viewpoint on masculinity and feminism that opposes stereotypes is weirdly actual for books created more than twenty years ago in a then freshly democratic country. Therefore, the characters mostly translate well to the modern visual medium. Both Yennefer and Ciri have a lot of screen time and they have their

stories explained in separate plots (see: *The Witcher*, Netflix series - character screen time ranking - Season 1; appendix 2). This was an update to the original story the show's creator, Lauren Hissrich, decided to make in her adaptation, as in the first two books Yennefer's background is recounted rather than presented. This decision resonates well enough with the audience who could have been disappointed with the (lack of) depiction of female characters in other fantasy stories. These quite modern women were put in a world without many possibilities, but they did receive a backstory and attention. They speak to today's audience, just like the witcher's ambiguous identity, philosophy of golden mean and his dry, sarcastic humour.

Yet, the reviews of the first season of *The Witcher* are strongly mixed. In the recent articles about the series, the Netflix's production is not treated as an adaptation in the understanding of a reproduction, but rather as a separate title. The reviewers do not take into account the books nor the games. This decision is justified, as adaptation can be treated as an autonomous work (Hutcheon 6), but in this case, it reveals certain gaps and misunderstandings in storytelling. Whereas a person familiar with the books would easily follow the plot of the show's first season (based on *The Last Wish* and *Sword of Destiny*), someone new to *The Witcher* might feel lost.

The ending of *Game of Thrones* in 2019 supposedly left in the audience an "entertaining hole" (Edward Helmore for *The Guardian*) *The Witcher* tries to fill in. Therefore, the reviewers mostly base their opinions on comparisons between those two shows. The Netflix production was viewed as a "generic version" of the

HBO's show (Mike Hale for *The New York Times*) but with worse writing and bad wigs which *The Guardian's* Lucy Mangan took a great offence with. Ed Power wrote in *The Telegraph* (20 Dec 2019) that the nudity in the series "come[s] off as an attempt to mimic GoT-style 'sexposition' as penned by people who never actually watched *Game of Thrones*". He also added that "[*The Witcher*—AM] lacks GoT's grandeur, slyness and exquisite politicking".

Netflix's *The Witcher* is therefore faced with expectations from those who would like to watch a *Game of Thrones* substitute, but also from the gamers who would like to see Netflix do justice to the game. After all, Geralt was a character already present in pop-culture, and thus the space made for *The Witcher* by the ending of *Game of Thrones* was cleverly used by the producers. However, both Lauren Hissrich (creator) and Tomek Bagiński (executive producer) underline the importance of the primary text in creating the show. Even Sapkowski himself took part in promoting the show (see: *Writing the Witcher with Andrzej Sapkowski and Lauren Hissrich* / *Netflix*, YouTube 13 Dec 2019), which is unusual considering the writer's view on adaptations. The author's involvement raises even more expectations from the "already fans" who would like to see on the screen the story as it was told by Sapkowski. The episodic way in which the books were written makes the transposition of the plot more difficult.

What is more, Netflix show-runners are facing a difficult decision whether to really stay true to the text, and therefore depict elements maybe not suitable for the current times, or to update the story. The nudity mentioned before was not updated; it is very much present both in the books and in the games. The scene in

which Henry Cavill sits in a bath is a nod to *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*, where a very similar picture of Geralt pops up on the screen after the introductory video. The show's scenes where the sorcerers' conjure an illusion of naked women are also present in the books. The viewers unfamiliar with the other elements of the franchise might treat these sequences as a distasteful attention grabbing trick taken from *Game of Thrones*, but the nudity is very much present in the games and in the original text. Lust is the modus operandi of Sapkowski's universe.

Although critics are disappointed with the show, the story's vast group of fans is still gaining new members. To them, the new Netflix adaptation probably feels rather like an addition to already liked stories than a separate content which should be captivating. *The Witcher* has been Netflix's second most popular show of 2019 (@netflix, Twitter), and the new wave of audience skyrocketed Sapkowski's *The Last Wish* into the tops of the bestseller lists. However, it is not the nudity that makes people attracted to *The Witcher*. To the foreign audience it is the relevance of the themes that appear in the story, the modern approach to masculinity and feminism. The humour in which the issues are treated is resonating with both native and outside audiences. For Poles, though, the social aspect of the series is most important. The story is used to create a new identity, switching from an oppressed and pushed aside nation into one capable of creating captivating content, which is globally appreciated.

Conclusion

Sapkowski writes about magical creatures, fantastical worlds and non-humans, and his books in many aspects overlap with other fantasy novels. *The Witcher* in a way could be categorised as classical Western literature, as it references Western cultures and discusses topics of race, destiny and power. It might thus seem that *The Witcher* is just another story about war and the adventures of a skilled protagonist. Indeed, thanks to the multi-layered composition of the story, the text allows the reader to treat it as another epic saga, a standard fantasy story. However, after closer inspection and the introduction of the perspectives of an insider and an outsider, the novels start to differ from other potentially similar books. *The Witcher's* otherness is highlighted in the topics of content, reception and intertextuality, but the intensity of the otherness depends on the readers' cultural knowledge.

The saga about the witcher is a great example of duality. In the context of the plot, Geralt tries to stand on the middle ground between good and evil. In a way, the witcher is a hero, a positive character who tries to make a positive change. In many ways his adventures are compatible with Joseph Campbell's description of heroic journeys, but at the same time, Geralt cannot be easily categorised as a role model. His refusal to be treated as one is mirrored in his efforts to be neutral. He does not want to glorify himself, as his self-reflections often lead him to judging his actions as bad. Morally grey, he is neither someone who deserves admiration, nor a character who should be condemned. This constant oscillation between

being a hero and an anti-hero places him somewhere between as a no-hero. The ambiguity of Geralt's literary status reflects the ambiguity of his identity, as he does not think of himself as a man, nor as a monster.

The oppositions present in the character and in the plot of the story correspond with the national and international experiencing of *The Witcher*, as well as the combination of cultural influences. In his books, Sapkowski unites two contrasting points of view. This creates somewhat of a melting pot, where different ideas and traditions meet and work together to build something new. In this way, the saga is both original and conventional.

The adventures of Geralt, Jaskier, Ciri and Yennefer are filled with references to different cultures and texts, more or less popular in Poland and the world. Retelling old tales of, for example, *Snow White* or *Sleeping Beauty* allowed the writer to arouse a feeling of familiarity but not of comfort. The known topoi are twisted and updated to fit the pessimistic and gruesome universe of *The Witcher*. The fairy tales became anti-fairy tales and the reader is invited to notice the irony the implied author is using. At the same time the story is "Easternized" by incorporating to it Slavic elements. Creating a protagonist that could have been based on local legends and stories is treated as a way of honouring native traditions. Strigas, rusałkas and drowners are elements of Polish folklore and having them described in a now worldwide-known literature is somewhat a milestone for Polish culture. Not only was Sapkowski the first one to fruitfully write fantasy stories, previously absent on the local literary scene, but his books were also the first ones to become international bestsellers thanks to their

adaptations into games and a Netflix show. As a creator of “the first Polish entertainment super-system” (Wałaszewski), Andrzej Sapkowski’s input in culture is significant. Therefore, *The Witcher* is often treated as Polish and the saga’s origins are usually underlined not only by the fans but also by the researchers.

Whereas to the Polish audience the new show is a reason to be proud, the international audience can find *The Witcher* worthwhile due to its modern depiction of both male and female characters. Even though the story about Geralt was birthed almost thirty years ago by a previously inexperienced author in his forties,²⁴ who spent his youth behind the Iron Curtain, the saga is surprisingly up-to-date. Thanks to this, Sapkowski’s protagonists fit with modern ideologies which helped Netflix in creating a popular show. Even though the series is faced with a lot of expectations from reviewers, new and old fans, it has already become a valuable part of *The Witcher* franchise.

Although Sapkowski himself is reserved when it comes to *The Witcher’s* success, its importance in Polish culture and literary history is undeniable. The writer states that his works are not heavily based on local traditions, but the fan base does not groundlessly treat *The Witcher* as a representative of Eastern and Polish heritage. That, however, is not a hindrance to the foreign audience in experiencing the story. Much to the author’s dismay, it is possible that internationally the franchise will be more associated with the games, or later maybe with the Netflix show, rather than with the text. Even though the audience comes back to the books as the primary source of the story, designers from CD

24 Sapkowski was born in 1948, the same year as George R. R. Martin.

Projekt Red and Tomek Bagiński, as well as Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, are the force which gave the saga a second life. The story is an interesting melange of cultures constantly being on the verge of falling into stereotypes and challenging them. Hence, the Rudyard Kipling's quote from the beginning of the thesis: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" changes its meaning in the context of *The Witcher*. After all, it is exactly the place where East and West meet.

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Appendix 1

Fairy Tales vs Anti-Fairy tales, a comparison prepared by David Calvin, found in:
 McAra, Catorina. Calvin, David. "Introduction". Anti-tales. The uses of
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Fairy Tale	Anti-Fairy Tale
▪ Optimism	▪ Pessimism
▪ Teleological, anticipatory	▪ Retrospective, subversive
▪ "Once upon a time"	▪ Real world context
▪ Initiation	▪ Dissonance
▪ Pedagogical	▪ Lessons unlearned
▪ Infantilised, bowdlerized	▪ Adult themes, cynicism
▪ Telling	▪ Untelling
▪ Cultural mirror	▪ Breaking the mirror
▪ Parabolic	▪ Anti-parabolic
▪ Black and white morality	▪ Grey morality or amorality
▪ Fixed point of view	▪ Shifting perspectives
▪ Independent narrative	▪ Intertextual, metafictional
▪ Bourgeois	▪ Avant-garde
▪ Patriarchal	▪ Feminist
▪ Mythologises	▪ Demythologises
▪ Enchantment	▪ Disenchantment

Appendix 2

Comparison of the characters' screen time in season 1 of Netflix's *The Witcher*, taken from:

Bar Chart Racer, *The Witcher*, Netflix series - characters screen time ranking -

Season 1, YouTube, 19 Jan 2020, timestamp: 1:07,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slePwaDn10A>. Accessed 28 June 2020.

Geralt (Henry Cavill) was on the screen for 198 minutes, Yennefer (Anya Chalotra) for 161 mins, Ciri (Freya Allan) for 124 minutes and Jaskier (Joey Batey) for 92 minutes. The whole season is around 480 minutes long.

