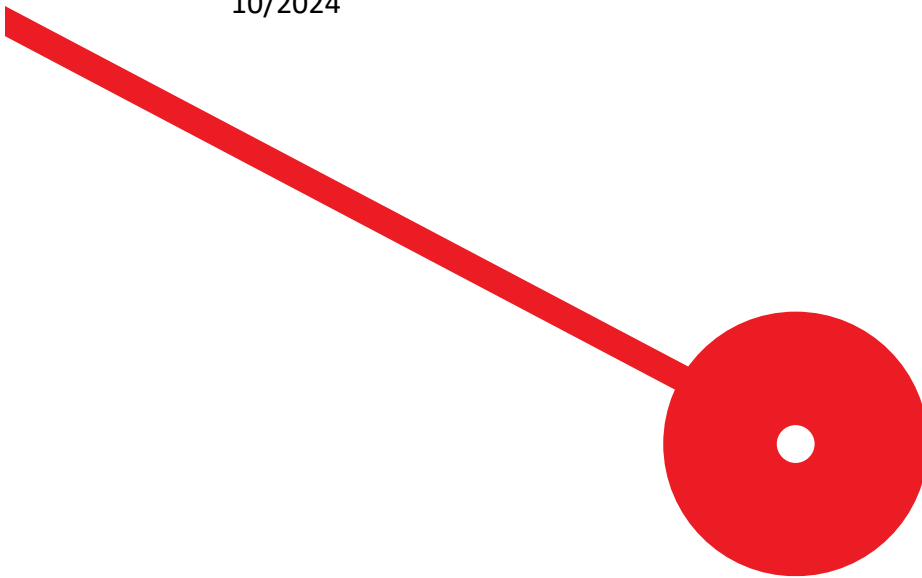




# The Commoditization of Folklore; Mythology in Pop-Culture: The Witcher - a case study

Joana Mafalda Rosinhas Gonçalves

10/2024



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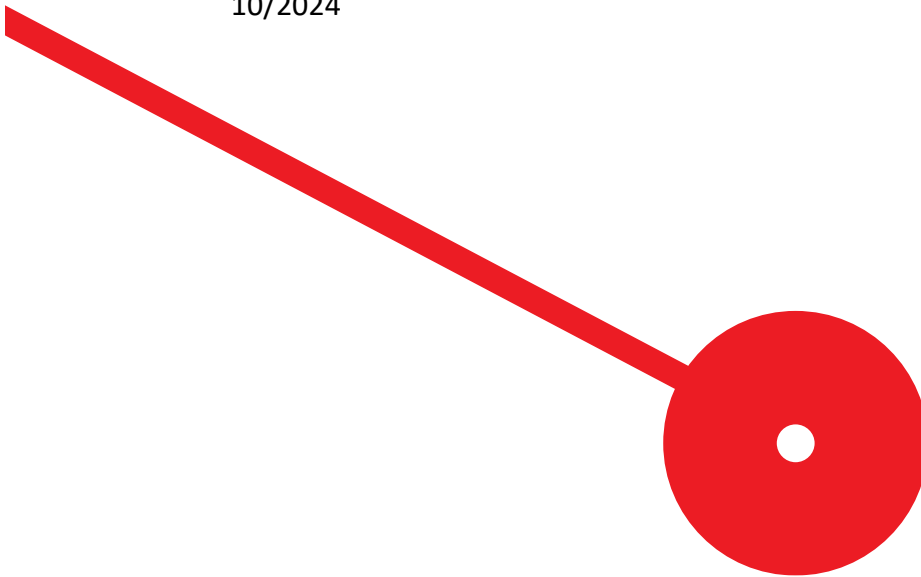
MESTRADO  
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**Resumo:**

Contar histórias é uma das práticas mais antigas da humanidade. Através da tradição oral, história, crenças e costumes eram transmitidos de geração em geração. Esses sistemas de crenças moldaram as comunidades, e vice-versa. A mitologia e o folclore, inseridos nesses sistemas de crenças, eram usados para explicar o mundo em tempos onde as explicações científicas eram desconhecidas. Eram também usados para transmitir os pilares morais de uma comunidade e serviam como lições. Hoje em dia, esta informação pode percorrer distâncias maiores graças aos avanços tecnológicos e os avanços científicos fornecem explicações para fenômenos até então difíceis de compreender. No entanto, a mitologia prevalece como uma das principais fontes de inspiração para os criadores de obras de ficção. Fornece modelos para enredos, arquétipos de personagens e o cenário da ação para obras de ficção, principalmente do gênero de fantasia. Ainda que não intencionalmente, detalhes como estes podem passar despercebidos, mesmo estando presentes de variadas formas. Nesta dissertação, estes temas serão explorados, usando *The Witcher*, com foco na adaptação da Netflix, como caso de estudo, que exemplifica como mitos, folclore e arquétipos moldam um produto da cultura popular.

**Palavras chave:** Mitologia, Cultura Popular, Mass Media, *The Witcher*

**Abstract:**

Storytelling is one of the most ancient practices of humankind. *Word of mouth* was how history, beliefs, and customs were passed down through generations (Jones & Flaxman, 2014). These belief systems shaped the communities, and vice-versa. Mythology and folklore in these belief systems were used to explain the world in periods when scientific explanations were unknown. They were also used to convey the moral grounds of a community and served as cautionary tales. Nowadays, this information can travel greater distances thanks to technological advances. Further advances in science have provided explanations for phenomena previously complicated to fathom. Nonetheless, mythology prevails as one of the main sources of inspiration for fiction creators. It gives the plots' models, the characters' archetypes, and the action's background to works of fiction, mainly from the fantasy genre. Intentionally or not, it may go unnoticed, even though it is present in more ways than might be initially thought. In this dissertation, this will be explored and explained using *The Witcher*, focusing on its adaptation by Netflix, as a case study that exemplifies how myths, folklore, and archetypes shape a popular culture product.

**Keywords:** Mythology, Popular Culture, Mass Media, The Witcher

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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Humans have always lived surrounded by the belief systems they created. Mythology, folklore, and storytelling have been present in human societies and function as a bonding between elements of a group. The tales and myths passed through generations were not just stories: they contained lessons and moral values that have persisted to this day.

Although nowadays scientific and technological developments allow us to explain how the world works and laws determine what can and cannot be done, myths and folklore tales are not distant past recollections; they continue to be present in today's forms of culture. In entertainment, folklore, and myths are a source of inspiration for stories and character-building for fictional stories.

In an era where popular culture is mass-produced, it is difficult to distinguish these remnants of something that has been deeply embedded in a shared cultural past. Some elements might go unnoticed by a more distracted audience. This dissertation therefore aims to explain how mythology and folklore are present in contemporary popular culture pieces, using *The Witcher* as a case study to illustrate how cultural products become a global commodity.

This dissertation was carried out to obtain a master's degree in Intercultural Studies for Business from Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração do Porto of the Polytechnic of Porto and is entitled "The Commoditization of Folklore; Mythology in Pop-Culture: The Witcher - a case study". It is divided into four chapters and consists of a theoretical part in which relevant terms and concepts are defined and a case study portion in which the object of it is studied and conclusions are presented.

In Chapters I and II the concepts are defined to lay down the basis for the case study approach. Chapter I explores the concepts of popular culture, mass media, and storytelling as they are key concepts when studying today's entertainment pieces. *The Witcher* is the example chosen to illustrate the dissertation's subject. An understanding of these concepts is needed as *The Witcher* was adapted into several formats of media, that involve different ways of telling the story.

Chapter II aims to explain the concepts of mythology and folklore, distinguishing between the two terms. This categorization will then be applied to elements of *The*

*Witcher* (2019), to comprehend how this piece of popular culture has elements of both and how they enhance the plot.

In Chapter III, the case study will be looked at in depth. The original work *The Witcher* is a series of books about the adventures of Geralt of Rivia, a witcher who slays monsters for money, in a cruel fantasy world created by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, in 1986. The saga includes short stories - "The Last Wish" and "Sword of Destiny" - and full-length novels - "Blood of Elves," "Time of Contempt," "Baptism of Fire," "The Tower of Swallows," and "Lady of the Lake" (Gawronski & Bajorek, 2020). In 2001, a film and a TV series directed by Marek Brodzki was produced but was poorly received by the audiences (Gawronski & Bajorek, 2020).

The true turning point for Sapkowski's fantasy narrative came in 2007, when CD Projekt, a Polish game development studio, bought the rights to *The Witcher* from the author and adapted the story and characters into an extremely successful video game series. Later in 2019, a massive event for the expansion of this world would take place, when Netflix's adaptation of *The Witcher* saga premiered, renewing interest worldwide in the Polish fantasy saga.

To determine if *The Witcher* is a popular culture product, the episodes which better illustrate the use of mythology and folklore will be analysed. This way, it will be shown the different elements that build this fantasy world known globally.

The methodology for this dissertation relied mainly on literature review of scientific articles and books on the topics handled in each chapter. The repeated viewership of Netflix's adaptation of *The Witcher* was a substantial part of the practical work as it constitutes the case study portion.

Finally, in Chapter IV, the conclusions drawn from the case study will be presented, referring to the objective of carrying out this dissertation, whether they were accomplished during its development, while also leaving the question for future topics within this subject.

**CHAPTER I – POPULAR CULTURE:  
CONCEPTUALIZATION AND DEFINITION OF TERMS**

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# 1 Conceptualization and definition of terms

## 1.1 Popular Culture

In *Toward a Definition of Popular Culture*, Parker (2011) refers to the difficulty of defining this concept as it can be found in the most varied societies and groups within those societies, as well as in different periods. This meaning that popular culture will look different depending on the period, context, and population that is the object of study. These many variables complicate the process of coming up with a definition for popular culture.

According to Raymond Williams (1985), there are four common ways to use the term *popular*:

1. To refer to something that is well-liked by a large number of people;
2. Something that is inferior or unworthy,
3. Something that seeks to win favour with people, and
4. Forms for culture made by the people for the people.

The author also states that there can be three broad definitions for the word *culture*:

1. It can refer to one's intellectual and spiritual development;
2. It can refer to the way of living of a determined group of people or a period; and,
3. It can refer to the practices and objects related to intellectual and artistic activities (Williams, 1985).

So, naturally, any attempt to define the concept of popular culture will stem from the conjugation of the various meanings of the words popular and culture (Storey, 2018). When confronted with the multiple angles that the expression 'popular culture' entails – at least from Raymond Williams' perspective – it becomes clearer how such a well-known term has so many layers of meaning, which turns its definition into a hard concept to fully grasp.

The connotation and the terms used to describe popular culture and mass culture suggest that there are levels in which culture can be placed – “Before, it was popular; now, it is

defiled and merely mass” (Parker, 2011, p.154). This suggests that the more a piece of culture is liked, the worse it is considered by critics and intellectuals of art and culture. Regarding art and culture, there’s a need for it to be *niche* and *cult classics* to be validated and appreciated (Storey, 2018) – meaning to be liked by and accessible to a small elite audience, as people tend to have a sense of ownership for their interests. Additionally, the idea of the superior being an exclusive attribute of high culture is centuries old. In the nineteenth century, the concern was the domination of public space - art should be unattainable and expensive (Storey, 2018).

The baby boom post-war in the twentieth century affected the creation of a different youth culture. There was a deep mistrust in the recreational habits and tastes of the working class, which would rather read commercial writers than the so-called “authentic revolutionary writers” (Hewitt, 1999, p. 353). This group of people defined by their class developed a sense of *true* popular culture, through which they could connect with a past thought to be lost. There was a distinction between the mass culture influenced by purely commercial interests and what was considered the authentic popular culture defined by action and initiative aimed at empowerment (Hewitt, 1999).

For this reason, the rise and development of popular culture have been seen for a while as an attack on culture itself – what was considered high culture. The differentiation of high and low culture was a way of segregation and prevention against “social intermingling” (Frith, 1991). Popular culture was seen as a space to share and communicate the experiences of the lower, working class. This portion of society was deemed less literate and therefore – in the eyes of the elite – incapable of creating something worth the title of *culture*. Consequently, in this hostile context towards it, the study of popular culture has been, understandably, discouraged. Contrary to what was desired, the shunning of the concept only made the intellectual community more aware of its existence (Hall, 1983). Therefore, the solution is not to eliminate or alter the concept of ‘superior’, but its default exclusive correlation to high culture must cease (Frith, 1991).

Some authors, such as Bennett (1981) and Storey (2018), rely on quantitative definitions, regarding popular culture as culture that is liked or favoured by a large group of people. This definition poses one obstacle: where to draw the line. It is a vague definition if there isn’t an agreement on a certain figure that indicates when something becomes popular culture (Parker, 2011). As the Parker (2011) notes, this type of definition is interesting as

it puts the label of popular culture as desirable, a level that pieces of culture strive to achieve.

Additionally, when considering popular culture as culture that large groups favour, it creates the space to introduce the term mass culture on the same level. Frith (1991) defines mass culture as “(...) the culture made possible by technological change, by the use of the means of mass cultural production” (p. 108) which highlights the historical and conceptual difficulties in the task of defining the idea of mass culture and popular culture. This is often the case for theorists who use the term popular culture to designate a specific type of common culture that is only present in modern times – a type of culture that is mass-produced and mass-consumed (Parker, 2011). This type of culture is usually equated with passiveness, for if it is mass consumed, it must not be complex, therefore, it enforced the position regarding popular culture of “if it’s popular it must be bad!” (Frith, 1991, p. 103). When the value of popular cultural goods is determined by the value of the audience that consumes it, there’s a shift in the previous position to “if it’s popular it must be bad, unless it’s popular with the right people” (Frith, 1991, p.103).

John Fiske (1991) recognizes that industries of mass cultural production were unable to accurately predict what an audience will enjoy or manipulate popular opinion to that degree. Nonetheless what was considered a market failure was necessarily *unpopular*, and market success was *popular*. Nowadays, this isn’t exactly true anymore. Social media has become somewhat omnipresent in everyday life, converging interpersonal and mass communication in it (Figueredo & Bolaño, 2017).

It’s almost impossible to think of popular culture unrelated to social media (Beer, 2013). This crossover of the two concepts is also the root of discussions on freedom of speech, individuality, the right to privacy, and mass communication, within the huge revenues of the digital economy (Beer, 2013).

The algorithms of social media organize content according to the user, considering interactions with other users and all forms of content found online (Figueredo & Bolaño, 2017). The possibility of tailoring content flow and advertising to each user of such media and the management of said individuals' interactions has brought some changes to the popular culture panorama (Figueredo & Bolaño, 2017), making social media and algorithms crucial tools when it comes to predicting and even manipulating audiences' tastes and reactions to popular culture pieces (Beer, 2013). The use of such tools has two

sides: on the one hand, it means that software is entrusted to attribute importance to a certain object for an audience, therefore attributing cultural value to that object; on the other hand, although it has been said the audience is passive in this consumption (Frith, 1981), it is crucial to remember that audiences validate these predictions by interacting with the content shown to them and that algorithms use those interactions to predict the content it will show/advertise next. But algorithms are not the only factor that determine the popularization a piece of popular culture. The product itself must cater to certain audience demands and changes such as political and moral views, as will be discussed in the section titled Storytelling.

In more recent works, Grindstaff (2008) argues that different approaches to defining popular culture are not mutually exclusive. However, the author explains that considering popular culture in an opposing position, as the “other” of high culture, comes with a negative connotation of equating it to mass culture which is usually regarded as an infertile ground for creativity, distinction, or true art. Grindstaff (2008) also considers a more inclusive definition of popular culture as something that comprises beliefs, practices, and objects that organize popular culture and are “widely shared among a population” (pp, 207-208).

These definitions are useful in the sense that they advance the study of popular culture, not merely to find out what it is but also what it does and focusing on the objects that are created by popular culture in a space where meaning is created, not simply transmitted (Grindstaff, 2008). Accordingly, for a text to become popular, it needs to reassure the reader, and the reader needs to relate to the text, creating meaning and relating to the meaning previously created (Grandstaff, 2008).

Regardless of the creation of meaning in the popular culture space, there is also a correlation of popular culture as the product “of those without cultural capital” (Parker, 2011, p. 161), which furthers the distance between the types of culture – high culture and popular culture. Paradoxically, this distance only increases the entanglement of both definitions as they are defined by the exclusion of the other – what is not high culture, is low, popular culture (Parker, 2011).

Even recognizing, that “Popular culture consists of products that require little cultural capital either to produce or else to consume” (Parker, 2011, p. 161), one is still faced with questions such as “Is it art?”, “Who defines what is art?”. As Parker (2011) points out,

before, a studio and a label were required to produce and distribute the said record, respectively. However, with the mass production of equipment and software, and the surge of the internet, creators can go directly to the market, to the consumer (Parker, 2011).

This quote illustrates reality nowadays, as with the right content, anyone can be a creator and have and reach an audience:

With blogs, every man his newspaper; with podcasting, every man his TV station. With the people seizing the means of production, we see the rise of both democratic authorization (ratings on YouTube and Amazon) as well as the increased importance of the gatekeepers. With tens of thousands of self-published books, blogs, and albums, to choose from, who will guide me to what I like the most? (Parker, 2011, p.163)

It also serves to illustrate the relevance of not only individual creators but corporate enterprises, such as streaming services. For many years, Hollywood had a monopoly on the cinema and TV shows market, making the movie/series market a North American-dominated one. When streaming services appeared, the democratization in the film industry began. Nowadays, anyone with access to Netflix has access to Turkish, Spanish, Brazilian, and Portuguese TV shows and movies. People now have access to popular culture from around the world in media format.

Following this idea, in *Towards a Definition of Popular Culture*, Parker (2011) introduces the term “authorize”, relating it to the terms of author and authority. He starts by stating that if art is authorized by the art world, an idea previously mentioned in the article, making popular art not authorized by the art world.

The problem in trying to find a definition for popular culture, Parker argues, is the risk of homogenizing what “the people” look like. Differentiating authorities is a form of resistance to the unifying process between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Parker, 2011). However, as most of the definitions of popular culture tend to do, this one results in a search for the “authorities” that give high culture its status, thus separating it from popular culture. In the realm of popular culture, the authority that defines its products’ value and status is the market and the audience. Something is popular when it sells well and makes a profit (Parker, 2011).

On this point, it's legitimate to question the freedom in art – what room is left for it? If the industry tends to invest in what will presumably bring profit, won't the creator be limited to the formats that already exist and are known to work? One could argue that is what happens. As audiences increasingly define the success or failure of a Tv show, a movie, a book, and other forms of artistic expression, artists and creators may tendentiously lean towards a certain plot, a certain choice in actors, a certain setting that they know will work for the masses and thus make their piece successful, whether or not it represents them.

The assumption that minorities (women, people of color, working class) have less cultural capital reveals that popular culture is judged by its target audience. Therefore, if a piece of popular culture is well liked by a minority, it is associated with a negative connotation – it becomes a lower form of culture, regardless of the product itself or its quality (Parker, 2011).

Even so, the limits of high and low culture have been somewhat blurred. Popular culture emerges as a democratic space for the participation of individuals in the world through the possibilities created by the industrial revolution and the electronic age, we now live in. “Popular culture is thus regarded as a site of cultural negotiation” (Haselstein et al., 2001, p. 333) where, although the main and first goal is pleasure, engaging in interpretation is also part of it, making it not so different from the high cultural products. The opposition between high and low culture still prevalent in popular culture studies is not so much based on social and financial class nowadays; groups with a specific set of cultural practices and judgments are broadly defined based on ethnicity, race, and gender (Haselstein et al., 2001, p. 333).

## **1.2 Mass Media**

In *Key Concepts in Communication*, O'Sullivan, Saunders, and Fiske (1983) offer the following definitions for mass media and mass communication, respectively:

Usually understood as newspapers, magazines, cinema, television, radio, and advertising; sometimes including book publishing (especially popular fiction) and music (the pop industry) (O'Sullivan et al., 1983, p.130)

Mass communication is the practice and production of providing leisure entertainment and information to an unknown audience employing corporately, financed, industrially produced, state-regulated, high-technology, privately consumed commodities in the modern print, screen, audio, and broadcast media (O'Sullivan et al., 1983, p.131)

It's important to note that these definitions were written before the appearance of the Internet and social media which should be added to this list as well, as both are part of everyday life now. Mass media and mass communication are connected, even if the two terms are separately defined, as mass media engulfs the means through which the process of mass communication is possible. Therefore, in defining mass communication, one must define mass media (Potter, 2013).

Since the 1920s at least, the concepts of "mass communication" or "mass media" have been studied. These terms apply to a smaller area within communication studies that focuses on communication that is mediated in a way that differentiates it from other types of communication (Potter, 2013).

Mass media are key instruments for integration into a society and its culture. They diffuse information and entertainment while contributing to cultural transmission (Sorlin, 1997). For this reason, the mass media end up playing a crucial role in defining one's opinions (Viswanath et al., 2007). Moreover, mass media also influence and are influenced by social groups, institutions, and contexts. The media have the power and the function of bringing a sense of community and connection and making social capital accessible (Viswanath et al., 2007).

The current world of communication is a different one from only a few decades ago, as a result of technological advances in computers, smartphones, and the generalized use of the internet. This new world sets itself in four crucial pillars: technological convergence, interactivity, information saturation, and a shift in marketing perspective (Potter, 2013). The transition from separate media channels to a single platform where all messages are exchanged is known as media convergence. Potter (2013) argues that forms of media nowadays are crossover forms of media, which means they all draw and adapt from one another. On social media platforms, the user can access and send words, pictures, videos, and audio.

This phenomenon can also be observed in the trend of videogames being adapted to TV series format. Some examples of this included HBO's daptation of the videogame The

Last of Us, Prime Video's adaptation of Fallout, and the case study of this dissertation Netflix's *The Witcher*, which was primarily a book series by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski adapted into CD Projekt RED videogame trilogy of the same name. Bolter and Grusin (2000) call this process remediation – an intricate and recurring process that media take part, in which the form and content of media are copied, criticized, and then enhanced.

Mass media constitutes a special case of media due to the distinct conceptualization of its users, who impact the way technological channels are operated (Potter, 2013). Audiences' experience of media has drastically changed due to all of the options available and the possibility of multitasking while using media. Amid so many options to choose from, people tend to rely on what's known and intuitive, which incentivizes platforms and media creators to borrow features, storylines, tools that are successful in one format and adapt it to others (Potter, 2009).

Although the term “mass media” can misleadingly hint at anonymous entities that propagate information to unknown audiences, these institutions are well-structured organizations that generate, compile, and disseminate news, entertainment, knowledge, and opinions, through new technologies such as smartphones, computers, television, radio, and of course the Internet (Viswanath et al., 2007). One can conceptualize the mass media as the interaction of different parts of the communication industry existing in a symbiotic relationship to achieve the ultimate goal: create products for different audiences that bring profit (Viswanath et al., 2007).

The media, insofar as they inform, are a component of communication, which means they are a part of the distinctive process by which human societies are created and in which they exist (Sorlin, 1997). For this reason, and although popular culture and mass media have negative connotation, both are key aspects of societal development.

### **1.3 Storytelling**

The oral tradition of storytelling, which has a long history and ties to folklore, was vital to the transmission and preservation of cultural information (Jones & Flaxman, 2014). In oral traditions, storytelling refers to the oral dissemination of stories, myths, and tales from one generation to another as opposed to the written word, as it is a dynamic and alive type of folklore, according to Dundes (1980), that enables groups to preserve their sense of self and cultural continuity. These tales frequently serve to inform and amuse

listeners while highlighting the values, beliefs, and experiences of a particular society. Fairy tales, epic poems, and legends are just a few of the prominent folklore genres that have their roots in the oral storytelling tradition, which continues to influence contemporary storytelling in popular culture (Dundes, 1980).

Throughout history, different approaches to storytelling and its role in engaging an audience with a product have been taken. A few theories of storytelling will be briefly discussed in the following paragraphs to introduce and understand how it applies to the case study of this thesis.

The term "cognitive storytelling" describes the application of theories and principles from cognitive psychology to the art of telling stories. It focuses on how tales are processed and understood by the human mind as well as how to effectively engage and connect with an audience through storytelling (Mar et al., 2011). This type of storytelling enables people to mimic events, feelings, and social interactions in a secure setting. The audience is cognitively, emotionally, and socially engaged by storytelling in this way, which promotes greater comprehension, empathy, and immersion in the story (Mar et al., 2011). Emotions and states of mind influence not only the engagement in the story but also its choice. Adalma (2015) follows the same logic when stating that when an audience doesn't experience emotion it becomes less involved in the story and rejects it.

According to the narrative paradigm theory (Fisher, 1990), people are essentially storytellers who use tales to communicate and make decisions. This theory believes that the moral, social, and cultural values of the audience should be reflected for effective storytelling. It advises that for stories to be compelling, they should be logical, realistic, and relevant to the audience's viewpoint (Fisher, 1990).

Fisher's (1990) narrative paradigm emphasizes the importance of coherent narratives and narrative fidelity. Coherent narratives mean the story has a logical structure and internal consistency - a distinct beginning, middle, and end; while narrative fidelity refers to the extent to which a narrative aligns with a person's values, beliefs, and experiences. A tale's persuasive power is greater when it supports the audience's perspective.

In the same vein, Hofstede (2004) state that the media have the "important role of creating cultural understanding (or misunderstanding)" (p. 425), which can originate ambiguities as it is made of people with their own set of cultural beliefs and background, sometimes biased when portraying other cultures.

Wolfgang Iser (1980) challenges the idea of a text's fixed and objective meaning in *The Act of Reading*, where he offers a theory of aesthetic response. He claims that a literary

work's meaning is not merely dependent on the author's intentions or completely personal to each reader. Furthermore, the author contends that meaning instead develops through negotiation and interaction between the reader's expectations and any ambiguities or gaps in the text.

The author proposes the idea of the "implied reader," a hypothetical construct that continuously develops and alters their idea of themselves as they interact with the text. The author points to the importance of "gaps" or "blanks" in texts because they promote reader participation and stimulate them to fill in the blanks with their interpretations (Iser, 1980).

The concept of transmedia storytelling focuses on developing storylines that can be shared across a variety of media, including books, websites, social media, and video games. It enables a more immersive and interactive storytelling experience and acknowledges that different audiences connect with various mediums. Transmedia storytelling tries to accommodate the tastes and routines of distinct audience segments across a range of media platforms (Jenkins, 2006).

Each element of the transmedia franchise (e.g. movie, book, game, comics, etc.) adds value to the story as a whole by being "self-contained", as Jenkins (2006) explains. It provides an independent point of entry into the story without the need for previous knowledge of other transmedia elements, as "Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 96).

The way storytelling aims towards the audience has a crucial role in the success of a text: it impacts the shared experience of storytelling and the emotional attachment that fans have to their favorite tales, which are key factors in the development of fandoms in popular culture. Fandoms are communities of devoted followers that actively engage in and celebrate the popular culture they have chosen. Jenkins (1992) holds that fandoms are created by the social connections and participatory culture of their members, who frequently partake in activities like cosplay, writing fan fiction, creating fan art, and participating in online forums. Fans can connect with other people who share their passion for a specific tale or fictional universe, which helps them build a feeling of community. As fans debate, dissect, and reinterpret the stories, they create fandoms that are interconnected by storytelling, resulting in a rich and intricate tapestry of fan-created content and interpretations (Jenkins, 1992).

The development of popular culture and its many media, such as books, movies, television shows, and video games, has altered the field of storytelling and opened up new opportunities for audience participation. As previously mentioned, popular culture can be, in a broader sense, defined as cultural practices and products that are widely consumed and valued by a large audience. Popular culture offers a way to relax, escape, and, at the same time, a way to reflect on culture (Hills, 2002). It enables people to lose themselves in imaginary settings, relate to characters, and engage with stories that speak to their own experiences. The potential of storytelling to forge emotional bonds, ignite fandoms, and define collective identities among fans is what gives it power in popular culture.

The effect of storytelling in fandoms of popular culture goes beyond simple pleasure and has impacted media businesses as well as broader cultural discussions. As artists and producers increasingly consider fan comments, forging a more collaborative relationship between creators and audiences, fandoms can alter the course of storytelling (Pearson, 2010).

Media corporations have taken notice of the fervent fan interaction and are aggressively cultivating fan communities through official events, merchandising, and social media marketing as fans also reclaim this: they feel they're owed this retribution for their support (Stanfill, 2019). By exhibiting the enduring power of narrative and its capacity to build strong ties and involvement among audiences, fandoms have emerged as a major influence on how popular culture is shaped (Jenkins, 2006).

*The Witcher* follows a trend of adaptations that naturally falls into the scope of transmedia storytelling theory. This way of telling a story by adapting it to different media than the original provides a larger audience, making the world of *The Witcher* available to a wider group of potential fans (Schmidt, 2022).

Transmedia storytelling and adaptations provide each individual the opportunity to experience their favorite tale in their preferred type of media (Enășoiu, 2021). On the other hand, this brings critiques and controversy when adaptations don't meet the expectations of fans who are familiar with the original content. There is a delicate balance to be struck: provide fans with the familiarity they expect while challenging their interpretations of the original text (Enășoiu, 2021).

The appreciation of the audience for this sense of fidelity to the original material intertwined with fresh and relevant additions is noticeable when analyzing the ratings for the episodes of Season 1 and 2 of the Netflix TV show on the online database IMDb which provides information and statistics about movies, TV shows, and documentaries.

While the highest-rated episodes (S1E8: Much More; rated 8.8; S1E3: Betrayer Moon, rated 8.6; S2E1: A Grain of Truth, rated 8.5) are strongly based on the source material, the lowest-rated (S2E2: Kaer Morhen, rated 7.6; S1E2: Four Marks, rated 7.7; What Is Lost, rated 7.8) are the ones where the creators deviated more from the original text.

It is a difficult task to achieve the equilibrium between staying loyal to the primary text and incorporating new details. Myths and fairytales often transmit a message for the audience, meant to teach a lesson and provide moral conduct guidelines (Jones & Flaxman, 2014). As society changes and evolves, some of those messages become outdated, sometimes portraying situations that are now considered prejudiced and do not reflect current values (Enășoiu, 2021). For this reason, in order to appease contemporary audiences, creators adapting older works, that take inspiration from even older myths and fairytales, must be mindful of current context and revise certain aspects regarding gender, class, and other topics that have changed through time (Enășoiu, 2021).

In these cases, the changes are often welcomed, as it is the case for Episode 1 from Season 2 titled A Grain of Truth. Even though, the episode's story is faithful to the source material – a short story with the same title from the book *The Last Wish* by Andrzej Sapkowski (2019) – some of the moral choices of the characters were altered.

Sapkowski's (2019) story portrays one of many of Geralt's adventures. Geralt is a monster hunter who roams the Continent, working for those who need a monster killed. As he travels, he finds a seemingly abandoned mansion. Upon entering, Geralt meets Nivellen appears, a man cursed to live like a monster.

As Nivellen tells his tale to Geralt the reader finds that Nivellen was cursed because after robbing the temple of the Lionhead Spider, one of the many religions of the inhabitants of the Continent, he and his group sexually assault a priestess. That priestess takes her own life cursing Nivellen to live in a skin of a monster for the rest of his life.

As mentioned before, the story and the pacing are very similar both in the book and in Netflix's rendition of it. The distinction resides in Geralt's reaction, which is very different from the book where the witcher doesn't seem particularly affected by the crime itself, being even willing to help Nivellen break the curse. Geralt goes further and seems to pity Nivellen saying 'You had some bad luck' (Sapkowski, 2019, p.58). In the book, Geralt appears to be unbothered by the acts of Nivellen and not once negatively comments on it or condemns the actions.

On the other hand, in the Netflix TV show, Geralt not only finds the true reason for Nivellen's curse much later but has a stronger position about it. At the end of the episode,

after the curse is broken, Nivellen asks Geralt to show him some mercy and put an end to his life. Geralt refuses telling Nivellen he can do that himself if he wishes to, visibly distressed by the information and not wanting to aid the man who received a well-deserved punishment (Surjik & Hissrich,, 2021).

Geralt's position in the TV show is evidently disparate from that of the book. Even if the character is morally grey, dismissing a gruesome action of sexual assault and empathize with the offender would not be acceptable, for the audience. It is impossible to remove a piece of art from its context, and a TV show is no exception (Lisee, 2020). Even if movements such as #MeToo might have not directly influenced the decisions of Netflix's *The Witcher* creator, it certainly changed the social context and public opinion on such matters (Lisee, 2020). Therefore, maintaining Geralt's original reaction to the revelation might would not have passed unnoticed and would generate a sense of dislike for the main character.

This example illustrates how political and moral views impact an adaptation. Adjustments are necessary for the story to fit in the contemporary context, reflecting not only the current moral values of society but also its interpretation from the creators of the adaptation.

## CHAPTER II – THE WORLD OF FOLKLORE

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## **2 World of Folklore**

### **2.1 Folklore and Mythology: Conceptualization and Definition of Terms**

Understanding the cultural relevance and historical setting of storylines like those found in *The Witcher* and other folklore-based works requires being able to distinguish between folklore and myth.

Folklore includes the habits, beliefs, and tales passed down through the generations within a particular cultural group (Bronner, 2017). It contains various stories, such as myths, folklore, and folktales. In contrast, myths are a type of folklore that frequently refers to supernatural creatures, gods, and cosmological explanations. They are commonly regarded as historical or religious realities and serve as sacred or pillar stories for a particular culture (Baumgartner et al., 1974). By making the distinction, we may better understand how folklore and myths help to create the fantasy world of *The Witcher* by drawing on cultural traditions and reflecting the ideals and beliefs of the societies they represent.

#### **2.1.1 Folklore: The Reflection of Culture**

Folklore is a mirror of culture. Its components such as myths, folktales, legends, folksongs, proverbs, riddles, games, dances, youth slang, and gestures, among others, provide crucial resources to learn about and understand culture. Folklore is a tool to understand the human condition and the cultural world one lives in (Dundes, 2007; Bronner, 2017).

According to Alan Dundes (2007), the modern folklorist understands as folk any group of people that share at least one common link such as religion, occupation, ethnicity, geographical location, and so on. The study of folklore brings forth the possibility of learning about culture “from the inside out”. In this perspective, folklore is a powerful tool to understand one’s culture and other cultures they are not part of, in which traditions and customs form the folklore.

Folklore, however, is an everchanging object because it belongs to the oral tradition, therefore its study is never truly complete, contrary to what occurs with products of written tradition, such as Shakespeare's play or a classic novel. It is argued that the oral

tradition is coming back through mass media, as content is transmitted to spoken language in TV, cinema, music (Dundes, 2007).

The rise of the internet brought the question of tradition and its place in culture back to the surface. The internet an accessible, open and more democratized, much like the natural space, providing the grounds and means for folklore exchange, which are more widely available and highly personalized. It distinguishes itself from other mass media because it allows live connection and interaction between those involved (Bronner, 2017).

These means of disseminating information and entertainment replaced the time spent telling old tales in the family (Bahr, 1993). However, with adaptations such as the case study *The Witcher*, one can argue that this time was given back in a different form, by retelling the myths and folktales that have been forgotten for a while.

“Folklore provides socially sanctioned forms of behaviour in which a person may do what cannot be done in “real life” (Dundes, 2007, p.59). As a mirror, folklore provides a reflection of the folk’s values, as well as a way out of them, for example, as in folktale, where the hero is advised against a certain course of action, but follows it anyway, while maintaining their happy ending and not facing any serious consequences (Dundes, 2007). Each generation will reinterpret the folklore through a different lens, even modifying the text depending on the needs that arise from the context. Nevertheless, what changes the most is usually the interpretation, which depends on the audience and its characteristics.

Folklore and its cultural objects bring out two sides of the same coin: on one side lies the need to protect it for it is considered a gift from the past, a treasure worth preserving, and on the other, it is equated with the “illiterate in a literate society” (Dundes, 2007), meaning that while it a valuable artifact is also regarded as belonging to the uneducated members of society, therefore whatever they created could only be seen as unrefined.

Most of all, to understand folklore is necessary to understand tradition. At the same time, tradition can be used to enforce submission as it is, more often than not, used to carefully select and instigate certain behaviors and eliminate the undesirable ones, turning tradition into a tool to manipulate into submission (Bronner, 2017).

Edward Said’s (1979) work *Orientalism* is a great example of how entire societies used the selection of cultural aspects and traditions, to manipulate and justify their actions

against others. Orientalism, Said (1979) explains, is a form of domination and oppression exerted by the West – European great powers and the United States of America – on the East, the Orient – Said refers especially to the Middle East but also the Far East. The author argues that Western Orientalist scholars, writers, and artists often manipulate and distort Eastern traditions to justify the imperialist policies in the Middle East, selectively highlighting elements of Eastern culture, history, and religion that fit their preconceived notions or stereotypes of the Orient.

This manipulation reinforced Western superiority and justified Western domination over the East. The portrayals of Arabs and Islam, for instance, by the "area specialists" are predictably and consistently negative since they are a result of the transmission of prejudice. These negative perceptions are supported by academic studies, which in truth, are derogatory caricatures of Arab and Islamic culture (Said, 1979).

Additionally, the long record of Western romanticization of fabricated images of Asia and the Middle East has functioned as an implicit defense of Europe and America's colonial and imperial aspirations. Said (1979) also criticized the habit of Arab elites who assimilated the notions of Arabic culture held by American and British orientalists.

These imagined constructs through which knowledge about the Orient was generated created a safe ground for the West to manipulate public opinion, Western and Eastern alike, as it created a false image based on the cultural and traditional aspects that Europeans and North Americans chose to portray (Said, 1979).

The work behind the field of what Said (1979) calls Orientalism goes against the purpose of studying folklore and what should be the focus of Cultural studies: to find similarities between distinct cultural groups and create a sort of unity in those parallels (Dundes, 2007). Notwithstanding, as explained above, the rise of ethnocentrism remains a possibility, disguised as cultural and heritage preservation (Dundes, 2007) and as a justification for imperialist practices and policies.

### **2.1.2 Myths: Moral Guidelines of Culture**

From the Greek word *mythos*, "myth" means "word", but not just any word – it means the word that gives veracity to a statement, it certifies its truth and authenticity (Baumgartner et al., 1974). Myth is the word that represents the actual state of things, facts, something that truly happened. It goes beyond a historical account of events,

carrying affirmative and creative elements. Mythology in turn derives from the Greek term *mythologia* (*mythous legein* which means “to tell myths”) (Baumgartner et al., 1974).

The world of myth is the world of gods, or more accurately, the stories of gods’ deeds, journeys, and adventures. This world is assumed as real without needing or providing proof, as myth itself does not enclose the need for evidence or questions, it simply affirms (Baumgartner et al., 1974; Bahr, 1993).

The myths usually intertwine the gods’ deeds and those of men, as the divine works are the framework and the essence that make up the human world (Bahr, 1993). This establishes myths as a guideline for human action or a cautionary tale, in some cases. Societal rules and values of a given cultural group will be passed down to its future generations in the shape of myths.

Most mythologies follow archetypes for the creation of myths. The latter can be broadly categorized as theogonic myths, cosmogonic myths, and anthropogonic myths (Baumgartner et al., 1974), as shown on Table 1. The repetition of certain themes and archetypes in different mythologies around the world, suggests a unity in the history of humanity (Campbell, 1959). Stories about a wanton demon, such as Lilith, who preys on men and children that span through diverse cultural groups and times are but one example out of many of the shared archetypes in myths (Smith, 2008).

These archetypes that are shared between cultures in the myths are also shared in popular culture products. Myths provide structure and content for literature and other mass media, such as TV, as has been mentioned concerning the case study of this dissertation. Myth possesses the duality of working on its own as a story with societal functions such as teaching generations the long-standing values of a given group, while also providing inspiration and models for popular culture and mass media products for more generalized consumption (Workman, 1981).

In the case study of *The Witcher*, myth and folklore are crucial elements in the development of the story and the universe. The myths serve as a backdrop for the characters' motivations and behaviors. By discerning the myths from the broader folklore, one can comprehend how these elements serve as an influence on the characters' beliefs, behaviors, and plot in general. The distinction between myth and folklore in *The Witcher* offers an opportunity to investigate the complex relationships between history, belief systems, and the creation of an enthralling fantasy world.

As is the case of Episode 1, Season 1 of *The Witcher* “The End’s Beginning” (2019), based on the short story “The Lesser Evil” (2019) by Andrzej Sapkowski, where folklore, fairytales, and myths, come together to create a new story in this magical universe. “The End’s Beginning” (2019) introduces the audience to the main characters of the show Geralt and Ciri in different timelines.

Geralt of Rivia is introduced as a monster slayer, killing a kikimora – one of many mythical creatures mentioned in the show – and trying to sell it in a nearby town. Upon arrival, Geralt is directed to the town mage Stregobor, a master of illusion, who reveals he wants Geralt to kill Renfri, as she seeks revenge from the mage and intends to murder him. To justify this request, Stregobor explains that women born on or around the day of the solar eclipse had internal mutations - known as the Curse of the Black Sun. This was seen as evidence for the mage-prophet Eltibald's prophecy that the sixty women born at that time would herald Lilit's return and consequently, the extinction of humanity. Stregobor and other sorcerers sought out and killed or imprisoned these women to stop it.

Stregobor admits that he attempted to assassinate Renfri, one of the last women and a princess born during the peak of the eclipse, to achieve this. She managed to escape his assassin, though, and has been on the quest to take Stregobor’s life ever since. Her mutations have made her resistant to his power. Therefore, Stregobor attempts to hire Geralt to kill her to protect himself from retaliation and to prevent the world from the prophecy, but Geralt rejects the offer, delivering the iconic quote “Evil is evil, Stregobor, (...) Lesser, greater, middling, it’s all the same.” (Hissrich & Sakharov, 2020, 00:18:17; Sapkowski, 2019, p. 90).

Renfri hunts down Geralt outside of Blaviken and demands to know where Stregobor is so she may kill him, telling Geralt that the assassin he sent after her sexually assaulted her. If he does not slay Stregobor, she threatens to butcher her way through Blaviken, but he is unfazed. Renfri questions Geralt about why he would not kill people if they came after him like they had tried to kill her. Geralt responds because doing so would turn him into the monster they claim he is.

Renfri is a key character as she is the one who reveals that Ciri is Geralt's destiny and that she will always be with him as she lies in his arms before passing away from blood loss. Stregobor traverses the aftermath of Geralt's fight with Renfri's men while it is still bloody. He comes to Renfri's body and declares he wants to perform an autopsy on her.

When Geralt protests vehemently, Stregobor argues that she must be studied since her mutation allows her to control others around her, as she demonstrated by subjugating her company of soldiers. Stregobor knows that Geralt is similarly affected when he is unmoved, so rather than paying him for the murder, Stregobor draws attention to the bodies that Geralt left behind, making the population angrily chase out the witcher.

In this episode, the fairytale Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs by The Brothers Grimm, weaved with the myth of Lilith, the first wife of Adam and mother of all demons create an interesting and pivotal moment for the TV Show plot.

In the fairytale named Little Snow White, the Queen asks for a child "as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window-frame" (Grimm & Grimm, 2016). Soon the Queen has that child in her arms and names her Snow White. However, the Queen dies, and the King takes a new wife who is not so fond of Snow White and envies her for her beauty. The new Queen asks the magical mirror "Looking-glass, Looking-glass, on the wall, Who in this land is the fairest of all?" (Grimm & Grimm, 2016) and it tells her it is Snow White. Furious with the discovery that she is no longer the most beautiful woman, the Queen asks a huntsman to kill Snow White, but he pities her and lets her escape. In the woods, Snow White seeks refuge with seven dwarves who take care of her. Meanwhile, the Queen, believing Snow White is dead asks the mirror who's the fairest of them all, but it still replies that Snow White is the most beautiful.

The Queen ensues in several attempts to kill Snow White herself, one of them with a poisoned apple, which leaves Snow White in a sort of coma. Luckily a prince comes by the dwarves' house and takes Snow White to his castle, where a servant seats her body up and she coughs the piece of poisoned apple that was keeping her asleep (Grimm & Grimm, 2016).

Although with some distinctions, the similarities between Renfri's story and that of Snow White are striking. Renfri's stepmother Aridea orders Renfri's death, after learning from Nehalena's Mirror that Renfri would kill her and others in the future (Sapkowski, 2019). In *The Witcher* TV Show, the audience learns that Renfri is allegedly cursed by the Black Sun, making her an evil monster as it is prophesized that the women cursed will bring back Lilith and end humanity. The man hired by the Queen rapes Renfri and robs her, but she manages to kill him and escape afterward. Cast out on the street alone and poor, Renfri resorts to crime and creates a name for herself in that world. Soon she finds a band of gnomes from Mahakam and continues to rob merchants, now with her gang.

In the book “The Last Wish” (2019), readers get more details about Renfri’s journey which further proves her story’s mirroring Snow White’s. Renfri was also poisoned with an “apple seasoned with nightshade” (Sapkowski, 2019, p. 100) and saved by “one of the seven gnomes” (Sapkowski, 2019, p. 100). The audience of *The Witcher* TV show as well as readers of *The Witcher* Saga books by Sapkowski are also introduced to Lilith, a demon capable of destroying humanity and prophesized to do so, by Etibald, a mage (Sapkowski, 2019, p. 100).

Although a great deal of this lore is original to Sapkowski’s world, the myth of Lilith is widespread through multiple religions. In Judeo-Christian mythology and literature, Lilith is the first woman, created at the same time as Adam and from the earth just as he was, the first man. Created equally to Adam, Lilith refused to submit to his will and left Eden to live alone, giving way for the creation of Eve. Eve was created from Adam’s rib making for a much subservient woman. This figure of the defiant first woman is also found in the Sumerian and Babylonian creation myths (Harris, 1986).

Lilith appears as a demon seducer who is sexually promiscuous, sometimes associated with the succubus, remaining unable to achieve a pregnancy in some cases. Other instances refer to Lilith as the mother of demons - offspring with men seduced in their dreams to copulate and produce more demons. Lilith is also referred to as a baby stealer who will prey on newborn children (Smith, 2008).

The intertwined histories of Snow White's story and the Lilith myth, as seen in the story of Renfri, provide an engrossing study of the series' thematic depth and narrative complexity in the first chapter of *The Witcher* books. Renfri's tale expertly blends aspects of classic fairy tales and mythological archetypes, evoking the well-known Snow-White theme of a princess doomed by envy and an evil stepmother. The distinction between good and evil is blurred in *The Witcher*, which adapts this cliché into a darker, morally ambiguous narrative. Renfri's tragic destiny, influenced by both outside events and her own decisions, represents the show's main concept that characters are built by a web of causes and consequences, where fate is rarely straightforward.

Similar to the Snow-White fairytale, Renfri's tale has additional levels of symbolism and allegory because of the Lilith myth. Renfri's rebellion against fate and her need for agency resonate with Lilith, who is frequently portrayed as a strong and rebellious figure in myth. Lilith's resistance to patriarchal restrictions is mirrored in Renfri's rejection of her prescribed role of femininity, often reinforced by fairy tales such as Snow White (Budidarma et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Renfri's character has a thematic basis thanks to the Lilith myth's connotations with darkness, seduction, and feminine strength; her sad path represents the struggle for independence and the results of turning to darkness to fight it. The coming together of these two plot lines demonstrates how *The Witcher* interacts with well-known myths and stories, giving them new interpretations and moral nuances that appeal to modern viewers.

Although slightly disparate from the original fairytale and myth which transpire in the creation of Renfri's story and character arc, the adaptation of both into the brutal world of *The Witcher* creates a fantastic character that opposes the ideal of femininity that fairytales convey, drawing nearer to the figure of the eminent demoness Lilith, that stands in this adaptation as much as an omen as in the original myths. Additionally, Renfri stands as a pivotal figure that will impact Geralt immensely as this event is what earns Geralt the moniker "Butcher of Blaviken", leaving him with a weighted conscience. In the show, Renfri is also the first character to mention Ciri and how she is Geralt's destiny, the main theme of the series (Hissrich & Sakharov, 2020).

Netflix's series underscores the significance of distinguishing these two suppliers of content, as this episode sets the tone for the exploration of myths and folklore within the world of *The Witcher*. Weaving myth and folklore, it invites its audience to explore a variety of rich cultural backgrounds that create the intricate web of the plot. The distinction between these two types of storytelling brings a deeper understanding of the series' thematic depth and capacity to draw on the cultural history of diverse cultural groups.

The interplay between these elements enriches the narrative and offers a mirror to the real world. Thus, it serves as a reminder of the timeless appeal of folklore and myth, which can captivate and resonate with audiences across time and place.

## **2.2 Mythological Archetypes in *The Witcher***

### **2.2.1 The Hero Archetype**

Myths can be categorized according to its themes and subjects. Furthermore, mythological figures can be sorted into categories according to their characteristics. Once these general models are created, they serve as a base for the creation of fictional stories and are adapted to mass media products, such as the Hero and the Great Mother

archetypes, which can be found in the object for the case study of this thesis – Netflix’s *The Witcher*.

The Hero archetype is a repeating motif in mythology and literature that denotes a figure who sets out on a trip or mission, encounters several difficulties and setbacks, and finally accomplishes a significant milestone (Raglan, 1965).

The Hero's Journey is a narrative form that frequently has three main stages, popularized by Joseph Campbell (1949) in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* – birth, initiation, and return. The Hero is born in a sacred, miraculous, or other uncommon way, more often than not, related to a god. After being abandoned in infancy, the Hero reaches puberty and receives a sign that tells him he is special and has a destiny to fulfill. The Hero embarks on a quest that involves tests, slaying monsters, and difficult battles, which may result in the Heroic death of this character or his return to his birthplace (Garry, 2017). The Hero can also be characterized by having a dark side that remains hidden from the story's other characters but is confided to the audience of the story being told. This aspect will propel the adventure to expiate the Hero's sins (Bauzá, 2007).

However, childhood is often omitted from the tale, as birth is usually mentioned and is crucial to characterize the Hero, but the story only picks up again once the Hero has left boyhood behind. Nathalie M. Underberg (2005) argues that the Hero's story represents the human rituals of passage – birth, adulthood, and death. These are the most important and transformative moments in a person's life since these are the pivotal events that shape an individual's character and destiny. However, some of the Hero narratives, whether myth or truth, may not have fit into this category perfectly, and were shaped and adapted into something that fits the Hero Archetype.

Overall, cultural, historical, and narrative elements create Hero archetypes and their stories, making them flexible and adaptive. The emphasis or exclusion of particular life periods may differ from one Hero narrative to the next, but the fundamental Hero's journey framework is a powerful and enduring storytelling pattern. As it is, some of the characters' arches of *The Witcher* fit this archetype, even though they are not seen as obvious Heroes or Heroines at all.

Geralt of Rivia, the main character of *The Witcher* fits this pattern, even though he is presented as a character of ambiguous morality. His birth is mysterious as in the 2019 TV show, his father is unknown. His mother, a mage sorceress called Visena, desperate and unable to raise Geralt on her own after his father's death, abandons him in Kaer Morhen.

At Kaer Morhen boys were turned into witchers through the Trial of Grasses – a physically painful process that killed many of the boys who went through it. This was the first obstacle in Geralt’s journey, which he survived, becoming the famous White Wolf, a well-known witcher for his skill in killing monsters. His journey is full of obstacles and quests as he slays monsters for a living.

However, he runs into his destiny as Cirilla of Cintra is promised to him, while she’s still in Pavetta’s womb, as a gift from the Law of Surprise. A skeptic, Geralt dismisses this event, even though Mousesack warns him not to run away from his Destiny, as it may have terrible consequences.

Geralt lives his life as if nothing has happened and the years elope. Sooner rather than later, Geralt is forced to return to Cintra as the imperial forces of Nilfgaard invade it. At this moment, Geralt’s true quest will begin as he’ll have to fight dangerous forces to protect his child, Ciri.

The mysterious circumstances of Geralt of Rivia's birth are woven into the fabric of his life, creating the foundation for his Hero's journey. As a witcher, Geralt's very existence is a challenge, in a world that alternates between fearing and relying on his unique skills to combat the supernatural. His experiences with horrific monsters and moral impasses challenge his willpower and make him wonder where the lines between good and evil should be drawn.

The turning point in Geralt's voyage occurs when he accepts his fate as Ciri's protector, a position that not only deepens his Heroism but also establishes his reputation as a defender of the defenseless.

The journey has also a spiritual aspect to it, as the hero will have an introspective experience during the quest, that will allow them to know themselves on a deeper level and discover new facets of their personality. Geralt, a witcher who has no feelings, the rumors have it, throughout the adventure, finds a true romantic connection with Yennefer and becomes a fatherly figure for Ciri. Both of these instances, the audience is told, were very unlikely not only for a witcher but also for a sorceress like Yennifer.

Through his quest for self-discovery, fighting monsters, and facing moral dilemmas, Geralt develops into a more sympathetic and Heroic character, personifying the Hero archetype. His story is a prime example of how the Hero archetype can be (and has been) adapted and reimagined in modern fantasy literature.

In the Netflix adaptation of *The Witcher*, Geralt's destiny serves as a major plot line for the development of the story. This element is an important link between Geralt and the Hero archetype, as outlined by Raglan (2013).

Geralt's character is intricately connected to the concept of destiny. He stands out as a character with a well-defined role to play in his world. In the classical conception of the Hero, Geralt is confronted with dark forces and a sense of duty to protect the world from supernatural threats. However, his destiny is something far greater than fighting monsters for coin.

The belief that the world is governed by invisible and inevitable laws is a recurrent theme in myths and folklore around the world. In some cultures (Greek, Indian, Irish), fate or destiny is personified in magical figures, usually feminine, who weave, cut, and wash the fabric of life, or as a male death figure (Hebrew folktale) (Garry, 2007).

In *The Witcher*, the theme of fate and destiny is the thread that binds the stories of Geralt, Ciri, and Yennefer. Although there isn't a character that singlehandedly represents Fate, the destinies of the main characters are known, and this personification of fate appears through supporting characters and their actions. These revelations of what Geralt's future reserves for him and his companions are unveiled by Renfri when she tells Geralt "The girl in the woods will be with you always. She's your destiny." (Hissrich & Sakharov, 2019, 00:54:28), the Law of Surprise and Mousesack's warning about fighting destiny (Garcia & Hissrich, 2019, 00:54:38), or when Yennefer (and so the audience) finds out about Geralt's last wish from the djinn which saved Yennefer and ends up binding their fates together (Brändström & Hissrich, 00:51:36, 2019b).

As Geralt sets out on his quest, he encounters plenty of obstacles that both physically and morally test him. He faces terrifying creatures, moves through delicate political terrain, and struggles with the nuances of right and evil. These encounters give him a complex personality and demonstrate how he develops into a hero.

Ultimately, Geralt's journey connects with destiny through his relationship with Ciri and Yennefer, building a family. Geralt's heroic qualities are highlighted by taking on the role of her guardian and protector, which also represents fulfillment for his character. This position as Ciri's protector marks a turning point in his journey, highlighting how the hero archetype is firmly ingrained in the character of Geralt of Rivia in the television series *The Witcher*.

### 2.2.2 Great Mother Archetype

Even though (male) Heroes take a lot of the leading roles in mythology, the feminine side also has a key presence in the development of culture and the creation of lore (Larrington, 1992). Eric Neumann (2015), a Swiss psychologist, defines this as the “Great Mother” archetype, a concept rooted in Jungian psychology and mythology. This figure represents the primordial, universal image of the nurturing and protective mother figure found in the collective unconscious of humanity, and as Neumann (2015) sees it, is of great importance both in the psychological and mythological spheres of the human experience.

"The woman is the natural nourishing principle and hence mistress of everything that implies nourishment." (Neumann, 2015, p.283). The Great Mother is a symbol of fertility, creation, and the cyclical nature of life. It symbolizes the primary source of life, fertility, motherhood, and the wellspring of creative feminine energy. She represents the source of nourishment and sustenance, both physically and emotionally. This archetype is often linked to the Earth and nature. She symbolizes the fecundity and cycles of the natural world, including the seasons, agriculture, and harvest (Neumann, 2015).

However, it can also evoke fear and havoc. The Great Mother brings death and hardship such is her power. She can be destructive and vengeful reflecting the duality of nature itself. "For this woman who generates life and all living things on earth is the same who takes them back into herself, who pursues her victims and captures them with snare and net." (Neumann, 2015, p. 149).

While the Great Mother archetype shares common elements across cultures, Neumann (2015) also recognizes that it takes on diverse forms and characteristics in different societies and mythologies. These variations highlight the adaptability and versatility of the archetype. This diversity is evident in feminine mythological figures across cultures such as Gaia - Greek Goddess, the Earth itself (Larrington, 1992) -, Mut - Egyptian Goddess, mother of all things (Garry, 2017) -, Rosmerta - Celtic Goddess, The Great Provider, (Larrington, 1992). These characteristics illustrate the complexity and depth of the Great Mother archetype, which plays a central role in understanding the psychological, mythological, and cultural significance of the maternal figure in human experience (Larrington, 1992).

In *The Witcher*, this archetype is found in several characters such as Calanthe - Ciri's grandmother and Queen of Cintra -, Yennefer, Tissaia - Aretuza's leading sorceress and motherly figure to Yennefer -, Francesca - the Elven Queen - and Eithné - Scoia'tae's

Queen of the dryads and leader of Brokilon. All of these characters present the duality of the Great Mother archetype - they are powerful nurturing figures with a nurturing side, capable of protecting and leading their people, as well as the power to destroy whatever stands in their way.

Yennefer of Vengerberg, one of the main characters in Andrzej Sapkowski's and Netflix's *The Witcher* series, can be examined through the lens of the Great Mother archetype. In mythology, psychology, and literature, the Great Mother archetype is a recurrent and universal metaphor that stands for the nourishing, vitalizing, and transforming qualities of the feminine, as seen before (Neumann, 2015).

Yennefer is one of the characters who presents the traits above. Her arch is a very linear one, contrary to the narrative style used in season 1 of *The Witcher*. In the episode Four Marks (Klein & Hissrich, (2019) Yennefer is presented to the audience as a hunched-back peasant, despised by her village and family due to her physical disabilities. As the episode progresses, Yennefer is bought by Tissaia de Vries, a mage who sees the magical potential in Yennefer. The latter is taken to Aretuza, a school for mages and sorcerers, ruled by the Brotherhood of Sorcerers, where she will learn to wield Chaos (as magic is referred to in the series).

It is not an easy journey and Yennefer has to sacrifice a lot, including her fertility and ability to procreate, to achieve her goal: become the advisor to the king of Aerdin.

The inability to have children of her own may seem like a contradiction to the Great Mother archetype, and it may be so; however, it's important to note that Yennefer is not a one-dimensional representation of the Great Mother archetype. Her character is layered and nuanced, and she has traits that go beyond this archetype (Worrow, 2022).

Nonetheless, elements of the Great Mother can be seen in her character, particularly in her nurturing and transformative qualities, as well as her connection to the natural world and her role in the lives of those she cares for, all of which are clear once she meets Ciri for whom she becomes a protector, a teacher, and a motherly figure.

As it was demonstrated, *The Witcher* universe not only draws from specific myths and folklore, but it uses classic archetypes such as the Hero and the Great Mother to flesh out its characters.

Geralt of Rivia is widely recognized as a character who operates within a complex and challenging world, often blurring the lines between right and wrong. Nevertheless, he embodies the quintessential qualities of a hero. His quest is characterized not only by his

physical power and fighting skills but also by his moral compass, which develops as the story unfolds and guides him in a world full of ethical dilemmas.

On the other hand, Yennefer of Vengerberg is a complex character who challenges the stereotype of the Great Mother archetype. Despite being infertile, which is typically seen as an obstacle to fulfilling traditional motherhood roles, Yennefer can embody the nurturing and life-giving qualities associated with this archetype: her magical abilities, deep empathy, and her role as a protector and mentor to Ciri demonstrate that the Great Mother archetype goes beyond the limitations of physical motherhood. In this intricate story, Geralt and Yennefer challenge our preconceptions, illustrating that archetypes can manifest in unconventional and thought-provoking ways, adding depth and complexity to their roles in this captivating world.

### **2.3 Myths in Pop Culture**

The themes presented in myths are universal and timeless – the battles between good and evil, love, and heroism – which facilitates the emergence of retellings from time to time. Moreover, myths are flexible – they allow for modifications while maintaining their easily recognizable essence (Woodside, 2009). This flexibility makes myths a great source of inspiration for new material in fiction. Whether it is books, TV shows, or movies, mythology provides solid bases for many stories which can then be adapted to the author's vision for the plot.

Myths' retellings can be used to measure the evolution of values in society since they often carry the moral values of the time in which they were created, by comparing them to previous versions. This way, one can perceive the societal changes through the reimagination of a myth. However, as Julianne Woodside (2009) notes, it is important to understand that even the well-known Greek myths, which are the basis of Classical Mythology, are Roman retellings of the original Greek material. The original material for myths is almost impossible to reach as mythological and folkloric transmission relied heavily on oral transmission. For this reason, the comparisons that can be drawn will be between two versions of a myth, not necessarily between the original one and its retelling.

It is important to keep the aforementioned point in mind when talking about modern retellings of ancient myths to conduct an educated evaluation of both the earlier version and the newer one of a myth. Nonetheless, modern adaptations of myths and folklore are

a form of connecting with cultural heritage and history. Many creators draw inspiration from their cultural background for their work, infusing it with authenticity and relatability (Vries, 2014).

As seen in this thesis, mythology supplies archetypes for both themes and characters, which can be used in popular culture to shape complex and dynamic fictional characters that still resonate with the audience (Woodside, 2009).

Mythological stories often feature fantastical creatures and places, epic battles, and great journeys, which provide solid bases for artists and creators creating their fictional worlds. The diverse content that myths present, prompts the creation of incredible new perspectives on well-known narratives.

Products that use myths and folklore as its foundation (retellings) also stimulate the audience to explore those older texts, after engaging with the products they consumed. Understanding that the author made changes, the audience seeks to learn and become aware of the differences (Leighton, 2014). The awareness of original content is crucial for the case study of this thesis. *The Witcher* universe is comprised of books, videogames, Polish TV show and films (less popular), and the 2019 Netflix adaptation, all of which heavily rely on mythology and folklore to create its universe, as has been mentioned throughout this paper and will be further explored in later chapters.

The versatility of myth and folklore makes it appealing as content and inspiration for creating pieces of fiction. Nonetheless, some aspects, namely the social and moral values it transmits, require revision to resonate with contemporary audiences.

Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* is a noteworthy example as it combines multiple sources of folklore and mythology to create a portrait of modern-day America. In *American Gods*, the Old Gods (from Norse, Egyptian, Slavic, and Irish folklore and mythology) are at war with the New Gods – which represent things people worship today such as Media and Technology – as the former are losing believers and therefore their power (Stepanek, 2008).

Neil Gaiman uses mythology in a very accurate manner, as the original myths relating to the Old Gods remain in the narrative, making the book and Starz's adaptation a very educational representation of said myths. The real reflexive aspect of *American Gods* lies in its juxtaposition between what used to be considered worth worshiping, and what it is now, creating a social critique for capitalism/consumerism and entertainment, which is in itself entertaining and easily consumed (Stepanek, 2008). The characters of the Old Gods are based on mythological figures from different cultural settings, which are cleverly used

to represent the plethora of ethnicities that come together to form what the United States is today: a cultural “melting pot” (Vries, 2014). Therefore, *American Gods* is a prime example of the incredible source that mythology and folklore can be for contemporary popular culture products, but it is far from being the only one.

Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* adapts Greek mythology to create an alternative to the contemporary setting, following a group of teenage demigods; this universe is comprised of books that were later adapted to the big screen (Leighton, 2014). Another example is *Lucifer* - a television drama series based on the character Lucifer Samael Morningstar of *The Sandman* DC Comics by Neil Gaiman, Sam Kieth, and Mike Dringenber (Babu, 2020). In both of the cases, mythology and folklore set the base for the rise of fictional contemporary alternative worlds and serve as a backdrop for social criticism.

In Riordan’s world, there is a utopian place where disabled children (who are demigods) are safe to be themselves while realizing that their disabilities are a super-power - a criticism of all the obstacles that people with disabilities face in a still very ableist world (Rabbi, 2016).

In *Lucifer*, the main character, Lucifer himself, is shown as a “punisher and not the embodiment of evil” (Babu, 2020, p. 169), as he joins the LAPD and helps Detective Chloe Decker (Babu, 2020), showing Lucifer’s righteous moral compass, even if a bit conservative.

All of the above examples demonstrate how mythology and folklore can inspire modern retellings and how those retellings can adapt the original content to something appealing to a wider audience. Furthermore, it is relevant to highlight a specific wave in mythological retellings: the feminist revisionist mythmaking movement, which is going to be developed further in the next subtopic.

### **2.3.1 Retelling and Revising Myths in a Time of Feminism**

In myths and folklore, as in society (historically and contemporarily), feminine-coded characters have been marginalized, mere support or spectators of the action developing in these narratives (Bläuer, 2021). Therefore, a need for revision of these tales, in an era where feminism still grows, arose. In the feminist revisionist mythmaking movement, female authors take it upon themselves to rewrite female side characters of well-

established myths as the narrators of their own story, giving them a new-found agency, proper of the contemporary period (Bläuer, 2021).

This connection with current issues and, simultaneously, with historical events, enables feminist revisionist retellings to criticize the patriarchal society (Chandran, 2013). Far from being a phenomenon of this century, as “This trend has its roots in twentieth-century women’s historical fiction, which featured an intense interest in Ancient Greece and Rome” (Judge, 2023, p. 108), a new wave of products of this genre has been entering the market, responding to the increasing interest in such texts.

Authors that are part of this recent wave in the feminist revisionist movement worth noting (but not exclusively) include Madeline Miller (*Circe* and *Galatea*), Nathalie Hayes (*Stone Blind* and *A Thousand Ships*), Jeniffer Saint (*Ariadne*, *Elektra*, *Atlanta*) and Pat Baker (*The Silence of the Girls*) (Bläuer, 2021).

These retellings create a space for female discourse in which themes such as bodily autonomy, equality (or lack of), sorority, and sexual assault, often use first-person narration to enable proximity between a mythological fictional character and the contemporary audience (Altin, 2020).

*The Witcher* is therefore another prime example of what can be done with mythology and folklore. Andrzej Sapkowski draws from different cultural heritages to create a fantasy narrative where various worlds come together to form one. In this sense, the variety of the origins of myths and folklore used is not only clever but necessary to establish the diversity and differences of the multiple groups that were forced to live together after the Conjunction of the Spheres, the original event that creates the Continent - the place where the narrative takes place.

There are clear variations - which can be inserted into a feminist revisionist perspective - between the original content in the Polish fantasy series of books *The Witcher* and the Netflix show of the same name, which are updates to the moral values of the Continent. It is arguable whether these alterations were for better or worse. In the chapter ‘*Pretty ballads hide bastard truths*’: *Patriarchal Narratives and Female Power in Netflix’s The Witcher* of the book *Gender and Female Villains in 21st Century Fairy Tale Narratives*, the author Kristy Worrow (2022) elaborates on the choices made regarding female characters through a feminist lens. In Netflix’s adaptation of *The Witcher*, there was a clear decision to favor female narratives as the director of the show Lauren Hissrich’s writing team was dominated by women. Nonetheless, the adaptation was criticized for its employment of female nudity and the objectification of the female body (Worrow, 2022).

In an attempt to rewrite what can be considered a misogynist fantasy narrative, Lauren Hissrich constructed a narrative that delivers feminism but arguably lacks intersectionality. Although feminine characters are empowered and powerful, such as Yennefer, her character arch is criticized for being ableist. Yennefer goes through a magical procedure to remove what is considered her physical deformities and become a powerful mage and an advisor to the king of Aedirn, turning her into ‘the image of the classical feminine beauty’ (Worrow, 2022, p. 66) while sacrificing her ability to have children in the process. This storyline can be considered ableist for insinuating that physical beauty is indispensable for a feminine character to be empowered and owner of her agency (Worrow, 2022). Besides, it also implies that being beautiful and being able to be a mother are conflicting characteristics. Nevertheless, this is her informed choice, despite being discouraged by her mentor Tissaia de Vries, enforcing at least her agency over her own body. It is rather disappointing then, that Yennefer’s arch heavily relies upon her to pursue the reversal of her sterilization (Worrow, 2022).

Lauren Hissrich and her team have made several alterations and adjustments to the source material which have been acclaimed and criticized (Click & Scott, 2017). However, it’s important to keep in mind that Netflix’s adaptation is a part, an entry point of the transmedia storytelling of *The Witcher* world, which means it involves adapting content while also creating and crafting alternatives to the original narrative. The changes made have the goal of captivating audiences that are familiar with the content, giving them something new about a world they already know; but also, to captivate new fans who will be getting into this fantasy world and story for the first time. For this reason, changes to the source material are often needed and are an intrinsic part of transmedia adaptations (Click & Scott, 2017).

In short, there is no denying that the resurfacing of modern interpretations of mythology and folklore has had a profound impact on popular culture. These retellings not only provide classic tales with a fresh perspective, but they also represent contemporary ideals and issues. The ability of storytelling to subvert conventional narratives and elevate underrepresented voices is best demonstrated by the feminist revisionist mythmaking movement. These stories open the realm of legends to scrutiny and reinvention, resulting in cultural products that speak to a broad and changing audience (Burillo et al., 2018).

The transmedia adaption of *The Witcher* available on Netflix stands out as an illustration of the influence these retellings have had. It bridges the gap between ancient stories and contemporary dilemmas while enthralling spectators with its medieval-set fantasy

storyline. *The Witcher* exemplifies how a creative and analytical approach to mythological retelling may go beyond the boundaries of its original material, igniting fresh debates and encouraging a broad audience to explore the vast world of myth and legend.

In this era of reimagined myths, these adaptations do more than just provide entertainment value; they also act as cultural touchstones, connecting audiences to the timeless yet ever-changing human experience (Gaiman, 1999).

## **CHAPTER III – CASE STUDY: THE WITCHER SERIES**

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### 3 The Witcher Universe

The way people consume content has evolved, as technology and new storytelling methods emerge. Nowadays, it is increasingly important for publishers to assess if a literature piece has the potential to be adapted into other forms of media. This type of entertainment is becoming the most popular as it introduces new segments into the previously existing audience (Schmidt, 2022).

For this reason, it is no surprise that *The Witcher* universe continuously grows and enlarges. The original work *The Witcher* is a series of books about the adventures of Geralt of Rivia, a witcher who slays monsters for money, in a cruel fantasy world created by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, in 1986. The saga includes short stories - "The Last Wish" and "Sword of Destiny" - and full-length novels - "Blood of Elves," "Time of Contempt," "Baptism of Fire," "The Tower of Swallows," and "Lady of the Lake" (Gawronski & Bajorek, 2020).

Due to the success of books, its content was eventually adapted into a film and later into a TV series, in 2001, directed by Marek Brodzki. However, the installments were poorly received and criticized for swaying too far from the source material (Gawronski & Bajorek, 2020).

The true turning point for Sapkowski's fantasy narrative came in 2007, when CD Projekt RED, a Polish game development studio, bought the rights to *The Witcher* from the author and adapted the story and characters into an extremely successful video game series.

The games follow Geralt of Rivia, featuring an open-world format with deep narrative choices. The series includes "The Witcher," "The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings," and "The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt," with the last installment being particularly acclaimed for its storytelling and world-building. CD Projekt RED has reassured fans of *The Witcher* and confirmed a new trilogy of games in this world, without giving an expected release date (Loveridge & West, 2023).

Another crucial event for the expansion of this world took place in 2019, when Netflix's adaptation of *The Witcher* saga premiered, renewing interest worldwide in the Polish fantasy saga. Initially, the endeavor was a massive success; however, after three seasons and a replaced main actor, Netflix's *The Witcher* has faced its fair share of controversy and criticism, which will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this dissertation.

Other elements of this universe were added over the years including a rock opera “A Road with No Return,” a board game “The Witcher: Old World”, an animated movie “The Nightmare of the Wolf” and a spin-off of the Netflix adaptation “Blood Origin” both by Netflix and another pc card-game, also developed by CDProjekt RED, very popular among fans of *The Witcher*, “Gwent” (Evallyo, 2021).

The 2019 Netflix adaptation is a part of this vast universe, and it will be the main focus of this dissertation; nonetheless, comparisons between Netflix’s TV series and Sapkowski’s book series will be drawn, as it has been throughout this dissertation, to better understand the underlying folklore and mythology - the primary concern of this case study.

### **3.1 Netflix Adaptation**

Starring Henry Cavill as Geralt of Rivia, Anya Chalotra as Yennefer of Vengerber, and Freya Allen as Princess Cirilla of Cintra, the TV show gives a new chance to the Polish fantasy story on screen

Netflix’s adaptation has a darker color pallet that aligns with the ambiance of the CD Projekt Red games, contrasting with the epic fantasy aesthetic of the Polish films. While books are the source material, CD Projekt RED computer games have had a substantial influence on the creation of the TV show. The latter adaptations have introduced *The Witcher* to a broader audience, creating a robust and enduring fantasy franchise (Panait, 2021).

The adaptations of *The Witcher* have always been surrounded by controversy as the author, Andrzej Sapkowski seems to oppose it. When selling the rights of his story for the first game to CD Projekt RED, Sapkowski did not believe in the success of the project, so much so, that he sold the rights without negotiating for the royalties. This turned out to be a huge mistake, as the games were incredibly profitable. In an interview in 2012, Andrzej Spakowski made his point clearly regarding the games:

Maybe it's time to set the matters straight (...) “The Witcher” is a well made video game, its success is well deserved, and the creators deserve all the splendour and honour due. But in no way can it be considered to be an 'alternative version', nor a 'sequel' to the witcher Geralt stories. Because this can only be told by Geralt's creator. A certain Andrzej Sapkowski. (Purchase, 2012)

### 3.2 Methodology

As mentioned throughout this dissertation, a selection of episodes from the available seasons of Netflix's *The Witcher* will be explored in depth for its representation of mythology and folklore, as well as the use of both in the plot.

The creatures and other elements related to mythology and folklore chosen to be part of this case study were selected based on two criteria: 1) to be mentioned in the original *The Witcher* book series and/or Netflix's TV show; and 2) sufficient description which can include but not limited to: physical attributes, and customary actions or habits.

Therefore, the episodes picked were the ones that presented more mentions of said creatures and/or elements that could be researched based on the description given and when applicable, could also be found in the books.

The episodes were revisited several times to collect the most detailed description of the elements that were going to be studied, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the plot and the connection between mythology and folklore with the fantasy story of *The Witcher*.

Once the episodes were selected and the description of the mythological figures and folklore elements was completed, the reading of the books followed as a way to gather more information about the character, the world-building, and the plot. Additionally, these readings served as a way to gather more notes that could be used in completing the descriptions of the elements that were going to be examined.

As soon as the notes were gathered and the selection of episodes for the case study was decided, it was necessary to find sources for the mythology and folklore used. The viewing of the Netflix documentaries *The Witcher - Bestiary Part 1*, *The Witcher - Bestiary Part 2*, and *The Witcher Season 2 Bestiary*, provided confirmation and further details regarding the origins of certain elements chosen previously.

Afterward, *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook* (Garry, 2017) revealed itself as a great tool to do a preliminary identification of figures and elements found in the episodes of *The Witcher* (2019), as well as *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (Larrington, 1992).

With the framework laid out, the next step was to reexamine each episode from *The Witcher* TV show (2019) and/ or the (respective) short story or chapter from Sapkowski's books. For this purpose, each element that is mentioned in each episode was studied separately regarding its mythological and/or folkloric origin, using the adequate bibliography.

Having all the myths and folklore correctly identified for each chapter, it was necessary to make the connection and establish its importance within this episode and in the plot as a whole. For this reason, the analysis of each episode ends with a reflection on how myth and folklore contributed to the worldbuilding and plot progression of *The Witcher*.

After careful deliberation, the following episodes were selected to be explored:

### **3.2.1 Episode Selection**

Season 1, Episode 3 – Betrayal Moon

This episode is based around the story of King Foltest, his sister Adda, and a striga, from the short story collection *The Last Wish* by Andrzej Sapkowski (2019).

A striga is a cursed human being who possesses two arms, two legs, and two hearts as a birth defect, according to folklore. In this case, the Striga is cursed because she's the daughter of Foltest and Adda, making her the princess but also the result of an incestuous relationship. Once again, fairytales and mythology connect to create a fantasy story. This story draws from the *Sleeping Beauty* fairytale to create a background for the characters in it and relies on mythology to provide a beast such as a striga, darkening further the plot. This episode was based on the short story titled *The Witcher* (Sapkowski, 2019; Lopez & Hissrich, 2019)

Season 1, Episode 5 – Bottled Appetites

Three stories unfold at the same time, and all of them bring different mythological creatures. First, in Ciri's journey, she enters the Brokilon Forest where she meets dryads – warrior female creatures.

Geralt and Jakier come across a djinn, a figure from Egyptian mythology. In trouble, the pair finds Yennefer for the first time, whom they ask for help. In the end, the audience is

presented with a well-known mythological race, the elves, that are present in all three plot lines of the episode.

#### Season 1, Episode 6 – Rare Species

In this episode, Geralt's values are put to the test by Borch Three Jackdaws or Villentretenmerth. He's a dragon that can shapeshift into human form. Although dragons are commonly referred to in fantasy books and films, this one stands out for being a sentient being, capable of transforming into a human man (Brändström & Hissrich, 2019b).

#### Season 2, Episodes 2 – Kaer Morhen to 8 – Family

Although the audience only fully understands who Voleth Meir by the end of the season, this figure is hinted at through episodes 2 to 8 (DeMayo & Hissrich, 2021; O'Gorman & Hissrich, 2021; Louise O'Gorman & Hissrich, 2021; Bazalgette & Hissrich, 2021). This development throughout the season brings a worldwide myth – the Baba Yaga. Many adaptations have been made of the 'witch in the woods', named Voleth Meir in the show. It's a relevant character not only for its mythological background but also because it's the reason for Geralt, Ciri, and Yennifer's encounter.

This figure doesn't have a direct match nor the same presence in the books that it has in the show. However, a similar creature called "black annis" (Sapkowski, 2019, p. 124) is mentioned, a creature hiding in the woods in "a little house on a chicken-claw tripod" matching the representation it had in the second part of the second season of *The Witcher* TV show.

### **3.3 Overview of the show – plot summary and characters' origins**

Created by Lauren Hissrich, *The Witcher* series premiered on Netflix in 2019. The TV show follows three different main characters and how their lives become intertwined. Geralt of Rivia, a powerful witcher who hunts and kills monsters for money; Yennefer of Vengerberg, one of the most powerful sorceresses in the Continent; and Princess Cirilla of Cintra, more commonly referred to as Ciri, the Lion Cub of Cintra who holds a dangerous power that could save or destroy the world.

Geralt of Rivia, played by Henry Cavill, is a witcher. Witchers become powerful monster hunters for hire through the Trial of Grasses - a procedure in which young boys ingest alchemical solutions to gain superhuman abilities. It is a dangerous procedure and not many survive, being this one of the reasons why witchers are scarce when the audience first meets Geralt and his brotherhood of witchers. To succeed in this life, the witchers undergo rigorous and demanding training. In the Continent, it is widely believed that witchers are incapable of feeling emotions, but, following Geralt, the audience soon understands how untrue that statement is.

Afterward, the spectators are introduced to Yennefer - a mighty and ambitious sorceress, who hides a traumatic past behind her beautiful façade. Yennefer starts as a poor peasant who has a hunchback, hated by her stepfather who blames it on her elven blood. The same elven blood, for its ties to magic, provides her a way out of her poor household when Tissaia de Vries buys her from her parents and takes her to Aretuza, a school for sorceresses. These sorceresses play a vital role in the political scene, as advisors to kings. The audience will follow Yennefer's transformation, and her complex relationship with power, love, and herself throughout the show.

To complete the triad of the main characters, Princess Cirilla of Cintra, often referred to as Ciri, is introduced in the plot. She is the daughter of Pavetta and Duny, a tragic love story couple who leave their daughter orphan when they lose their lives in a shipwreck. Ciri is raised by her grandmother, the mighty Queen Calanthe, the Lioness of Cintra, who rules Cintra, an unlikely position for a woman, after her husband King Roegner Ebbing passes away before the actions in the TV show. Ciri possesses an unlikely power, as her mother. Later is revealed that her power can save or destroy the world, and it's her destiny to choose one path or another.

All of this action is happening in the Continent, a place where various kingdoms, races, and magical creatures coexist after the Conjunction of the Spheres. The latter shaped the world as a cataclysmic event, which brought together different spheres/dimensions with different magical creatures, monsters, and humans.

Even though initially, the three main characters' storylines appear separately, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Destiny links all of them together. Fate, magic, destiny - these are the keywords for the bonds that are created between Geralt, Ciri, and Yennefer

as they form their unconventional family unit. Both Yennefer and Geralt become parent figures for Ciri, who starts seeing them that way as well.

The decisions of each one of them will inherently impact the others, as they navigate the dangerous environment of the Continent and enemies pile up to capture Ciri.

### **3.4 Case Study**

#### **3.4.1 Episode 3 – Betrayer Moon**

In “Betrayer Moon” (Lopez & Hissrich, 2019), the action mainly takes place in the kingdom of Temeria. Ruled by King Foltest, the Temerian people are struggling as a monster haunts their land. When Geralt hears, in a nearby town, that a fellow witcher has gone there but fooled the people and ran with the money without killing the monster, he knows something is askew.

Upon arrival, Geralt meets with a young man on his deathbed who tells him that a *vukodlak* has attacked him. The witcher offers his service to the miners of Temeria in exchange for coin, as per usual. However, the conversation between the witcher and the miners is interrupted by a few of the royal soldiers led by Lord Ostrit, who informs Geralt that he is to be escorted to the border of the kingdom to leave.

While in the woods, Geralt is approached by Triss Merigold, a sorceress who serves King Foltest, although the latter is not aware of her doings. Triss then asks Geralt to save the monster instead of killing it. The sorceress believes that the beast is somehow Princess Adda’s child, as she was rumored to have had an affair at the time of her death.

Geralt is asked to look at the corpses to gather clues as to what this beast could be, one of them being of a fellow witcher, who supposedly ran away with the payment. The truth was that the beast bested a witcher, and to smother a revolt fuelled by panic, the king lied to his subjects.

Geralt inspects the bodies and realizes that the witcher's body is missing his heart and liver, leading him to conclude that the monster is a *striga*. According to Geralt, *strigas* are always female and can only come into existence through a curse (Lopez & Hissrich, 2019, 13:22).

Through his enhanced senses and his ability to read people, Geralt comes to realize that the *striga* is a child born in an incestuous relationship between King Foltest and his sister

Princess Adda, cursed by Lord Ostrit by accident out of jealousy for he was in love with her. Geralt uses Lord Ostrit as bait for the hungry *striga* and reveals the enchantment he used, revealing how to break the curse as well - one would have to keep the *striga* out of its crypt until a rooster crows three times (Lopez & Hissrich, 2019, 45:36).

Meanwhile, Yennefer is at Aretuza going through a transformation that will erase her deformities and provide her the status, power, and respect she believes she deserves. The transition between the scenes is accomplished mainly through the screams of both female characters - the *striga* and Yennefer. The first screams because she's angry and hungry, she wants to kill Geralt because that's all she has ever known to do. The second one screams because she is in pain, giving away her ability to procreate in exchange for a beautiful and striking new body that will grant her the life she always dreamed of.

This alternation between the two storylines seems intentional to draw the parallel between Yennefer and the *striga*, as both women's lives have been drastically altered by the cruelty of men around them. Both characters change into fierce beings who can reclaim the power lost.

The scene of Yennefer's transformation is powerful and very symbolic. The mage Giltine - the one responsible for the transformation of the students at Aretuza - warns Yennefer: "There is a cost to all creation. A sacrifice that is always made. To be reborn; you will bear no more." (Lopez & Hissrich, 2019, 46:15).

Indeed, for this transformation to occur, Giltine removes her uterus and places it in a small bowl to burn. Once it turns to a black powder, the mage mixes it with other ingredients to create an enchanted black ink with which he will trace Yennefer's body deformities and remove them. Yennefer relinquishes the possibility of having a biological child for the agency over her life. This scene is a critical moment in Yennefer's character since recovering her ability to bear a child will become her obsession.

Geralt manages to break the princess's curse but leaves the scene physically injured and Triss takes care of him. She also reveals that King Foltest lied about the sequence of events - he tells his subjects that Lord Ostrit sacrificed himself to kill the *vukodlak*, instead of giving the witcher the credit for the deed, since it would require revealing the incestuous case of the Foltest and Adda.

In the end, Yennefer gets what she wants: a dance with the King of Aerdin (where she was born) and to be chosen as his mage advisor. The three branches of the story (Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri) are all addressed as the episode ends and Ciri is called into a forest by a mysterious voice.

#### 3.4.1.1 Striga or vukodlak?

As previously mentioned, the episode introduces two creatures that come from folklore: the *vukodlak* and the *striga*. Although, originally these two figures are distinct: the first refers to what is commonly known as a werewolf - a shapeshifter between human and wolf - and striga is a type of vampire -, however, the south Slavs refer to vampires as *vukodlak*, and very rarely as *vampir* (Dundes, 1998).

As for Betrayal Moon, it seems to be the case as well since it starts with one of the victims of this creature explaining to a witcher what he believes it is:

“It comes on a full moon... to feed. That's what Ma used to say. When a wolf... crosses a maiden's grave. A pregnant girl who died before her time. That babe... starts growing... right in her belly. When it's big enough... that babe rips out. Only it ain't a babe no more. It's a monster. A vukodlak.”

The vampire lore is extremely extensive because it is one of the most prevalent mythological figures around the world. Several terms are associated with the vampire, such as *strigoi*, *moroi*, *upír*, *strige*, etc (Guiley, 2005).

According to *The Vampire: A casebook* (Dundes, 1998) one could become a *strigoi* - a male vampire in Romanian lore - if a cat or dog walked over on one's corpse, which matches the description above. In this case, however, the character of Betrayal Moon who has been attacked by this creature assumes it is a *vukodlak*, but the audience later finds out that it is a *striga*.

In both the short story and the Netflix adaptation, the plot is based on Princess Adda's death while giving birth to a child with certain anomalies (Obertová, 2022). Mother and child were buried together but seven years after the funeral, on a full moon, the deaths started to happen in the Temerian town (Sapkowski, 2019).

Once Geralt gathers all the information and evaluates the situation, he realizes that the creature is a *striga*. However, at this point, it becomes clear that there's a twist to the

folklore and how it is used by Andrzej Sapkowski and Lauren Hissrich, by staying faithful to this aspect of the story.

It is important to note that folklore can be adapted both by using its elements in a new story setting and by denying its beliefs (Obertová, 2022), which is exactly what happens in *Betrayer Moon*. Geralt states that *strigas* are picky eaters, eating only the heart and the liver, they're always female, and can only come to be through a curse (Lopez & Hissrich, 2019, 13:22) - the curse being the real motive for the mutation and not the one mentioned initially by one of the *striga*'s victims.

There are some key differences between the short story and the TV adaptation. The most important is the secrecy with which the subject of incest is treated in the episode *Betrayer Moon*; while in the short story by Sapkowski, the incestuous relationship between Princess Adda and her brother King Foltest is no secret in the kingdom.

This alters the pacing, as it offers a layered mystery for those not familiar with the source material. This is a necessary adaptation to a different format, to retain the audience's attention, which provides a more dramatic effect and culminates in a more intense reveal.

Additionally, it reflects more modern and Western values, as the secrecy indicates that this fantasy world of *The Witcher* condemns the sexual relationship between siblings; while the book characters seem more resigned to the practice.

### **3.4.2 Episode 5 – Bottled Appetites**

Until this point in the series, the story is scattered, as the audience follows, somewhat confused, the paths of Geralt, Ciri, and Yennefer. In this installment, Geralt and Yennefer find each other by chance (or destiny).

In this particular adventure, Geralt is fishing in a lake when Jaskier enters the scene, but he is not looking for fish - he is trying to find a djinn to cure him of his sleeplessness. Jaskier disapproves of this method as he believes this is the same as putting "salve on a tumor" (Brändström & Hissrich, 16:22, 2019). The two of them fight over the djinn's bottle that Geralt found, releasing the djinn that then proceeds to strangle Jaskier (Meslow, 2019).

During the fight, the bottle containing the djinn falls and breaks, and Geralt cuts himself while expressing to want for some quiet, marking the first wish. This djinn has a wicked

sense of humor, therefore, to fulfill Geralt's wish, the djinn enchants Jaskier who appears to be suffocating and unable to speak.

Looking for a cure, Geralt and Jaskier ride to the next settlement and find, Chiredean, an elven healer, for help. The latter understands that Jaskier's wounds are of magical source, and for that reason, he can't help. Chiredean refers Geralt to the mage sorceress who has been running a business in town, illegally, since the mayor finds mages dangerous. Turns out, this mage is none other than Yennefer - played by Anya Charlotra. She and Geralt meet in the iconic orgy scene, which establishes Charlotra's character as the dominant character of this episode (Purslow, 2019). With her black dress and lace eye mask, Yennefer is a force to be reckoned with.

Yennefer accepts to help Jaskier in return for Geralt's "company and conversation" (Brändström & Hissrich, 34:01, 2019), which seems too good to be true because it is. Yennefer's interest is to be the djinn's master, to ask for a wish - a cure for her infertility. However, the true master is Geralt who, upon realizing Yennefer's intent, asks for his final wish off-camera (Purslow, 2019).

After escaping a falling Cintra, Ciri's mentor Mousesack is killed by a doppler to take his body. The doppler follows and tricks the princess into leaving the Brokilon Forest, where she sought refuge with the Dryads, the creatures who protect the forest and offer sanctuary to those who enter it.

The djinn, the dryads, and elves are mythical creatures that act as support characters and help the plot advance. Each plays a crucial role in developing the main characters' arcs. The djinn is the catalyst for Geralt and Yennefer's encounter, the dryads help Ciri while the doppler is the threat. The elves appear in all three lines of the episode: Yennefer has elven blood, as well as the healer Chiredean who takes Geralt to her; Ciri is accompanied by a male elf in her journey to the Brokilon Forest.

#### **3.4.2.1 The Dreaded Dryads:**

In *The Witcher* universe, the dryads, or eerie wives of Brokilon dedicate themselves to its protection and those who seek shelter in this forest. They are an exclusively female race who values living following nature's accord. However, they also employ ruthless tactics to fight against the imperial force of Nilfgaard (King, 2022).

Their leader, Eithné, welcomes Ciri into the forest and offers her shelter. In exchange, the princess needs to drink from the water to erase any memories of her past life. Often, Dryads kidnap the girls, erase their memories, and turn them into warriors who will help in the group's effort to protect the Brokilon Forest and its inhabitants (King, 2022).

The inspiration for this racial group came from a minor deity in Greek mythology, as the author has confirmed (King, 2022). The word dryad derives from the Greek *dryade*, which in its root means *tree*, more specifically *oak tree* (Hansen, 2005). A dryad is born at the same time as a tree; the tree is connected to the life of the dryad, therefore when the tree dies, so does the dryad. In *The Witcher*, the dryads have the same connection with the forest: they are its protector, and the forest gives them the shelter and resources to survive (Hansen, 2005).

The connection with nature between both Sapkowski's dryads and the Greek dryads is powerful. In both instances, the dryads derive their life strength from nature and vow to protect it. Geralt aligns his values with the dryads, being one of the few men to leave Brokilon forest alive. He remains neutral to allow for the dryads to have their space and stand in opposition to the imperial forces of Nilfgaard. This, in turn, prompts the audience to side with the Eerie Wives of Brokilon (King, 2022).

In *Bottled Appetites*, the character who finds the dryads is Ciri, and the audience sees their protectiveness and care for her. However, for the dryads to shelter Ciri, she would have to forget her past life. This creates a conflict in the audience: on one hand, it may side with the dryads and the security they provide; on the other, Ciri forgetting her past and the mission of finding Geralt would hinder the plot.

Ultimately, Ciri refuses the offer and continues on her journey, with who she thinks is Mousesack.

#### **3.4.2.2 The Light Elves:**

In *The Witcher* world, elves have a central role in the plot. After the Conjunction of the Spheres, other creatures came to inhabit a world that was originally populated by gnomes and dwarves. Later, elves appeared and brought magic with them (Poradecki, 2020). Humans were well received but soon grew tired of being less than the elves, these majestic and magical beings. A conflict broke out between these two groups and a war ensued.

As important as elves are in this fantasy world, their mythology seems a bit elusive and falls in the shadow of great fiction works such as *Lord of the Rings*, by J. R. R. Tolkien.

According to Lacouteux (2018), there was no word for elves in French; the one used was borrowed from Germanic languages used to refer to fairies, a term often interchangeable with *elfe*. In Germany, the terms for elf (al, elbe) seldom appeared in texts up until the thirteenth century, and after this period, it was used as a synonym for *dwarf* (zwerch); the same etymological evolution took place in England (ælf, elf; pl. ylfe). In Scandinavian countries, the *álf* is usually the same as a dwarf (dvergr), blurring the lines between two different designations for two distinct creatures.

Lacouteux (2018) mentions other authors such as Jacob Grimm and Ferdinand de Saussure, who made the “intuitive” connection between the various variations of the word *elf* in different languages (alf, ælf, alb/alp, elbe) to the Latin word *albus* which means white. This serves as a base for the division between the good and evil canons, light and dark “In fact, the elf is a white creature, a brightly shining being, which reflects a beneficent nature based on the law mentioned earlier, that of the close interrelation between physical appearance and character” (Lacouteux, 2018, p. 122).

The lightness and clarity are attributes of the elven race; they’re considered benevolent and good-natured creatures in folklore. However, the elves from *The Witcher* are more nuanced due to their conflicts with humans and other races.

The place of mythological figures in *The Witcher* is a well-thought-out one. In this narrative, these creatures don’t appear as “decoration” only, they are characters who serve the plot and help build the fantasy world in which they are inserted.

Although the djinn is a crucial agent of destiny in Geralt and Yennefer’s relationship, the information about it is scarce. It is possible to establish the creation of this character was inspired by the jinn: an Arabic mythical creature (which predates Islam but appears in the Qur’an) made of “the fire of hot wind” or “smokeless” (Peterson, 2007, p.95). These creatures had free will, meaning they could choose to follow God or not, and were not determined by their nature to do one or the other (Peterson, 2007; Lebling, 2010). The concept of the jinn trapped in a bottle that once released can aid or hinder is derived from Western narratives inspired by *Arabian Nights*, which is how the djinn is represented in the episode discussed (Peterson, 2007; Lebling, 2010). The jinn can usually be found in abandoned places such as houses, caves, and wells, where human life is often distant.

This is represented in this episode as Geralt finds the amphora that contained the djinn in a lake, which once free, grants Geralt's wish by seizing Jaskier's voice and almost his life as well (Brändström & Hissrich, 2019).

The djinn is the conduct for Geralt and Yennefer's first encounter, which leads them to be connected by destiny. The doubt remains on whether or not the djinn made that destiny or if it was only an agent of it. The dryads bring deeper political discussions to the table: firstly, because they are an exclusively female race, they introduce a commentary on femininity and matriarchal societies, and how they constitute an opposing force to Nilfgaardian advances; secondly, the Eerie Wives of Brokilon provide an environmentalist insight into the destruction, both to human and nature, that war brings wherever it passes through.

The elves are a bigger character group in which Ciri inserts herself further along the story, being a descendant of Lara Dorren (an elven sorceress who fell in love with a human).

This episode is crucial to establish the three main characters as such and connect their stories into one cohesive narrative, and it does so by resorting to mythology and folklore, as it has been done throughout *The Witcher's* episodes.

### **3.4.3 Episode 6 – Rare Species**

In episode six of the first season of *The Witcher*, the audience is presented with one of the most epic fantasy and mythology creatures: the dragon. The storyline is one of the most quintessential of the collection as it presents Geralt, hired to kill a monster with a huge moral dilemma in between (Purslow, 2019a).

The episode opens with Jaskier waiting for Geralt. The witcher has been gone for an hour, trying to kill a monster. As the men who hired him are getting restless, they assume Geralt is dead and try to steal his horse. Jaskier's protests make the men become violent, but an old man and two warrior women appear to save the day. "I've been looking for you, Geralt of Rivia" the man, Borch, says (Brändström & Hissrich, 01:58, 2019b).

Geralt and Jaskier are approached by Borch Three Jackdaws and his Zerrakanian companions, Téa and Véa. In a tavern, the Pensive Dragon, Borch informs them King Niedmir has been having some issues with dragons. To resolve the problem, the King commissions the dragon's death and allows those who kill it to keep the dragon's treasure

as a reward. Borch invites Geralt to his team, but the witcher refuses, saying he doesn't kill dragons (Kelly, 2019).

The audience is then introduced to the groups of adventurers who have joined: the dwarves, the Reavers, Sir Eyck de Denesle, and his sorceress companion, Yennefer. The moment Geralt lays eyes on Yennefer, his attitude completely changes, and he accepts Borch's offer, much to Jaskier's dismay. Geralt, upon talking to Yennefer, discovers she intends to use the dragon skin to heal her infertility (Poradecki, 2020), which Geralt dismisses as "made-up fertility cures" (Brändström & Hissrich, 22:28, 2019b).

The four teams start the journey, and throughout it, the dwarves become allies, sharing a shortcut to the dragon's cave, although they try to leave Geralt and his companions behind; Sir Eyck de Denesle is assassinated, and everyone suspects the Reavers who seem to be raging murderers.

The shortcut proves to be extremely dangerous and Borch along with his companions falls to their apparent death. Geralt, Yennefer, and Jaskier continue the path and eventually find the cave where a green dragon, apparently dead, is cradling an egg (Kelly, 2019). This is where the plot twist starts: Téa and Véa come out of the shadows, to protect the dragon and the egg; from above a golden dragon flies in - Villentretenmerth, Borch's real name. Throughout the episode, Borch provided plenty of hints, and readers of Sapkowski's books were not surprised by the outcome.

Upon seeing the scene, Yennefer has a change of heart and helps Geralt and Villentretenmerth to protect the egg against the Reavers who arrive at the cave. A fight ensues, allowing the viewer to witness Geralt and Yennefer as an undefeatable team. When the confrontation ends, the dwarves, who were frozen under a spell cast by Yennefer during the fight, take dragon teeth to prove to the king the dragon is dead.

During the episode, the scene cuts to Ciri and her elven friend Dara traveling through the woods with the doppler disguised as Mousesack. Dara is suspicious and Ciri starts a questioning that leads the doppler to lose its temper and confirm their suspicions. Ciri ends up escaping but her friendship with Dara is fractured (Kelly, 2019).

In the aftermath of saving the dragon egg - Borch's child -, he, Geralt, and Yennefer discuss what happened and Borch says "I can see why Geralt didn't want to lose you."

(Brändström & Hissrich, 51:19, 2019b). This prompts a hard conversation for Geralt, as Yennefer doesn't understand the meaning of this comment. Geralt begrudgingly admits that it is related to the djinn they encountered previously, and Yennefer connects the dots: the witcher made a wish to save her, binding her to him. The sorceress questions their connection, assuming it is not real, only the result of magic.

Borch breaks up the argument between the two by saying "I'm going to save you both a lot of hurt with a little pain now. The sorceress will never regain her womb. And though you didn't want to lose her, Geralt, you will." (Brändström & Hissrich, 52:37, 2019b). This allows Yennefer to leave, stating that Geralt already lost her.

Wounded, Geralt lashes out at Jaskier, blaming him for all the trouble he has been having lately, breaking their bond as well, which leaves the witcher alone.

As is usual in his storyline, Geralt battles with the general beliefs about monsters, human nature, and his interpersonal relationships and values. In this episode, the audience perceives the prejudice that this world has for someone who is different from the majority and how it punishes them for it.

This is a reality very close to Geralt's since he is being shoved to the sidelines of society for being a witcher, even if constantly meddling with it when hired. Geralt also has to deal with his bottled emotions, as he lashes out at Yennefer and Jaskier alike, resulting in being left alone.

"Rare Species" also explores the themes of family and legacy, which are a concern to Borch, as his species is dying out. Therefore the preservation of the dragon egg is as much about saving his only family left, as it is about ensuring the continuity of the dragon species. On the other hand, this is also a concern for Yennefer as she tries to regain the ability to have a child, and for Geralt, who has a child-surprise bound him.

#### **3.4.3.1 The Mighty Dragons:**

The idea of dragons is deeply embedded in human storytelling. Indeed, it is one of the most famous mythological figures, and one does not need to be a fan of the fantasy genre to be acquainted with this creature. In the West, dragons tend to have a reptile-like body, with scales, four legs, and wings. From their snout, they exhale fire, live in caves, and

amass great treasures (Ogden, 2021). In other cultures, they have feathers or leathery skin, and no wings, but some other animal's body parts, from tails to beaks and bird talons (Niles, 2013).

Dragons are comparable to gods or demons; they are powerful, majestic beings, that have lived for such a long time, before man, making them seem immortal even if they're not. Firebreathing is one of the most common attributes given to dragons, but the occurrence of lightning is equally common in association with such creatures (Niles, 2013).

There are plenty of examples of dragons making appearances in folklore. One of the most well-known in the West is the story of Saint George. A town in Libya was terrified of a colossal dragon circling the nearby countryside. To keep it appeased, the king ordered that two sheep were to be sacrificed every day. Next, it was children, until it was the king's daughter's turn. The rumor of a dragon intimidating a town spread wide and Saint George was sent to slay it. He saved the princess, captured the dragon, and brought it to the town, where he slayed the monster to convince people to turn to Christianity. On the spot where Saint George killed the dragon, a church of the Blessed Virgin Mary was built (Helidra, 2015).

But not all cultures see dragons as an evil force - this is mostly a Western position. In some cultures, mostly Asian, the dragon is a protector of mankind and a benevolent figure that helps people. In Japan and China, the dragon is a synonym for power and status as it is the symbol of an emperor's rule (Niles, 2013).

In three great Eastern traditions - Japan, China, Korea - the serpentine mythological figure has a special prominence in the tales. Dragons are mighty creatures, that have the power to destroy, but rarely express that facet. On the contrary, dragons in Eastern cultures are usually guides to humans, assisting in the quests they face. Although they can fly, dragons of the Asian myths have no wings for a major part of their lives (they can grow them after a few centuries) and are often associated with water, instead of fire (Niles, 2013).

In Chinese mythology, dragons have four different colors which have different meanings and categorize the creatures in different tiers.

Starting with the blue and green dragon, these colors are associated with spring, nature, growth, harmony, and health as the patron of the East China Sea. The black

and white dragon represents a balance such as the ying (black) as winter and yang (white) as autumn, a patron to both the North and West Chinese Seas. The red dragon is known to be the symbol of the summer, good fortune, and happiness. It is also the patron for the South China Sea. And finally the yellow and gold dragon, the most superior dragon of them all, symbolizing wisdom and wealth. This particular dragon is associated with the imperial family of China, since China's first imperial dynasty called themselves "descendants of the dragon" and are said to possess dragon blood within them. (Willow, 2018, p. 4)

Although the appearance of the dragons portrayed in *The Witcher* is based on Western notions of the creature (scales, firebreathing, wings), the personality attributes lean more towards Eastern mythology. As mentioned before in the plot description of *Rare Species*, Borch/ Villentretenmerth seems to be immensely wise and knowledgeable even in his human form, with a godlike omniscience. He is aware of Geralt and Yennefer's past, their history together and apart, as well as their future. The gold dragon of *The Witcher* fits in the Chinese category not only for his color but also for his character traits.

Besides drawing inspiration for the creation of this dragon character from Eastern mythology, Sapkowski also refers to Polish folklore to develop this particular story. There is a popular story about the Wawel dragon that resembles the initial action of the story. According to legend, Krakow, a large city in southern Poland, on the banks of the Vistula River and not far from the Carpathian Mountains, has its name due to a dragonslayer named Krak (Niles, 2013).

Legend says that a vicious dragon terrorized the villages in Wawel Hill - an elevation in the Vistula River's bank, with a deep, dark cave at its foot. The dragon killed livestock for years and occasionally a traveler that got lost. Even though the region was not rich, the dragon collected rings and other small precious objects throughout the years. The king ruling the region was at a loss for what to do to remove the threat from his lands, so when his daughter came of age, he promised her hand to the man capable of slaying the dragon. Krak, the son of a humble shoemaker, approached the king to ask permission to slay the dragon. He had no horse or sword but had a plan - stuff a freshly killed sheep with sulfur and leave it at the entrance of the cave for the dragon to feed on it. According to plan, that's what occurred. The dragon ate the sheep whole, the heat of its belly burnt the sulfur and the dragon exploded. Krak collected the dragon's treasures, reported the success to

the king, and married the promised princess. The land became full of people again and when the king died and Krak ascended to the throne, he built a castle that served as a seat for the Polish crown (Niles. 2013).

A monument to Krak's dragon still stands near the cave at the foot of Wawel Hill. The monument includes a statue of the dragon, which contains a feed of natural gas that allows the statue to belch a cloud of fiery breath several times per hour. (Niles, 2013, p. 196)

In the book *Sword of Destiny* (Sapkowski, 2019), a similar event is recounted by Dandelion, Geralt's bard friend, when they meet with Borch:

In a forceful peasant manner. 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. Just to be sure, the local apothecary poured in two quarts of his concoction for carbuncles, and the priest from the temple of Kreve said prayers over the carcass. 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 by that shit, which stank to high heaven, but reality surpassed our expectations. Ignoring the living and bleating baalams, the reptile swallowed the bait and the stake. (Sapkowski, 2019, p. 17)

The difference lies in the aftermath of this event: the trap didn't work on this strong dragon, it only made it sick and furious, hence why King Niedamir announces the reward for killing the dragon.

Once again, Sapkowski draws out myths to enrich his stories, only to deny the myth later and introduce a denser plot. In this case, the failure prompts Geralt to join Borch in this quest, and encounter Yennefer. This story gives the audience a glimpse of Geralt's moral code, which contradicts not only his notoriety as a monster slayer but also as proof that witchers having no emotions is a brutal misconception.

The dragon slayer as a hero is a common trope, as slaying a beast is a recurrent plot in the hero's journey/ quest (Garry, 2017). However, in this instance, this trope is used in its

negative form as Geralt emerges as the protector of dragons, instead of a slayer, solidifying once again the perception of Geralt as a hero on a quest.

#### **3.4.4 Season 2 – Episodes 2 to 8**

*The Witcher's* second season marked a tide-turn for the series, as the audience started following a multi-episode plot introducing a main antagonist, instead of the short-story-inspired ones as in the previous season.

The Deathless Mother, also known as Voleth Meir, is a witch with shape-shifting and psychic abilities who would do anything to free herself and return to her sphere.

The first appearance of Voleth Meir takes place in episode 2 of the second season, Kaer Morhen (DeMayo & Hissrich, 2021). Yennefer dreams of her and Geralt having a baby and a normal life in a little cabin when suddenly the baby catches fire and a hooded figure looms distantly.

Francesca dreams of what she believes to be the Elven prophet Ithlinne showing her the path to the rise of a new elven kingdom: “In my vision, I’m lost in a maze of dead bodies, elves stacked so high they shade the sun. Ithlinne guides me clear the labyrinth, where I see the sun rise on a new elven kingdom.” (DeMayo & Hissrich, 2021, 00:26:34).

For Fringilla, the hooded figure is Emhyr, after he returned to Nilfgaard, overturned the Usurper, and saved her. Yennefer remains quiet when asked about the content of her dream. At this point, it’s quite clear that this figure who appears to the three characters can understand their deepest desires and fears, and use them to her advantage (DeMayo & Hissrich, 2021).

The three of them then find an altar with an inscription and an incantation. Fringilla mentions that her father used to scare her with stories about the witch in the woods and her home perched on basilisk legs. At this moment, they hear a calling from the path that opened in the middle of the altar. When they descend, and upon reciting the incantation, each of them is teleported to the hut, and each sees whoever they see in their dreams.

In this episode, the viewers learn that the witch tells Fringilla and Francesca that Nilfgaard and the elves must ally, resulting in a nurturing friendship between the two characters.

Whatever message or request the Deathless Mother had for Yennefer, remains a mystery at this point. However, the audience learns that Yennefer lost her magic, her access to Chaos in the Battle of Soden, when she used fire magic to protect the mages fighting against the invading forces of Nilfgaard.

A background hint is given by Vesemir when he is talking to Ciri, and showing her a sort of museum in the witcher's keep, Kaer Morhen. Vesemir points to a dagger and explains that it belonged to Klef, one of the first witchers who died while fighting a demon, who was entombed in her hut deep in the woods, suggesting that the demon that the witchers defeated once is the current season's ancient villain (DeMayo & Hissrich, 2021).

In episode 4, Redanian Intelligence (O'Gorman & Hissrich, 2021), Ciri has a vision of herself saying "Daughter of Chaos belongs to us. Turn your backs. Join the procession. There is only death here." (O'Gorman & Hissrich, 2021, 00:33:23) in Voleth Meir's voice. This suggests that everything is somehow connected, Ithlinne's prophecy, the Wild Hunt, and Voleth Meir, as they are the recurring themes in Ciri's visions.

In episode 5, Turn Your Back (Bazalgette & Hissrich, 2021b), the audience learns that Yennefer didn't take the bargain the Deathless Mother offered, and every time she has a reflex to use her magic, the witch's voice surges telling Yennefer that all she has to do is ask - ask what she needs to do to regain her power.

Meanwhile, Fringilla and Francesca's friendship blossoms as does the alliance between the elves and Nilfgaard - the elves get Cintra (Xin'trea) back and fight for Nilfgaard in return. In the end, desperate, Yennefer takes what Voleth Meir has to offer, and learns what she must do to hold up her end: steal Ciri, who she has no idea is Geralt's Child Surprise, and deliver her to the witch.

Voleth Meir keeps reaching out to those who struck a bargain with her, as a way to ensure the tasks are completed but also to feed on their fear and desperation. In episode 7, *Voleth Meir* (Louise & Hissrich, 2021), Geralt finds Ciri and Yennefer in Cintra, right before Yennefer almost delivers Ciri to the witch. Geralt is understandably furious with the mage and sends Ciri to Kaer Morhen with Jaskier, the bard. He orders Yennefer to recite the incantation and both stand outside the hut, but Voleth Meir is no longer there. Feeding on

fear and hatred, she managed to become strong enough to break out of her prison. She, then, follows Ciri and possesses her, right before the episode ends.

The last episode of the season is named Family (Bazalgette & Hissrich, 2021a), as family is a recurrent theme in the series, but more so in this episode, as Ciri is possessed by the Deathless Mother. The old witch weaves an intricate illusion to keep Ciri in her subconscious where her family - Calanthe, Mousesack, and her parents - are alive. This sits on the opposite end of her found family - the witchers, Geralt, and Yennefer - who are in the real world fighting Voleth Meir to save Ciri.

But to what end? The Deathless Mother needs Ciri's power to open a portal to her sphere, where her home is so that she can go back. The group fights the old witch and manages to expel her from Ciri's body into Yennefer's and return her to her world. When they travel to Voleth Meir's world, they see her specter join several others who gallop in their direction - The Wild Hunt. In *The Witcher's* universe the Wild Hunt, or Wraiths of Mörhogg, is an omen of war and misfortune of wraiths in undead horses.

However, the Wild Hunt is a group of Elves from Tir ná Lia, the same place where the Aen Seidhe (the elves of the Continent) come from. They are culturally different and both fled their homeland before the Conjunction of the spheres.

The episode and this season ends with the shocking revelation that Emperor Emhyr is in fact Ciri's presumed-dead father, Dunny. This explains why the Nilfgaardians knew about Ciri's role in the salvation or destruction of the world, as per Ithlinne's prophecy, before anyone else.

#### **3.4.4.1 Voleth Meir: The Deathless Mother and Baba Yaga**

Lauren Hissrich, the writer of *The Witcher*, confirmed that the inspiration for Voleth Meir - a character original to the TV show - was Baba Yaga, the witch in the woods of Eastern European Folklore (Nelson, 2024).

The word *Baba* comes from the Indo-European, which helps explain how it spread so widely among different languages. The primary meaning of baba, in Slavic languages, is old woman, grandmother, or lady, but in Russian, for instance, it can mean any woman (Ugrešić, 2009).

Slavs also refer to female mythological characters, astronomical events, and illnesses, amongst others, using the word baba. Furthermore, female demons are often called babas:

Female demons are often called babas. Mother Wednesday (baba Sereda) watches over the weavers at their looms and stops women from using them on Wednesdays (or it might be any other day). White Lady (Belaja baba) is a watery demon, while Bannaja baba (banniha, bajnica, baennaja matushka, obderiha) is a spirit that lives in the traditional Russian steam bath (banya). In Ukraine, the Wheaten Lady (Žitna baba) is the spirit of the fields; and the Wild Lady (Dika baba) is the female demon that leads young men astray. Witches, fortune-tellers and healers are all called – baba. (Ugrešić, 2009, p.214)

Baba Yaga has countless variants in Slavic languages including but not limited to Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian. She is a sorceress, a witch that lives deep in the forest, in a small hut, which stands on hen legs and turns around on itself. She is described as having a bony leg, drooping breasts, huge pointy nose. Baba Yaga uses a mortar to fly and a broom to clean her tracks (Ugrešić, 2009).

The origin of Baba Yaga is unclear. She might have been a great goddess or mother earth at some point. She might have been the goddess of death or the goddess of birds, which remained represented in the hut's hen legs and her long nose. Baba Yaga is an elusive figure; her role in a story is not always the same. Sometimes she helps the hero, sometimes she is the villain in their story. She can also act as a mediator between the worlds and characters of a story.

In *The Witcher*, Voleth Meir embodies this duality by helping Yennefer, Fringilla, and Francesca, while asking for something in return. The clearest instance is the deal with Yennefer. Voleth Meir can help her restore her powers, which the audience wants to see happen because they are rooting for the mage.

In return, Voleth Meir asks for a girl, Ciri, whom Yennefer has not met yet. This capture would hinder the main plot between Ciri and Geralt and ultimately is not completed. However, it is a representation of Baba Yaga as both the helper and the villain in the story. Besides, as a witch, like many other figures in mythology, she can shapeshift. This is used

in *The Witcher*, as Voleth Meir appears in different bodies to the different characters, to manipulate them and earn their trust.

Baba Yaga's hut is unwelcoming, it stands on chicken legs and might not have windows or doors. To enter the hut and summon the witch, heroes must recite a few verses, as Prince Ivan does: "Little hut! O little hut! Stay still, little hut, as you once did, with your front to me and your back to the forest." (Ugrešić, 2009, p. 225). This is very similar to the incantation Yennefer finds on the altar with Francesca and Fringilla and recites at the end to get to Voleth Meir's hut with Geralt "Behold the mother of forests, the Deathless Mother, nesting in dreams. Turn your back to the forest, hut, hut. Turn your front to me. Hut. Hut." (Louise & Hissrich, 2021, 00:47:53).

In the end, Voleth Meir just wanted to go home, for which she needed Ciri's power and body. Realizing this, Yennefer offered herself as a vessel instead. Yennefer, Geralt, and Ciri cross the portal opened by Voleth Meir using Ciri's power, and Voleth Meir is reunited again with her people and/or family, The Wild Hunt.

The Wild Hunt is a key element in *The Witcher* Universe as it is one of the main antagonist, along with Nilfgaard, of the whole story. The Wild Hunt or Wraiths of Mörhogg are a group of dark knights that gallop the skies. The popular belief in the Continent is that they ride undead horses as a sign of war. In truth, they are a group of Aen Elle (Elder speech for People of the Alders or Alder Folk) elves from Tir ná Lia.

They share common ancestry with Aen Seidhe (Elder speech for People of the Hills or Hill Folk) but are culturally and physically different. Both left their world before the Conjunction of the Spheres and while the Aen Seidhe settled in the Continent, the Aen Elle roamed the worlds, until they found out about Ciri and started to pursue her.

The Wild Hunt, although in reality they are elves, are inspired by the Germanic myths of the Wild Hunt - a term popularized by Jacob Grimm in his 1835 book *Deutsche Mythologie* (Teutonic Mythology) (Hutton, 2014).

The Wild Hunt consisted of a group of ghosts or spirits who rode on horses during the night, led by a god or semi-divine figure. This figure could be either male or female. This idea consolidates the modern concept of the Wild Hunt as a "nocturnal procession" which mixes the notion of a female group visiting human homes to bless them, and the notion

of a cavalcade comprised mostly of corpses which was “rarely regarded as attractive or benevolent” (Hutton, 2014, p.164).

The general aesthetic of the Wild Hunt in *The Witcher* resembles the most common idea of the Germanic Wild Hunt - dead hunters (in this case, in knight armour) roaming the night skies - and it's the only aspect in which it does. This ominous figure represents a dark looming future for Ciri, as portrayed in the TV show. She fears them and their power, for their unknown nature to her. At last, Voleth Meir and the Wild Hunt are seemingly connected, at least as part of the same people. When she is released from Yennefer's body, in the new sphere, the embers that represent Voleth Meir's spirit fly in the Wild Hunt's direction.

The showrunner Lauren Hissrich explains the role of Voleth Meir in the second season of *The Witcher* the Netflix Geeked's official aftershow, *The Witcher: Unlocked*, when asked about the decision to include a new monster in *The Witcher*, which is not in the books:

Voleth Meir herself, the Deathless Mother, she's based on the mythology of Baba Yaga, and one of the reasons that we chose specifically Baba Yaga is we found that it was a monster that basically every culture has a version of. (...) So, Blood of Elves, I have to say, was terrifying to me in terms of adaptation. I found it so much more difficult in some ways than Season 1 and certainly more difficult than what I know is coming down the pike because it's a book that's a lot about character relationships and character movements but not a lot of forward-propelling action, and I think our fans of *The Witcher* expect sort of an active rollercoaster for eight episodes. So we started to talk about how to introduce a season-long villain, not just the monsters that Geralt is finding in every episode, and furthermore, we talked about how that villain could start to tie together Yennefer's stories. Geralt's story, Ciri's story, without them all being you know, on screen together yet. So obviously, Voleth Meir comes in and out of their worlds and then collides in the finale. (Still Watching Netflix, 2021, 48:02)

Ultimately, the appearance of Voleth Meir - a monster inspired by Baba Yaga's folklore, serves as a connection for all the stories that had been developed in Seasons 1 and 2. This character is the inciter for the merge of storylines, that give the family dynamics of Geralt,

Ciri, and Geralt, as well as the political shifts that come from an Elven-Nilfgaardian alliance against the Northern Realms.

## CHAPTER IV – *THE WITCHER* AS CULTURAL PRODUCT

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#### 4 *The Witcher* as a Cultural Product

Globalization – “Globalization is a process that encompasses the causes, course, and consequences of transnational and transcultural integration of human and non-human activities.” (Al-Rodhan, 2006, p.2) – is a phenomenon that influences several aspects of social life – the news we watch, the content we consume, what issues we find the most relevant. This is also true considering streaming platforms that dominate the entertainment market. Netflix is a prime example of content that reaches audiences worldwide, which may intensify the already massive power and influence of a Western narrative through media (Walder, 2023).

As explained in previous chapters, this massification of culture may lead to the erasure of minority narratives, if these are not relatable to the majority of the audience (Grindstaff, 2008). Furthermore, considering that cultural products reflect the time-space context in which they are created, the shift from local to global cultural products enabled by globalization presents the risk of dismissal of the original meaning (Walder, 2023), since it might be taken out of the context in which it was created, to appeal to a wider audience. This point needs special consideration when it refers to cultural products that use myths and folklore to create narratives, as these elements are crucial to understanding the values and core beliefs of the community to which the product originally belonged (Walder, 2023).

It is the case of *The Witcher*, a cultural product created in a specific context, for a particular audience. The 1980s saw the beginning of one of the most popular and successful pieces of Polish literature in history: *The Witcher* by Andrzej Sapkowski. The short stories written in Polish starring the witcher Geralt of Rivia became very popular among Polish fantasy readers (Evallyo, 2021), making the initial success of Geralt’s adventures constrained to the Polish audience. The fact that Sapkowski used elements that could be related to Polish history and identity made it more prone to the success it had (Walder, 2023).

As seen in the case study, the mythology used by the book series author, Andrzej Sapkowski, draws from Slavic mythology and Polish folklore, that can be traced to the Middle Ages (Walder, 2023). This aspect has contributed to the coining of a new genre to which *The Witcher* belongs: Slavic Fantasy (Majkowski, 2018).

The inspiration for the creation of *The Witcher* goes beyond the myths and folklore; some parallels can be drawn between Polish heritage and Sapkowski's fantasy creation. Besides the monsters of The Continent resembling mythological figures from Slavic folklore, the political situation of *The Witcher* is very similar to the Polish (Majkowski, 2018).

Therefore, to understand the sentiment of Polish pride regarding *The Witcher* and how it translates to a global audience, it is necessary to present a very brief account of Poland's history. This will also be helpful in the interpretation of the series' content.

The First Polish Republic – also known as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569–1795) – was once one of Central and Eastern European empires. However, it lost its independence in 1795, and for the next 120 years, it remained subjugated politically to the Austrian, Prussian, and Russian Empires (Nycz, 2014).

The justification for the takeover of Poland was very similar to colonial claims by colonialist countries, such as France and Britain: the responsibility of the Western countries to educate and free the uncivilized peoples. In this case, the reality of the Polish-Lithuanian government was anarchy, poverty, and exploitation of people, which paved the way for the invasion (Majkowski, 2018).

In 1918, Poland's sovereignty was once again restored; unfortunately, approximately 30 years later, in 1939, the Second Polish Republic is extinguished when Nazi Germany invaded the Polish territory as well as the Soviet Army, initiating the Second World War (Walder, 2023).

This long struggle between occupation and independence is mirrored in *The Witcher* universe, where there is an inept group of local governments, an older regime that governs without clear guidelines and does not provide the population with living conditions - the Northern Realms. On the other side of the war on the Continent is an imperialist kingdom that desires to conquer the land and unite it under one flag – Nilfgaard's (Majkowski, 2018).

Besides the correlation between Poland's real occupation throughout the centuries and the fictional imperial forces fighting in The Continent, the subjugation of marginalized groups is also a common theme. In Poland, it refers to Polish Jews, homosexuals, gypsies, or people with disabilities who were confined in concentration camps and ghettos by Nazi Germany (Walder, 2023). In *The Witcher* Universe, it first happened when the elves

arrived on The Continent and subjugated the dwarves and gnomes – its first inhabitants – and later, when the humans arrived and drove nonhumans (elves, gnomes, dwarves, nymphs, etc) to the outskirts of society for deeming them creatures who were less than the humans (Walder, 2023).

As mentioned in previous chapters, the fandom often has a feeling of ownership for the piece of culture that they love. These feelings are deepened by the correlation between the political context of *The Witcher* and the historical background of Poland, leading to a sense of revolt against some alterations were made for the Netflix TV adaptation (Majkowski, 2018).

To understand the many layers of the issue of representation, it is important to recall that *The Witcher* games by CD Projekt Red sparked a debate around race and representation, in magazines, online forums, and blogs. The discussion centered around the lack of diversity in most of the games, the central argument being Sapkowski's nationality. Poland is predominantly populated by Caucasian people, therefore, a fantasy world based on Slavic and Polish folklore will have, naturally, predominantly white characters. Some internauts also argued that the Poles' oppression throughout history should be enough to eliminate the expectation of diverse representation in a piece of culture inspired by its political and cultural background (Majkowski, 2018). A fair argument for the book series created by Andrzej Sapkowski, which, before translations, reached mostly Slavic countries.

In this case, however, as Majkowski (2018) points out, it can be argued that a game with an international target market should attend to certain standards, such as diversity and representation. Besides, in the games and the books, the audience often finds references and inspirations from other cultures, namely Arabic and Norse cultures/mythologies, as shown in the case study. Ultimately, *The Witcher* being a fantasy piece of literature with monsters and magic undermines any arguments about realism or historical accuracy (Majkowski, 2018).

The argument was sparked again when *The Witcher* premiered on Netflix, but this time, it was for the opposite reason: the show was too diverse. The cast includes several actors of color, including Anya Chalotra who plays Yennefer, one of the main characters. Netflix is known for its diversity and inclusion in productions, however, a part of the fans was not content with some casting choices (Gibson, 2019). The same feeling of ownership

regarding the games can also be mentioned concerning the Netflix adaptation, leading up to a similar opinion that a Polish piece of culture was being erased not only by Netflix casting choices but also by Lauren Hissrich's modifications and interpretations of the source material. The casting of actors of color for some characters was one of the aspects that some fans disliked, arguing that it made no sense to have black actors in *The Witcher* universe, evoking the same argument used when talking about the lack of diversity in CD Projekt Red games (Gibson, 2019).

It is understandable that Polish fans of *The Witcher* empathize with the material and feel possessive about it. After all, it resonates with people who can see their history and culture reflected in a fantasy world, creating a deep bond between the fan and the material. Furthermore, a certain resistance is expected when alterations are made to the source material to accommodate the story in a new medium. These modifications can omit some portions of the original material or add new content and nuance to the story. It is open to public opinion discussions on whether it improves or impairs the story.

Additionally, an adaptation needs to appeal to an audience that already knows the material and has expectations, and to an audience that has no previous knowledge of the material and needs to be persuaded to engage with it. This is an obstacle that directors and writers must face to adapt an existing story to another format while contributing to it. When this hurdle is overcome, it will add value to the content created.

When studying myths, it is important to acknowledge its variations; one can learn about the values and beliefs of the communities in which a myth was transmitted by comparing different versions. The same happens when source material inspires different adaptations. As Evallyo (2021) explains in her article *Transformations of the Other's Image in Transmedia Discussion on the Example of The Witcher*, "In the transmedia process, the authors of a new visual form pay attention to different accents in the original story, some of them are transformed, and others fade into the background." (p. 5), the creators of the adaptations will focus on different points, creating a different interpretation of the source material. Thus, Fantasy as a genre can be seen as an analog of myth. While fantasy creators draw inspiration from myth and folklore to create their plots, the human experience and all that entails (friendship, love, community, destiny, loss) continue to be explored and discussed, in a setting with monsters, mythical creatures, and magical abilities (Evallyo, 2021).

Following this line of thought, it is valuable to understand the modifications made to the original story of *The Witcher* by Andrzej Sapkowski to adapt it to an audiovisual format, as explored in previous chapters of this dissertation. Regardless of positive or negative feedback these alterations might have received, they still represent an alternative vision of the same story, reflecting a different time, place, political, and social context.

#### **4.1 From Local to Global**

*The Witcher* in all its elements and adaptations is a prime example of local/national cultural heritage becoming an international entertainment object – the commoditization of culture (Adamu, 2017). In the case of *The Witcher*, it is possible to observe this process as the inspiration for its creation came from cultural elements such as folklore and even Polish history, and it was turned into a commodity for consumption (Touzos, 2024). Indeed, through its adaptations, which all involve a product to be consumed (the books by Sapkowski (2109), CD Projekt RED's games, Netflix's (2019) TV show adaptation) *The Witcher* became an increasingly valuable product to be sold to a wider audience, generating more profit (Shaw, 2024). In fact, when US President Barack Obama visited Poland in 2011, Prime Minister Donald Tusk gifted him *The Witcher 2* game and the English version of two of Sapkowski's books that inspired the games as a diplomatic present. This gesture endorsed and validated *The Witcher* as a cultural product from Poland, a creation worth of national pride (Eklund et al., 2024).

Although viewership numbers have dropped from Season 1 to Season 3, following the announcement of Henry Cavill's departure from the role of Geralt (Tassi, 2023), it is possible to affirm that *The Witcher* became a product of mass consumption. Season 1 scored 89 million views in the first 90 days following its release (Shaw, 2024), Season 2 had 67 million views in the same period (Shaw, 2024), and Season 3 saw a drop of 15% in viewership compared to the already lower numbers of Season 2 (Shaw, 2024). The audience's reception for Seasons 1 and 2 was better than for Season 3, considering that only episodes from the first two seasons are featured in IMDb's (n.d.) Top-rated episodes of the show.

For Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), cultural products are produced for mass consumption in a capitalist society, which leads to a loss of the original value. "For the present the technology of the culture industry confines itself to standardization and mass production and sacrifices what once distinguished the logic of the work from that of

society” (Horkheimer & Adorno, p. 95, 2002), hence why the authors criticize the commodification of culture. As for *The Witcher*, this can be a consequence of its increased popularity. It started as a Polish cultural product and became a mass media cultural product.

On the other hand, considering Raymond Williams’s (1960) concept of cultural product as an expression of lived experience, the idea of a mass-consumed cultural product loses some negative connotation from the conceptualization above. The author believes that everyday life symbols, practices, and shared experiences of a community or society are as much cultural products as works of art literature, and other formal forms of expression (Williams, 1960). Therefore, even when the cultural product is mass-consumed it adds cultural value as it becomes part of a shared experience, a symbol on its own for the society that consumes it, that reflects the social conditions, power dynamics, and changes within that society.

In the case of *The Witcher*, being mass-consumed adds to the value of the fantasy universe created originally by Sapkowski, without losing its core values. It adds the shared experience of a global audience, bringing different ideas and topics of discussion such as diversity that inevitably bring the Polish origins of the source material to the forefront. It also visually represents a best-selling book series through a new interpretation that reflects the contemporary era.

Besides, Netflix (and other similar streaming platforms) transformed how people consume media. It eliminated interruptions such as credits or commercials, providing a smooth and uninterrupted experience when watching TV series and movies. The streaming platforms also removed the need to wait for the next episode of a TV show, as the entire season is available when it premieres (Griffith, 2020).

This model for streaming services allowed *The Witcher* to reach a larger audience, from devoted fans who were eager to watch the adaptation, to casual watchers, who had the show recommended on Netflix’s homepage (Griffith, 2020). Nonetheless, it brings new challenges as well. To adapt to this new way of experiencing media, changes had to be made. The choice to constantly alternate between timelines and storylines altered the pacing, forcing viewers to engage more attentively with the story or even rewatch it (Griffith, 2020). For instance, by adding an entire episode dedicated to Yennefer’s background story, which is relayed in Sapkowski’s books in small pieces of information,

Hissrich enabled the viewer to develop an emotional connection to the character and understand her motivations (Griffith, 2020).

Even though the author has a negative opinion of adaptations and the impact it has on his books (Purchase, 2012), the truth is that there is a symbiotic relationship between the books, the games, and the TV show. The CD ProjektRED games and Netflix productions exist because Sapkowski's books were successful. Nonetheless, the premiere of Season 1 of *The Witcher* brought a 554% increase in sales for *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (originally debuted in 2015) and 562% for *The Witcher* book series in December 2019, in the United States market (Grubb, 2020). Not every viewer will recognize Andrzej Sapkowski as the original creator of *The Witcher*. However, they still appreciate the intricate worldbuilding present both in CD Projekt RED games and in the Netflix production (Purchase, 2017).

*The Witcher's* universe demonstrates that mythology and folklore prevail in literary content and mass media products that adapt it. It is not only possible to turn culture into a commodity but also to disseminate knowledge about it. Indeed, the commoditization of culture can also be an agent of preservation, due to the audience's demands for the production of these objects (Medina, 2003). Additionally, it can attribute value to a cultural product as it becomes an object worth selling (Medina, 2003).

Certainly, some aspects of the original meaning that Andrzej Sapkowski infused into his books of *The Witcher* series are lost when adapted to a TV show meant for a global audience, that lacks a deep understanding of Polish culture and heritage. However, *The Witcher* sparked the conversation about culture, heritage, and representation while emphasizing how central the role of mythology and folklore still is in the way people represent, understand, and fantasize about their lives and the world around them.

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## **CHAPTER V – FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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## 5 Final Considerations

As proposed at the beginning of this dissertation, the connection between popular culture, myth, folklore, and mass media was explored and it proved to be a true challenge. Articulating such ideas and concepts was a complex project, although a very interesting one, that needed to be established to understand the commodization of culture.

While popular culture and mass media have a marked presence in our lives, defining those concepts was not easy. The idea of both is so engulfing that sometimes it hinders a broader perspective. Therefore, understanding how popular culture, storytelling, and mass media share a symbiotic relationship was the goal for Chapter I. It was necessary to establish that mass media functions as a tool to share popular culture, which, in turn, relies on storytelling methods to reach and immerse its audience.

The way we consume cultural content has changed as technology advances provide new tools that allow us to experience it (cultural content) differently. A story can now be experienced as novel, a comic book, a movie, and/or a videogame. Naturally, this brings us to new depths on culture and forces us to alter our storytelling methods, to best adapt to the new formats.

Sharing stories through word of mouth is not our only option anymore but even that ability has been enhanced by internet and social media – now, our oral transmission of stories is not limited to the group of people around us, it can be shared with the world in seconds.

Even so, as explained in Chapter II, with all this technological development, our stories continue to cover the same themes and motifs as the ones from our ancestors. Still, we borrow ideas, character constructs, and setting from ancient myths and folklore.

To illustrate it, *The Witcher* Universe was the case study of this dissertation, as it constitutes a cultural product that began as local and became global. Nonetheless, this movement was also a process that needed explanation and exploration. Therefore, a study of how this fantasy borrowed not only from Polish mythology but also from worldwide sources of folklore was carried out, to better present the idea of multicultural worldbuilding in a fiction work, that firstly catered to a limited audience (Polish people) but gradually took *The Witcher* to new audiences from different nationalities as the books

were translated, as well as audiences with diverse interests and preferences as transmedia adaptations turned this story in videogames and into a TV show.

Although with its fair share of controversy, *The Witcher* has established itself as one of the most successful fantasy works, in large part due to its masterful incorporation of mythology and folklore under a modern interpretation. It not only provides a new perspective but also brands it with contemporary ideas and issues, that represent contemporary context and concerns.

Naturally, there is still room for discussion on this matter, which had to be left out of this dissertation due to length limitations. Hopefully, this dissertation serves as a starting point for those who might be inclined to dive deeper into the subject of mythology in popular culture, how the culture that seems distant and forgotten is alive and well, incorporated into products of culture we consume every day. How a shared historical past, as is the case for Polish people, can be the source of such a rich world of fiction, that resonates with a global audience, as well. Streaming services', such as Netflix, contribution to how culture is produced and consumed could be the object of another investigation entirely.

Lastly, every contribution is meaningful to ensure a legacy will be passed on, even if a thousand years from now, they'll see us as primitive as we see our ancestors who first drew stories on cave stones.

The information that shapes our lives today is the new mythology, one day to be unearthed and rediscovered by a civilization far in the future that will wonder how we, too, went viral with the crude technology of our time. (...) Like us, they will wonder how information was embedded in our stories, movies, TV shows, novels, books, and so on; and they, like us, will attempt to construct an image of what life was like for us primitive folks in their distant past.

Jones & Flaxman, *Viral Mythology*, p. 26

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## Appendix I – [Table 1]

*Categorization of Myths, according to Baumgartner, Lanczowski, & Fries (1974)*

<b>Myth Archetype</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Theogonic</b>	Origins of the Gods	Myth of Gaia and Uranos – the Earth and her son, the Sun originated the Titans (Greek Mythology) (Witzel, 2012).
		<p>Myth of Aphrodite – born from the sea, where Uranos’ genitalia fell (Greek Mythology) (Larrington, 1992).</p> <p>Myth of Ra – God of the Sun that emerged from the sea of Chaos, Nun (Egyptian Mythology) (Garry, 2017).</p>
<b>Cosmogonic</b>	Creation of the World	<p>Myth of Odin – when Odin slew the primeval Frost Giant the world was created, and it will end when the Giants rise to defeat Odin in battle at Ragnarok (Norse Mythology) (Leeming, 2003).</p> <p>Myth Enuma Elish – the god Marduk, defeats Tiamat, the primordial mother, and divides the body into two parts, the heavens and the earth (Mesopotamian Mythology) (Witzel, 2012).</p>
<b>Anthropogonic</b>	Creation of humanity and natural occurrences (meteorological phenomena, geographical accidents, or death).	<p>Myth of Prometheus – the wisest Titan, that created humanity (Greek Mythology) (Brunel, 2015).</p> <p>Myth of Gerðr and Freyr – the marriage between the goddess of the earth, and the god of the Sun and fertility ensures the springtime regeneration of the earth (Norse Mythology) (Larrington, 1992).</p>