The Power of Chaos: Exploring Magic, Gender, and Agency in Netflix's *The Witcher*

In 2019, Netflix released the first season of its highly anticipated show *The Witcher.* Based on the books of Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, the fantasy show tells the intersecting stories of the Witcher Geralt of Rivia (Henry Cavill), the princess of Cintra Ciri (Freya Allan), and sorceress Yennefer of Vengerberg (Anya Chalotra), who is commonly referred to as a 'mage'. Although not as popular among critics as its original book incarnations and adapted game counterparts, the show went on to achieve an 89% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes and was subsequently renewed for more seasons. Although the general success of the show is clear among viewers, *The Witcher* was not without its detractors, who accused creator Lauren Hissrich of developing a *woke* series with a feminist agenda (Worrall), especially because of her desire to emphasise strong female characters (Crow). The latter is, of course, a direction that the Netflix series inherited from the video game version of *The Witcher* – especially *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* – even if the portrayal is often considered to be biased and "problematic" (Heritage).

Supporting the view that the show focusses on the character trajectories of independent and capable women is the analysis offered by Worrow (61), who attests that "the female representations in season one of *The Witcher* offer prominent female characters who are imbued with agency, institutional power and well-developed narrative arcs". Although Worrow's analysis offers a clear critical account of Yennefer's story arc – among the other female characters – what it does not consider is the relationship between women and magic, which has historically seen the mistreatment and ostracising of women as practitioners, and which tacitly informs representation in *The Witcher* by providing a gendered view of magical power. In response to this, the purpose of our article is to consider how Yennefer's pursuit of magic both maintains and challenges gender stereotypes, particularly as they pertain to sorceresses and witches. The analysis will focus primarily on the episodes of Season One.

Through the course of Season One, audiences are introduced to the character of Yennefer as she transitions from a deformed woman into a 'beautiful' sorceress. Alienated by her community because of a hunched back and cleft palate, Yennefer remains mistreated until she exhibits magical tendencies – or "the ability to conduct Chaos" (Guimarães). This is an aptitude that will later be revealed to be a direct outcome of her Elvin heritage (Worrow). Having gained the attention of Tissaia (MyAnna Buring), the Rectress of the magical school Aretuza, Yennefer is purchased from her family and relocated to Aretuza to train as a mage. Initially, Yennefer struggles with the magic training, where magic itself is referred to as "chaos". In particular, she specifically finds it hard to "control [her] chaos", as the series puts it, because of her emotional tendencies. After a short period of time, however, Yennefer develops into a strong, talented sorceress who is later instrumental in the final battle of Season One against the Nilfgaardian forces that are at war with the city-state of Cintra (Chitwood); the conflict with the kingdom of Nilfgaard is a central plot development in *The Witcher*, running across multiple seasons of the series. Throughout Season One, audiences view Yennefer's character development, as she sheds her kind, naïve personality in favour of becoming an agent of chaos, who is fully immersed in the political intrigue that influences the Continent – the broader geographical land where the events of *The Witcher* take place.

What It Means to Be a Sorceress

For the purpose of this article, we will be using the terms “sorceress” and “witch” interchangeably (Stratton). It is important to mention here that several strands of anthropological research contend that the two terms are not synonymous, with “sorcery” referring to the ability to “manipulate supernatural forces for malicious or deviant purposes” (Moro, 2); the term “witch”, on the other hand, would preferably be used for “people suspected of practising, either deliberately or unconsciously, socially prohibited forms of magic“ (Moro, 1). Nonetheless, historians and sociologists have long equated the two because of their prepotency to describe magic users who channel power for productive and nefarious purposes (Godsend; Lipscomb). We cite our understanding of these important terminologies in the latter critical area, seeing the important social, cultural, and political interconnections concomitantly held by the terms “sorceress” and “witch” in the context of magical practices within *The Witcher* series. ‘Mage’, for its part, seems to be used in the series as a gender-neutral term, openly recalling a well-known narrative trajectory from both fantasy novels and games.

Regardless of whether they were deemed witches, sorceresses, mages, or enchantresses, and despite historical records that prove the contrary, practitioners of magic, as such, have predominantly been gendered as female (Godwin; Stratton). Such a misconception has meant that stereotypes and representations of magic and witchcraft in popular culture have continued to show a penchant for depicting witches not only as female but also as powerful and intimidating beings that continuously challenge hegemonic power structures (Burger & Mix; Stratton). Historically, and especially so in the Western context, individuals labelled as witches and sorceresses have been ostracised, in some instances eradicated through mass killings, to ostensibly contain their power and remove the threat of the *evil* they inevitably embodied and represented (Johnson). This established historical framework is tacitly embedded in the narrative structure of *The Witcher*, with examples such as Yennefer often being portrayed as *out of control* because of her magical powers. The series, however, acknowledges unspoken historical truths and reinforces its own canon, as it is made clear throughout that men can also be magic users; indeed, the show includes a variety of male druids, sorcerers, and mages.

Where a potential gender divide exists, however, is in reference to the *Brotherhood of Sorcerers*, who seemingly control the activities and powers of magical practitioners. Although there is a female equivalent in Sapkowski’s novels, called the *Lodge of Sorceresses*, the first season of *The Witcher* does not openly engage with it. Such an omission could be construed as a gender concern in the Netflix show, as a patriarchal group seemingly oversees the activities of mages. As Worrow argues, the show implies that “The Brotherhood controls and legitimizes the use of magic” (66), and by being referred to as a ‘brotherhood’, creates a gender imbalance within the series. This interpretation is not unexpected, bearing in mind that gender studies scholars have consistently pointed out how structural inequalities exist, even in fictitious offerings. In social, cultural, and media contexts alike, these offerings subordinate women in favour of maintaining ideologies that advantage hegemonic masculinity (Connell; Butler).

Where the stereotypes of women diverge in *The Witcher,* however, is in the general characterisation of these powerful witches and sorceresses as empathetic and compassionate individuals. Across the history of representation, witches have been portrayed as cruel, evil, manipulative, and devious, making witches one of the most recognisable tropes of *evil women* in storytelling, from fairy tales to film, TV, novels, and games (Zipes). While a number of notable exceptions exist – one should only think here of *Practical Magic*, both in its book and film adaptations (1995/1998), as examples of texts exploring the notion of the *good witch* – the representational stereotype of witches as wicked and malevolent creatures has held centrally true. A witch's activities are generally focussed on controlling and bringing misfortune upon others, in favour of their own gain (Moro). As Schimmelpfennig puts it, the recurrent image of the witch is that of someone who is "envious" of others: "nobody loves, likes, or pities her. She seems to have brought disaster upon herself and lives on the margins of society, [often] visualised by her residence in the woods" (31). The common perception, as cemented in fictional contexts, has been that witches have nefarious and villainous intents, and their magical actions (especially) are perpetually motivated by this.

Although she was initially alienated by both her magical and non-magical communities, Yennefer's character development does not adhere exactly to the broadly established characterisation of witches. Admittedly, she does act in morally ambiguous ways. For example, in the episode "Bottled Appetites", her desire to have children leads her to attempt to control a jinn regardless of the dangerous costs to herself and others. And yet, in the following episode, "Rare Species", Yennefer changes her mind about trying to slay a dragon whose magical properties could help her, and instead works with Geralt to defend the Dragon and its family from Reavers. She also confronts injustices by helping to defend the territory of Sodden Hill which is threatened by Nilfgaardian forces ("Much More"). Rather than being *purely evil*, as witches have long been considered to be, Yennefer offers a more nuanced and relatable depiction, as both a witch and, arguably, a woman character. The moral complexity of Yennefer as a magical figure, then, not only makes for compelling viewing – with such magical characters often being an expected presence in mainstream programming (Greene) – but her continued growth, and the attention given to her identity development by showrunners, challenge gender stereotypes. On screen, female characters have often been treated as auxiliaries to their male counterparts (Taber et al.); they have fulfilled roles as mother, lover, or damsel in distress, reducing any potential for growth (Nairn). *The Witcher* Season One gives Yennefer her own arc and, in doing so, becomes a series that elevates the status of women rather than treating them as, to borrow Simone de Bauvoir's famous words, 'the second sex'.

Power & Empowerment

Differentiating Yennefer from the stereotypes of female characters, and witches/sorceresses more specifically within the broader popular media and culture landscape, is her obvious agency within *The Witcher* series. Gammage et al. argue that agency can be understood as "the capacity for purposive action, the ability to make decisions and pursue goals free from violence, retribution, and fear, but it also includes a cognitive dimension" (6).
Throughout *The Witcher,* Yennefer does not act subserviently and will even oppose the will of those around her. For example, in the episode "Before the Fall", she gives advice to young

girls training to be mages to ignore the instructions of their tutors and "to think for themselves" (26:19-26:20). She follows up by later telling the young mages about how Aretuza takes away their opportunity to bear children, to ensure the mages stay loyal to the cause. As she puts it: "Even if you do everything right, follow their rules, that's still no guarantee you will get what you want" (29:42-29:51). This exposes her character as not tied to traditional patriarchal notions of subservience. And while personal motivations may laterally aid the conception of witches as egotistical, her actions still stand out as being propelled by individual agency.

Female characters on screen have often been portrayed as submissive and passive, and this includes iconic on-screen witches from Samantha in *Bewitched* to the titular character in *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*. It is not uncommon to see *good witches* in popular media and culture, in particular, as still defined by male relationships in terms of cultural and social value (for instance, Sally Owens in *Practical Magic*, and Wanda Maximoff in the Marvel Cinematic Universe). As Godwin puts it, these characters embody the expected gender roles of a patriarchal society, with storylines, for example, that favour love potions or keeping house. As far as *The Witcher* is concerned, being submissive and passive is often in direct contrast with Yennefer's preferences. For example, in "Betrayer Moon", she intentionally ignores the decision of the Brotherhood to act as the mage in Nilfgaard by intentionally catching the eye of the King of Aedirn: the King then asks for Yennefer to be his mage. Fringilla (Mimi Ndiweni), who was supposed to be the mage in Aedirn, is forced to go to Nilfgaard instead. Yennefer's behaviour not only defies The Brotherhood in favour of her own interests but also demonstrates her unwillingness to conform to the expectations placed on her. Such depictions of Yennefer acting with agency make her, arguably, relatable to audiences. Female characters and witches such as Yennefer become emblematic of independent, competent women who use magic to take control of their own destiny (Burger and Mix) and can be praised for opposing "oppressive societal norms" and instead advocating for "independent thought" (Godwin 92).

It is possible to argue here that what drives Yennefer appears to be her sense of Otherness, as an intrinsic difference that is central to her being, both physically and emotionally. Although initially her *othered nature* is seemingly the product of her deformities and ethnic background (with elves being socially, culturally, and politically ostracised on the Continent), she openly admits to feeling *othered* throughout the series, even after her physical disfigurement is *cured* by magic. Her individualised agency makes her inevitably stand out and becomes a marker of difference. This representation is not dissimilar to the feelings expressed by women across First, Second, and Third-wave Feminism (Butler; Connell). Indeed, Worrow observes that "*The Witcher* encodes female characters with power as 'other', enhancing this otherness through magical abilities" (61). It would seem that, in essence, the show surreptitiously gives *voice* to the plight of minority groups through the hard work, dedication, and determination of Yennefer as an *Othered* character, as she struggles and defies expectations in pursuit of her goal of becoming a powerful sorceress. Her independence and agency tell a story of empowerment because, like other fictional witches of the last decade in the twenty-first century, Yennefer "refuses to pretend to be someone or something they are not, eschewing the lie to instead embody the truth of themselves, their identity's, and their unapologetic strength" (Burger and Mix 14). This profoundly diverges from other representations where being the 'other' was seen as a

justification for punishment, marginalisation, or mistreatment, and amply seen across the historicised media spectrum, from Disney films to horror narratives and beyond.

Nonetheless, although it appears as if Yennefer has agency and is empowered, there is the argument that she is a conduit of magic, and as such, lacks real power and influence without a capacity to control the chaos. As Godwin contends, witches are often limited in their capacity to be influential and to have true autonomy by the fact that they do not possess magic but are often seemingly controlled by it. At various times in Season One, Yennefer struggles to control the chaos magic. For example, while being beaten up, she inadvertently portals for the first time. During her magical training, she can't manage a number of magical tasks ("Four Marks"). Here, the suggestion is that she is not completely free to act as she chooses because it can produce unintentional consequences or no consequences at all; this conceptual enslavement to magic as the source of her power and individuality seemingly dilutes some of her agency. Furthermore, instances of her trying to control the chaos within the show also conform to stereotypes of women being ruled by emotions and prone to hysterical outbursts (Johnson).

Aesthetics & Sexuality

Stereotypically, and in keeping with fictional tropes in literature, media, and film, witches have been described as “mature” women, “with bad skin, crooked teeth, foul breath, a cackling laugh, and a big nose with a wart at the end of it” (Henderson 66). Classic examples include the witches depicted in the works of the Brothers Grimm, Disney’s instances of Madam Mim in *The Sword in the Stone* and the transformed Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), the witches of Roald Dahl’s eponymous novel (1983), and (even more traditionally and iconically) the hags of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1623). Yet, more recently the witch aesthetic has altered significantly in the media spectrum with an increased focus on young, alluring, and enchanting women, such as Rowan Fielding in *Mayfair Witches* (2023 –), Sabrina Spellman of *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018–2020), Freya Mikealson of *The Originals* (2013–2018), and of course, Yennefer in *The Witcher*. These examples emphasise that female magic users, much like a significant ratio of female characters in popular culture, are sexualised, with the seductive nature of the witch taking precedence and, in some cases, detracting from the character's agency as she becomes objectified for the male gaze (Mulvey). The hiring of actress Chaltora as Yennefer, although designed to challenge racialised beauty standards (Kain), does not dispel the treatment of women as sex objects as she is filmed nude during some magic rituals and in intimate scenes.

Importantly, and as briefly mentioned above, when Yennefer’s back story is told, she is introduced as a young woman with physical deformities. As part of her ascension to a sorceress, she is required to undergo a physical transformation to make her *beautiful*, as conventional beauty and allure appear to be requirements for mages. As Worrow (66) attests, she is seen “undergoing an invasive, painful, magical metamorphosis which remakes her in the image of classical feminine beauty”. Unsurprisingly, the makeover received backlash for being ableist (Calder), but the magical change also enforced stereotypical views of women needing to be “manicured and coiffed” (Eckert, 530) to have relevancy and value. Yennefer’s beautifying procedure could also be interpreted as paralleling current cultural

currents in contemporary society, where cosmetic interventions and physical transformations, often in the form of plastic surgery, are encouraged for women to be accepted. Indeed, Yennefer is shown as being much more accepted by human and mage communities alike after her transformation, as both her political and magical influence grows. In these terms, the portrayal of Yennefer maintains rather than challenges gender norms, making for a disappointing turn in the plotline of *The Witcher*.

The decision to submit to the transformation also came at a cost to Yennefer. She was forced to forfeit her uterus and by extension her potential to become a mother. Such a storyline conforms to Creed's long-standing perspective that "when a woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (118). Here, even after achieving the expected beauty standards, Yennefer is still treated as abject because she can no longer "fulfil the function dictated by patriarchal and phallocentric hegemony" (Worrow 68), which further contributes to the widespread ideological perspective that women's roles are to be nurturing and child-rearing (Bueskens). Of course, motherhood remains a contentious topic for Yennefer as, although she made the decision to forgo her uterus in pursuit of power and beauty, she later comes to regret that decision. In the episode "Rare Specifies", Yennefer admits to Geralt that she feels loss and sadness over her inability to reproduce, which contributes to the complexity and inner turmoil of her character, while equally reinforcing the perception that women should be mothers. Her initial independence and choice are undermined by her attempts to regain her uterus and later, in Season 3, by her adopting the role of mother figure to Ciri.

Conclusion

In many respects, the story arc of sorceress Yennefer of Vengerberg conforms to what McRobbie describes as female individualism, and Gill considers post-feminist. That is, Yennefer has choice and agency. She makes decisions out of a sense of entitlement, and privileges her desire for power, beauty, and freedom, sometimes above all else. Much like other post-feminist icons, Yennefer is empowered and challenges gender stereotypes that charge women with being passive and submissive. Yet, despite the fact that 60% of the writing credits are held by women on *The Witcher* (Worrow), Yennefer's character is still objectified. Although the male gaze might not always be privileged, there are examples where her sexuality is exploited; by being portrayed as physically attractive, desirable, and promiscuous, she still conforms to gender norms about ideal beauty standards. The sexuality of her character maintains perceptions of witches and sorceresses as seducers, and while she is not cavorting with Satan, as many witches have historically claimed to be (Stratton), her depiction maintains the adage that *sex sells* – at least as far as media production goes.

Ultimately, the character of Yennefer in *The Witcher* appears to be an attempt to respond to a tacit cultural desire for strong female characters with relatable storylines, without ostracising male fans. Despite the desire to include empowered female characters in the show, however, Yennefer is also depicted as a continuously unhappy and unfulfilled character, as her *value* becomes entangled with notions of motherhood. The balancing of these competing adages continues to simultaneously maintain and challenge stereotypes of witches and sorceresses, as representational exemplifications of women's experiences in media and culture.

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