

Degree Project

Level: Bachelor's

Fighting Patriarchy in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Sapkowski's *The Witcher Saga*

A Comparative Character Analysis Through a Feminist Lens

Author: Daniel Hellström

Supervisor: Billy Gray

Examiner: David Gray

Subject/main field of study: English (literature)

Course code: EN2028

Credits: 15 ECTS

Date of examination: 2024-01-09

At Dalarna University it is possible to publish the student thesis in full text in DiVA. The publishing is open access, which means the work will be freely accessible to read and download on the internet. This will significantly increase the dissemination and visibility of the student thesis.

Open access is becoming the standard route for spreading scientific and academic information on the internet. Dalarna University recommends that both researchers as well as students publish their work open access.

I give my/we give our consent for full text publishing (freely accessible on the internet, open access):

Yes ☒

No ☐

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Fantasy and Feminism.....	5
Éowyn of Rohan: A Shieldmaiden's Path to Agency	8
Yennefer's Complexity	12
Agency reimagined	19
Conclusion.....	22
Works Cited.....	24

Introduction

Modern fantasy literature has provided readers with empowered and active female characters such as Daenerys Targaryen, Celaena Sardothien and Hermione Granger. Today, one expects female characters to show agency and question patriarchal norms, however, this has not always been the case and owes its evolution to 20th-century feminism. This thesis seeks to comparatively analyze two female characters from similarly constructed patriarchal universes through a feminist lens. Lady Éowyn of Rohan from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Two Towers* (1954) and *The Return of the King* (1955) and Yennefer of Vengerberg from Andrzej Sapkowski's two collections of short stories, *The Sword of Destiny* (1992) and *The Last Wish* (1993), both provide excellent backdrops for this analysis where both characters' narratives are met with societal expectations, gender norms and patriarchal settings. Therefore, this thesis claims that both Éowyn and Yennefer share transformative experiences as they resist and challenge patriarchal norms in their pursuit for agency and empowerment.

Few people argue about the importance of Tolkien's contributions to modern fantasy literature - specifically to the sub-genre: high fantasy literature. Its meaning, first coined by Lloyd Alexander in an essay published in *Horn Magazine*, *High Fantasy and Heroic Romance* (1971), is summarized and visualized through a pot of soup in which there are "heroes and villains, fairy godmothers and wicked stepmothers, princesses and pig-keepers, prisoners and rescuers... the quest for the magical object and the set of tasks to be accomplished" (Alexander 2-3). John Clute and John Grant write in their online version of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) that high fantasy literature is also set in a secondary world that can be defined as "an autonomous world or venue which is not bound to mundane reality" (Clute and Grant 1997).

Tolkien lived an academic life, witnessed two world wars, and took part in World War One. Critics have discussed the importance of Tolkien's participation in the war, as it mirrors several relationships in *The Lord of the Rings* (Downs 70). Tolkien, with his genre-defining

collection of works *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), serves as a guide, not only as creator of a fantastical universe but also as a template author for complex characters, heroes, and heroines.

However, amidst the widespread acclaim and adulation, Tolkien has been faced with criticism regarding his works' lack of prominent female characters embodying central roles. In the introduction to *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan explain that the general critical interest in Tolkien's female characters began as early as 1971. They discuss how criticism has typically focused on Tolkien simply "ignoring women or placing them on unattainable pedestals" (Croft and Donovan 1). Tolkien's debut work adhering to Middle-earth, *The Hobbit*, has "virtually no females" whereas *The Lord of the Rings* only introduces a few (Coutras 187). Jack M. Downs develops the discussion regarding Tolkien's lack of female presence in his main narratives in the essay "Radiant and Terrible: Tolkien's Heroic Women as Correctives to the Romance and Epic Traditions" by prefacing that it is, on the surface, a difficult question to answer (Downs 55). While he agrees that the ratio of prominent female characters compared to male characters is low, he emphasizes that women are neither absent nor entirely confined to secondary roles within Middle-earth" (55).

Sarah Workman discusses Tolkien's creation of female roles in her essay "Female Valor Without Renown: Memory, Mourning and Loss at the Center of Middle-earth" (Workman 76-79). Her focus, like that of Downs, is to strengthen the views surrounding the lack of female narratives within Tolkien's works. Despite Workman's references to a misogynist Tolkien (76-77), she finds an interesting approach relating to how women "mourn their way into the narrative's core" (77). The shape of mourning takes place in several scenarios throughout Tolkien's works and is most dominantly portrayed in female characters being left behind when men go to war. Workman establishes that Tolkien's female characters "reject established

patterns of heroism that are often limited by gender stereotypes” and “defy stereotypes of passivity” (77).

Clute and Grant’s additions to the theme of gender disguise discussed in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* show how most genres of fiction have stereotypically dealt with female character portrayals and how authors have felt the need to disguise their heroines for the narrative to lead toward its climax. Indeed, Tolkien utilizes this perfectly in his narrative to propel it forward.

In her scholarly analysis *The Feminine Principle in Tolkien*, Melanie A. Rawls contends that one cannot acquire much insight into Tolkien’s view of women within both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as there are “too few women appearing in these books” (Rawls 99). However, after she had read Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* (1977), it changed how she perceived Tolkien’s female characters as it included far more women than his prior works included. In Rawls’ analysis, she expresses how Tolkien believes that there is no difference between sex and gender and that masculine and feminine traits are more relevant than gender to the narratives (99-101).

To conclude this section, Maria Raffaella Benvenuto argues in her essay “Against Stereotype: Éowyn and Lúthien as 20th-Century Women” that “while female characters in Tolkien’s fiction are indeed fewer and apparently less prominent than male ones, those which stand out are undisputedly among his most powerful creations” (Benvenuto 31). One female character who indeed stands out, despite the male-dominated universe of Middle-earth, is a symbol of resilience and defiance against societal pressure and patriarchal norms. Éowyn, a noblewoman of Rohan, embarks on a path to claim her agency and challenges the patriarchal expectations of womanhood.

As the father of high fantasy literature (Campbell 5), Tolkien paved the path for multiple future epics such as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997 - 2007), Christopher Paolini’s

Inheritance Cycle (2002), and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996) with the latter gaining a substantial increase in popularity due to HBO's TV adaptation of *Game of Thrones* (Yu). Through a similar phenomenon, combining critical video game success and TV adaptations, another high-fantasy fiction has recently attracted millions of readers: namely, Sapkowski's *The Witcher Saga* (1993-)

While doing background research for this thesis and using the keyword "Sapkowski" as a subject author in the MLA International Bibliography, only fifteen matches were found with only a handful written in English and even fewer relating to Sapkowski's literature. In expanding the research, a Swedish bachelor's thesis from Stockholm's University was found. However, it was not applicable to this thesis as it analyses feminine monstrosities within the series. Regardless, articles have been written about *The Witcher Saga* and the thesis will also include extracts and discussions from interviews with Sapkowski. Though not as critically well known as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Witcher Saga* has, since its conception, sold more than fifteen million copies and has been translated into 37 different languages according to an online article written by Paul Tassi in January 2020. Sapkowski, who was inspired by Tolkien as revealed in an interview with the Italian online magazine *Sugarpulp* (2019), introduces the reader to his own male-dominated "Middle-earth".

Sapkowski was born into a Polish family of academics in the aftermath of World War Two. Milos Milacic, a professor of language and literature, explains how Sapkowski held an economics degree and worked as a senior sales representative before branching out into full-time writing. In his article *Andrzej Sapkowski: The Creator of 'The Witcher'* he provides information regarding Sapkowski's background and how he is "a master of the genre" (Milacic). Sapkowski's world, The Continent, is a dark and harsh world filled with monsters, magic, and male-driven politics. While Sapkowski's primary focus is on monster hunter Geralt of Rivia - a Witcher who has gone through a series of mutations to receive monstrous strength,

feline-like agility, and magic capabilities, the reader also gets to intimately follow the second female character of this essay's feminist analysis, Yennefer of Vengerberg.

Yennefer hails from a low-status family from Vengerberg, the capital of Aedirn, a region on The Continent, and plays a crucial role in *The Witcher* universe. Her character is that of a powerful sorceress possessing formidable skills and knowledge which makes her a respected figure within the magical community in Sapkowski's universe. Yet, despite these powers her journey is not without its challenges as she grapples with societal expectations and gender biases. Yennefer's pursuit of power and navigation of this heavily male-dominated universe provides an interesting opportunity to cross-examine and analyze her character with that of Éowyn from *The Lord of the Rings*.

Fantasy and Feminism

Feminism has had an important part in evolving the portrayal of female characters within the fantasy genre. The significance of examining the progress made by showing what various impacts feminism has had in fantasy literature and its portrayal of female characters is therefore necessary. In her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex* (1949) Simone de Beauvoir famously wrote "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (de Beauvoir 293). This statement relates to what patriarchy has historically deemed as womanly and how women should conduct themselves in relation to men, whether it be through beauty standards, gender norms, or reproduction. De Beauvoir's work shares insights that provide cultural, historical, and religious context for patriarchal traits, societal pressure, and gender norms, and she became a pioneering figure in feminist theory in the middle of the 20th century (143, 155, 289). *The Second Sex* became an inspiration for among others American feminist Betty Friedan who, with her seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), transformed what feminism was to become. In the words of author Barbara Seaman: "The most important book of the twentieth century is *The Feminine Mystique*. Betty Friedan is to women what Martin Luther King, Jr., was to blacks" (2). Friedan

addresses several female stereotypes in America that include the role of the caretaker, the pursuit of female empowerment, women's rights, and equality (Friedan 11-19). She concludes that "[i]t was easier for me to start the women's movement which was needed to change society than to change my own personal life" (399).

Indeed, the importance of the second women's rights movement during the 1960s and 1970s has proven vital for the portrayal of female characters in fantasy literature. In her essay "Women in Literature: The Impact of Feminism on Fantasy Literature", Jessica Dassler argues that there were no "female voices" in fantasy literature before the 1960s (Dassler 2). In her examination of fantasy literature between the 1950s and the 1990s she shows how male authors wrote strong male characters and "one-dimensional female characters that added little to the story" (2).

Consequently, the second women's rights movement empowered female authors to write well-rounded and strong female characters, challenging the existing norms of characterization (2). This belief is also supported by Lori M. Campbell in her collection of essays *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy* (Campbell 5). With prominent works written during the 1980s, Campbell and Dassler both identify Marion Zimmer Bradley as a key modern author of fantasy and writer of empowered female characters within the fantasy genre and the "impact they had on the world around them" (Dassler 3). Bradley realized that, despite her love for Tolkien, in more than one thousand pages of *The Lord of the Rings* only three significant female characters appeared. According to Dassler, this revelation motivated Bradley to reorient the storyline, highlighting feminist elements and in doing so emphasizing the need for feminism in fantasy literature (10). Dassler argues that in Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), a reimagination of the Arthurian legend in which female characters have a much more central role, it is difficult to overlook the critique forwarded at the patriarchal society that western Christianity had created, and as such the 1980s became a stepping stone

for the “noticeable increase in strong-willed female characters” within fantasy literature (9). Dassler finalizes her findings by emphasizing how important the second women’s rights movement was through showcasing modern, strong, intelligent, and independent heroines like Hermione Granger from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) series, Beatrice Prior from Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* (2011-2013) and Suzanne Collins’ Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) (Dassler 18).

Furthermore, to elucidate how far feminism has pushed female characterization forward, Sarah J. Maas has created several modern female protagonists in her hit series *A Throne of Glass* (2012-2018) and *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015-ongoing). The respective series center around Celaena Sardothien and Feyre Archeron who both exhibit qualities that deviate from traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Maas and her characters' immense popularity is evident, as she has sold more than twenty-six million copies worldwide and amassed more than 11.5 billion views using Maas-related hashtags across social media platforms (McClusky).

With this background, this thesis aims to comparatively analyze two female characters from similarly constructed patriarchal universes. Comparing Éowyn in Tolkien's *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King* alongside Yennefer from Sapkowski's short story collections in *The Sword of Destiny* and *The Last Wish* can provide insight into both the shared traits and divergences in their pursuits of autonomy and transformative experiences as they resist and challenge patriarchal norms. In also sharing mediievally focused universes, the time gap between the two authors' active years and historical context will highlight interesting contrasts in how both authors characterize and depict both female characters.

Drawing upon feminist theory and scholarly materials dealing with specifically Tolkien, his literature, and the previously discussed general evolution of female characters within literature and fantasy, the essay will chronologically focus a chapter on Éowyn from the

aforementioned books before moving on to Yennefer in her own chapter. Subsequently, the essay will seek to compare and contrast the two characters in its third chapter, aiming to illuminate the contrasts and parallels in their respective journeys. Finally, a conclusive chapter seeks to synthesize and summarize the findings from this research.

Éowyn of Rohan: A Shieldmaiden's Path to Agency

Tolkien's second book pertaining to the trilogy of the Ring, *The Two Towers*, introduces Lady Éowyn of Rohan. Rohan is a kingdom of Men in Middle-earth inhabited by a skillful horse-riding people called the Rohirrim. Éowyn is of noble birth, being the sister-daughter to King Théoden, and calls herself a shieldmaiden. Despite only appearing a handful of times in *The Two Towers*, she gains traction and becomes a crucial part of Tolkien's narrative in *The Return of the King*. This chapter provides a chronological approach and follows Éowyn's transformative journey from a passive stereotypical character to one of Tolkien's most influential and important characters in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The reader is first introduced to Éowyn in the Halls of Meduseld within Edoras, the capital of Rohan. Initially portrayed as a passive "woman clad in white" attending to her king's needs, she rapidly becomes an integral part of the narrative in the brief time spent in Edoras (Tolkien 512). Rohan's traditional gender roles become evident in *The Two Towers* as even female nobility follow the roles of caregivers and household management. This aligns well with de Beauvoir's notions regarding gender norms and societal expectations as they shine clearly in Tolkien's initial portrayal of Éowyn (Second Sex 59). Her first interaction is that of a stereotypical maid giving care to King Théoden as the old man tries to get up from his throne (Tolkien 515).

Aragorn, a strong and empowered male character within the narrative, perceives Éowyn as very fair with hair like a river of gold. Tolkien describes Éowyn as "slender and tall she was in her white robe girt with silver; but strong she seemed and stern as steel, a daughter of kings"

(515). Already, one can attest to Tolkien's attempts at empowering Éowyn through his use of "stern as steel" and not merely a fair and defenseless woman. Tolkien seems to highlight her beauty yet allows her to possess strength and resilience which according to writer Laura Michel in her essay "Politically Incorrect: Tolkien, Women, and Feminism" firstly adheres to the socio-historical context of female characters being beautiful, and yet breaks the barrier of stereotypical weakness amongst women (58-60). Furthermore, his portrayal of Éowyn continuously uses 'fair' paired with symbols and synonyms of strength, elucidating Tolkien's need for the depiction of a strong and beautiful female character.

However, before Éowyn leaves the confines of patriarchal expectations of womanhood, she finds herself waiting on the king and a table full of powerful men within the golden halls of Meduseld (Tolkien 521). While not participating in the ongoing discussions, as politics were traditionally governed by men (Friedan 30), Éowyn listens eagerly and with intent (Tolkien 522). Aragorn has piqued her interest and she steps forward with more wine, hailing the lords of the table, and giving Aragorn specific praise. As their hands meet, she trembles at the touch, enabling Tolkien's small yet important trope for romance.

In a subsequent scene, Théoden collects all the lords and chiefs of Rohan, and the reader gets a first glimpse into Éowyn's value as a noblewoman. Before riding into war, Théoden proclaims that his only son is dead and that Éomer, brother to Éowyn, will be king of Rohan should Théoden not return (523). With Éomer also heading into the fold of war Théoden then asks sternly: "[w]hich of you will stay" with no response (523). However, in a hall full of men, Háma, an important minor character in Tolkien's narrative, announces that there are more than men able to accept the role of ruling in the king's absence: "There is Éowyn, daughter of Éomund, his sister. She is fearless and high-hearted. All love her. Let her be as lord to the Eorlingas, while we are gone" (523). Tolkien, with this quote, has introduced Éowyn as a

character and leader who has the respect of all of Rohan's people, again pushing the boundaries of traditional gender norms by proposing that a woman can take on a position of power. .

In delving further into the narrative, this paragraph touches upon Workman's notions of mourning as an attribute of strength for female characters within *The Lord of the Rings* (Workman 87). As Éowyn watches the Rohirrim march away into war she says: "A year shall I endure for every day that passes until your return" and Tolkien concludes the chapter with, "Far over the plain Éowyn saw the glitter of their spears, as she stood still, alone before the doors of the silent house" (523-25). Éowyn is ordered to stay behind and care for the people of Rohan while simultaneously grieving for the many lives that will perish which Workman argues is a strength and show of character.

In *The Return of the King*, Éowyn's character undergoes further evolution with one of the most important passages adhering to her characterization as a woman challenging patriarchal norms and societal expectations. With King Théoden's return, she engages in a discussion with Aragorn where she, initially, assumes the stereotypical role of nurturer and caretaker when she welcomes and accommodates Aragorn (783). However, this attitude quickly shifts as Aragorn discloses an immediate dangerous future for himself and his friends (784-5). Éowyn described as being "clad in white; but her eyes were on fire" lays her hand on Aragorn's arm: "if you must go, then let me ride in your following. For I am weary of skulking in the hills, and wish to face peril and battle" (784). This moment is a significant turning point and while Tolkien had hinted at Éowyn's strength and prowess through *The Two Towers*, it is with this passage that she reveals her true self and asserts her agency. Furthermore, when confronted with traditional societal expectations from Aragorn she emphasizes her need to contribute to the perilous times ahead:

Your duty is with your people, he answered.

Too often have I heard of duty, she cried. But am I not of the House of Eorl, a shieldmaiden and not a dry nurse? I have waited on faltering feet long enough.

Since they falter no longer, it seems, may I not now spend my life as I will. (784)

Éowyn's declaration expresses her longing for autonomy and the freedom to choose her path in life and by stating that she is a shieldmaiden she emphasizes her desire to be a warrior and protector rather than fulfilling conventional nurturing roles. This ties well into Terri Frontgia's 1991 essay titled "Archetypes, Stereotypes, and the Female Hero" in which she addresses different female archetypes and stereotypes in fantasy literature (Frontgia 15-6). Éowyn is beginning to assert her agency, leaving behind traditional archetypes like that of the caretaker or housewife (Friedan 47).

Adding to her claim, she continues, "Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return" (Tolkien 784). Aragorn reminds Éowyn of her accepted charge to govern at which Éowyn promptly holds her ground: "All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house... But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield a blade, and I do not fear either pain or death" (784). Tolkien, with this quote, empowers Éowyn by rejecting societal expectations of womanhood. Michel's words again come to mind, as she states that "Tolkien's sexism easily can be proven wrong when analyzing strong, active female characters" such as Éowyn (Michel 1).

Éowyn's activity in *The Return of the King* and her defiance of patriarchal orders becomes apparent during the battle of the Pelennor Fields where she travels in disguise with the Rohirrim under Dernhelm. Clute and Grant discuss the concept of gender disguise in their *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, as it frequents many different genres during the past couple of centuries. Clute and Grant exemplify how gender disguise appears in "[i]nnumerable gothic tales..." and is used within fantasy literature where societal expectations render female characters like Éowyn

unable to participate without patriarchal complications. Éowyn's male disguise is needed both for Tolkien's narrative suspense and since she would have been confined to the more traditional and passive role of the caretaker had she shown her true identity (Tolkien 785).

Nevertheless, her defiance of the king's orders proves decisive as she faces one extremely perilous foe. With the king on the brink of death, a disguised Éowyn steps forward to deliver one of Tolkien's most famous lines. The Witch-king of Angmar, Lord of the Nazgûl, tells Éowyn: "Thou Fool. No living man may hinder me", Éowyn answers, "But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn am I, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin. Begone, if you be not deathless! For living or dark undead, I will smite you, if you touch him." (841). Éowyn, the only woman in a battlefield full of thousands of men, elves, and orcs, stands alone to protect her king, and in ultimately beating the Witch-king reaches the peak of her autonomy, which also elucidates Tolkien's need for a strong-willed and empowered female character within Middle-earth. Campbell argues that Éowyn's portrayal is invaluable for the transition from the stereotypical damsel in distress to a more "nuanced, capable and heroic [woman]" (Campbell 2). Rawls contends that Éowyn is characterized as an equal regardless of gender through Tolkien's portrayal of her (Rawls 115-17). Éowyn's transitional journey from that of a passive caretaker to that of an active and empowered heroine, defying traditional gender roles when riding into war, is completed as she finds herself fully healed in the aftermath of the war (966).

Yennefer's Complexity

Sapkowski's *The Witcher* series (1992-1999) is comprised of two collections of short stories and six novels. This second character analysis focuses heavily on the two sets of short stories *The Sword of Destiny* (1992) and *The Last Wish* (1993) in which Yennefer of Vengerberg is both introduced and developed. While published one year later, Yennefer's introduction in *The Last Wish* will first be addressed and then proceed to the more informative *The Sword of*

Destiny. This character analysis cannot draw from secondary sources about Sapkowski due to the lack of available scholarly materials and instead seeks to add to and develop a feminist character analysis within *The Witcher Saga*. This chapter will therefore further discuss female characterization and autonomy reflecting upon themes such as reproduction and beautification.

In the first couple of short stories, Yennefer is only mentioned a handful of times and it is not until the last third of *The Last Wish* that the reader is properly introduced to this powerful sorceress. In multiple discussions between the high priestess of Melitele and Geralt, the main protagonist of the series, it is revealed that Yennefer is “mighty furious” with him, with no clear explanation as to why, and that she is looking for a seemingly non-existent cure (209). Her hunt for a cure becomes specifically important for Yennefer's characterization as it is later revealed that she has undergone a physical transformation to receive enhanced magical powers and physical beauty which has led to her sacrificing her fertility. Initial information regarding female magic users is supplied as the high priestess states: “She’s a sorceress. Like most female magicians, her ovaries are atrophied and it’s irreversible. She’ll never be able to have children” (211). However, Geralt simply implies that Yennefer is the exception and that she will find a way to reverse the spell, setting up one of the themes for her character, namely that of complexity.

Yennefer’s resolute choice to sacrifice her fertility in pursuit of power vividly exemplifies her departure from conventional gender roles, countering the patriarchal expectation that would relegate her to a role within the reproductive apparatus. Standing firmly against this norm, she aligns with de Beauvoir’s observations on the challenges women face due to “the burdens of reproduction” (74). De Beauvoir elucidates how conventional gender expectations, such as pregnancy, childbirth, and menstruation, historically rendered women into a state of dependency. She notes that women required the protection of male warriors for self-defense and the care of themselves and their children in a societal structure that marginalized their

autonomy (74). Women, often associated with motherhood and nurturing as presented by Friedan, rarely withdraw from these preconceived notions of womanhood, however, Sapkowski's depiction of Yennefer elucidates a strong sense of agency within her character. Furthermore, Yennefer's initial dismissal of reproductivity sheds light on her autonomy and her right to choose whether to have children, which aligns well with Friedan's promotion and address of women's rights to choose and defines the need for society to restructure and accommodate women who "happen to be the people who give birth" so that women can make human and responsible choices (Friedan 403). Yennefer embodies these new ideals in the various independent choices she makes throughout the series.

Geralt and Yennefer first meet in *The Last Wish* after a djinn, a genie-like entity, has possessed one of Geralt's close friends, Dandelion. In desperation, Geralt looks for help in a nearby town and finds that a sorceress has gained asylum and that nobody can get to her. However, Geralt, in need of aid, rushes to her location and after making short work of her guardian, engages in discussion with the newly awoken Yennefer (Sapkowski 226). Geralt, sarcastically, answers one of her questions and is immediately introduced to Yennefer's powerful magic. Sapkowski wastes no time in showing the reader that Yennefer will not tolerate any sort of demeaning behavior as "[a] golden streak shot out from her fingers... the discharge was so strong that it threw him back against the wall" (226). To preface this, and any future depictions of Yennefer's magic as a sorceress, Geralt is powerful in his own right but stands no chance against her powers. Her strong self-image is further portrayed as she tells Geralt exactly what to do without any restrictions or hesitations. She acknowledges her position of power, understanding Geralt's reliance on her assistance and recognizing her own extraordinary magical abilities. (229). Her multidimensionality is further explored as Sapkowski deliberately empowers Yennefer in an intense combat scene where she tries to master the previously mentioned djinn (264). When Geralt, stereotypically tries to save her from danger, she cries out

that Geralt underestimates her and that it is her choice, and risk (264). In a true patriarchal fashion, Geralt consistently tries to “save” Yennefer from her own choices and battles which aligns well with the standardized trope of a male hero trying to save his damsel in distress. Sapkowski, however, denies stereotypical depiction by giving Yennefer complete transparency and autonomy which departs from traditional fantasy characterization (Dassler 4).

Yennefer is continuously attributed as having absolute beauty, a beauty that “[s]he has turned into weapons. Weapons that she uses skillfully and without scruple” (235). Her beauty becomes a tool for political gain throughout the series which challenges traditional gender norms that often depict women as passive and counters the long tradition of fantasy authors portraying ugly women as evil sorceresses or witches (Clute and Grant). Geralt, however, sees through her beauty with his keen eyes. While the normal inhabitants of The Continent see Yennefer’s beauty as divine, Geralt sees several flaws: “He saw her left shoulder, slightly higher than her right. Her nose, slightly too long. Her lips, a touch too narrow. Her chin, receding a little too much. Her brows a little too irregular. Her eyes...” (236). Geralt indicates, that while she’s beautiful in her own way, she couldn’t pass as a great beauty (235). His perceptive skills become critical when he realizes that Yennefer, through means of magic, has altered her physicality into what she believes is her most beautiful self. Geralt perceives through looking into Yennefer’s cold and violet eyes, that she used to be a hunchbacked young woman (266). Yennefer’s transformation is needed for her to assert herself in The Continent’s male-driven society and it is important to note that it is her choice to create this beautiful image of herself. In Sapkowski’s universe, all sorceresses are considered beautiful as they would not be able to maneuver the male-driven landscape had they been depicted as traditionally ugly. One could argue that patriarchy wins because of this notion of beautification, however, Yennefer believes it is a small price to pay in order to receive benefits and power. More importantly, it has always been her personal choice to alter her physicality, which again shows agency and autonomy.

Sapkowski further empowers Yennefer by displaying language use, the casting of spells, and physical abilities. She is quick to tell Geralt when he is at fault, and consistently lashes out, both verbally and physically, at people of various stature, which is an attribute that Dassler argues would not be visible in female characters prior to the 1960s (Dassler 2-4). To provide context to how Yennefer asserts herself linguistically she often denies Geralt answers: “Let’s try this: it’s none of your damn business, witcher. Does that satisfy you?” (238). In a subsequent scene, she denies traditional patriarchy and chivalry, “[d]on’t try to charm me with your hard and insolent masculinity. You are the only one to think you’re insolent and hard” (241). Yennefer is consistently direct in her use of language; she curses and shouts out obscenities and does not restrain her reflections of what she wants or needs. Sapkowski’s choice of language reflects his needs for Yennefer’s sense of autonomy and agency which underscores her defiance of early 20th-century gender roles in which male writers “did not fully value the female character” (Dassler 16-17). De Beauvoir’s coinage of women as “the Other”, does not align with Yennefer’s characterization (163). Instead, Yennefer emerges as a character who goes beyond societal expectations and becomes a symbol of agency within the fantasy genre.

In Sapkowski’s *Sword of Destiny*, readers delve deeper into Yennefer’s complex layers relating to sexuality, her struggles with infertility, and the delicate dynamics in her relationship with Geralt. In the short story *The Bounds of Reason*, Geralt and Yennefer, having spent a couple of years away from one another, have an intense discussion regarding their falling out and why they are both involved in dragon-hunting business (35-7). When Geralt states that he wants to be there because of Yennefer, coolly implying that he has missed her, she responds:

I believe you, why not? she finally said. “Men like to meet their former lovers, like to relive memories. They like to imagine that erstwhile erotic ecstasies give them some kind of perpetual ownership of their partner. It enhances their self-importance. You are no exception. In spite of everything. (Sword of Destiny 36)

Sapkowski propels the narrative forward by denying settings of traditional patriarchy exemplified in this quotation, further empowering Yennefer in her dismissals of societal expectations and her navigation in *The Witcher Saga*. De Beauvoir wrote “History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy’s earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other” (de Beauvoir 163). Evidently, Yennefer’s characterization rejects this myth of womanhood and Sapkowski has without a doubt felt the need further to develop that of female characters within fantasy literature. In a 2015 interview with Daniele Cutali from *Sugarpulp.it*, Sapkowski spoke of his chain of thoughts when creating Yennefer. “[B]eing an avid fantasy reader I was sometimes really bored and disgusted with the stories in which the hero could easily have sex with any woman he wished because every woman was willing and eager to have sex with” (Cutali). This elucidates Sapkowski’s need for an active empowered female character who disagrees with basic male needs and patriarchy in general. Furthermore, he sends negative criticism towards stereotypical fantasy literature in which “[t]he woman was the prize of the hero... and as such had nothing to say, could only moan and faint in the hero’s powerful embrace” (Cutali). Sapkowski’s authorial intent is further explored as he addresses the need to complicate Geralt’s character growth. Yennefer is that complication “I created a woman character who simply refuses to be a fantasy cliché” (Cutali).

Despite being infertile, Yennefer’s intent to protect women and reproduction is evident when she, in a taunting discussion with a fellow male sorcerer, is tormented by her past decisions which made her barren. The sorcerer says, “[s]o take up bearing children, my dear; it’s the most natural pursuit for you. It will occupy the time you are currently fruitlessly wasting on dreaming up nonsense” (Sword of Destiny 43). Sapkowski deliberately includes varieties of societal expectations throughout the series however this one is specifically demeaning and shows how patriarchy and the male-driven magic community deem women only capable of

reproduction within the medieval contexts of *The Witcher Saga*. In a response to why Yennefer wants to eradicate dragons from The Continent, she answers “[t]he proper rhythm of reproduction will not be achieved, since human children are dependent for too long. Only a woman safe and secure behind town walls or in a stronghold can bear children according to the proper rhythm, which means one a year” (42). She continues, “Only a dragon, and no other monster, can threaten a town or a stronghold... This is why dragons must be utterly wiped out...” (42). Her response highlights her views and hopes for the future, and she intends to use her powers to fulfill this future. Sapkowski seems to emphasize that Yennefer, despite being infertile, will stand against anyone and anything to protect this utopia of hers which, again, asserts her agency and position of power within the magical community in the *Witcher* series.

Finally, a reflection regarding the theme of sex needs to be made in order to grasp both Sapkowski’s authorial intent and Yennefer’s characterization fully. Sapkowski does not romanticize sex as it is depicted as a reflection of pure lust and Yennefer is fully in charge of whom she has sexual relations with. In Sapkowski’s short story, “A Shard of Ice” included in *Sword of Destiny*, Yennefer faces emotional competition from both Geralt and a newly introduced character, a sorcerer named Istredd (86). The short story explores how Yennefer is in full control of her relationship with Geralt and her evident position of power between the two of them is revealed as he states that: “There was absolutely no point arguing with Yennefer.” (86) followed by, “contradicting Yennefer, as he knew, inevitably led to a fight, and a fight with Yennefer was not the safest thing” (87). Furthermore, Yennefer’s dominant sexual preferences are explored as Geralt describes extravagant environments in which they have slept (102). She continues to break boundaries and defy societal norms, as the story unveils that Yennefer has engaged in intimate relationships with both Istredd and Geralt within a matter of days (109). This, of course, ties well into Sapkowski’s intentions for Yennefer regarding his comments to deny the traditional female fantasy cliché (Cutali).

Agency reimaged

In the realm of high-fantasy literature, Éowyn and Yennefer emerge as two compelling female characters, each navigating their respective fictional worlds while confronting the challenges of patriarchy. Both characters share common ground as they grapple with the societal structures and gender norms that seek to constrain them, yet within their distinct narratives, these characters make choices that distinguish them from one another. This chapter delves into the comparative analysis of Éowyn and Yennefer, exploring how their responses to patriarchy diverge and converge.

Tolkien's characterization of Éowyn seems to be heavily influenced by his participation in World War One where Downs explains that through the knowledge of Tolkien's War participation, one can understand Éowyn's bitterness to Aragorn's gender-based dismissal "as there were no women on the battlefields of the First World War" (Downs 70). The same notion can be applied as Éowyn was left behind on several occasions, which gives Downs merit in his analysis of Tolkien as a World War One veteran where women were indeed staying behind the frontlines.

Sapkowski was brought up in a completely different societal and cultural context to that of Tolkien and directed criticism toward the fantasy genre, and sought to leave these "worn-out cliches" behind (Cutali). In this interview, Sapkowski candidly explains his role as an "avid reader of fantasy" and reveals some of his literary inspirations which, of course, include Tolkien, but also Marion Zimmer Bradley and her rendition of *The Mists of Avalon*, whom both Dassler and Campbell uniquely identified as a key author that helped authors transition from stereotypical female representation to the more active and empowered female character.

While Éowyn and Yennefer share commonalities within the high-fantasy genre, there are vast differences in their portrayals and specifically how they respond to patriarchy and societal expectations. De Beauvoir discusses how women have historically been in a state of

dependency where social expectations and patriarchy have confined women to traditional gender roles (de Beauvoir 74). Éowyn's introduction as a noblewoman, tending to her king's needs, confirms the stereotypical passive caretaker or mother figure that both de Beauvoir and Friedan address in their feminist works. Despite being selected as ruler-in-absence by her male peers she still pours wine and fulfills a passive role within the court of Rohan. Éowyn was never in contention to bring her shieldmaiden persona into battle, instead, patriarchy ruled that she was meant to stay behind and mourn the men while maintaining the health of the elderly, the women, and the children of Rohan. The patriarchy of Rohan aligns well with de Beauvoir's historical context where women were confined to feminine roles such as gardening, caretaking, and domestic work while the man goes to hunt or fish to provide sustenance for "the Other" (64). However, central to de Beauvoir's analysis lies the call for women's liberation where she argues that women must transcend the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures and for women to assert their autonomy. Furthermore, within the field of feminist theory, Friedan called for a similar liberation as the second women's rights movement began. Éowyn, who was initially confined to these Rohanesque notions of womanhood, breaks free from societal expectations in *The Return of the King*. Éowyn is denied participation a second time by Aragorn, and despite showing agency, in verbally revealing what she truly wants, she is still dismissed to passivity. Her only chance to participate is to travel under disguise as Dernhelm to liberate herself from these confines. Éowyn's transitional journey from a passive caretaker to an active and empowered female character reaches its peak as she confronts the King of the Nazgûl. Her activity then subsides and her lust for battle diminishes as she feels she has proven herself a capable shieldmaiden as she recuperates from the injuries sustained from her pivotal confrontation. Finally portrayed as an equal, Éowyn concludes, "[I] will be a shieldmaiden no longer, nor vie the great Riders, nor take joy only in the songs of slaying. I will be a healer, and love all the things that grow and are not barren" (966).

Yennefer, however, is instantly depicted as a character of strength and agency. She does not take no for an answer and consistently belittles patriarchy and Geralt's chivalry or claims which sends clear signals to the reader that harmonizes well with de Beauvoir's and Friedan's call for liberation. Her characterization relates more to her complex emotions and choices surrounding her infertility and how she projects power. The trope surrounding Yennefer's infertility becomes important in multiple ways in *The Last Wish* and *Sword of Destiny* as Sapkowski unveils hints of patriarchy through multiple different scenarios. One of these important scenarios pivots back to the male sorcerer depicted in Yennefer's analysis and how it portrays a typical patriarchal and demeaning response towards Yennefer's autonomy. It is evident that most men within the magical community see her sacrifice as something disgraceful not befitting the norms and expectations of womanhood. However, Yennefer has made an independent choice that relates to her own body and her own pursuit of power which indeed is a refusal of gender-based expectations. With her sacrifice, power has been achieved, completely dissolving her of a life that would have ruled her in a state of dependency and governed by men. Her position is made clear several times in her rejection of Geralt's chivalry, a typical representation of patriarchy where men protect women, as Yennefer simply is not a damsel in distress nor is she a prize to be won. Even in heated battles Yennefer declines patriarchal interventions and challenges traditional notions of heroism. She becomes the beacon of autonomy and agency that de Beauvoir and Friedan called for.

When addressing depiction, Yennefer is frequently portrayed as sexy and beautiful whereas Éowyn's most common adjective is 'fair'. Sapkowski leaves more room to analyze Yennefer's body whereas Tolkien provides a more metaphoric approach to the depiction of Éowyn's beauty. Completely excluded from the works of *The Lord of the Rings* is the theme of sex, which is thoroughly explored in Sapkowski's universe. Yennefer's emotional complexity regarding her sexual relationships with multiple men sends distinct messages that refuse

standardized tropes of romance and patriarchy. This is related to the historical and societal contexts in which both works were written, as the theme of sex was not a characteristic of fantasy due to its target audience mostly being minors prior to the 1960s and in Tolkien's case, an upbringing strongly influenced by Victorian and Edwardian values (Benvenuto 36-38). These values differ from contemporary Western values which also emphasize that feminist characterizations have come a long way since the middle of the 20th century, as their sexualities and preferences are seemingly more uncovered and common in modern fantasy literature where women who like sex can have sex, as men have always been allowed to (Clute and Grant).

Conclusion

This thesis has undertaken a comparative character analysis between Éowyn from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Yennefer of Vengerberg from Sapkowski's *The Witcher Saga*. The perspective of the analyses has been explored through a feminist lens and has provided a thorough background into the important critical sources relating to Tolkien and his historical context while also applying feminist theories from Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. Its background has touched upon the importance of feminism, especially the second women's rights movement, where Lori M. Campbell and Jessica Dasser illuminated its importance and how it affected authors portraying female characters since its introduction. In this thesis' initial discussion, it has been revealed that there were very few secondary critical sources pertaining to Sapkowski and his literature and nothing applicable when it comes to the characterization of Yennefer or other women within *The Witcher Saga*. However, interviews with Sapkowski and articles about the author have revealed his authorial intent and given insights into sources of various inspirations and his rejection of unmodern fantasy literature in which women are simply tools or male prizes.

With this background, the purpose of the thesis has been to broaden scholarly analysis into Sapkowski's universe, which to date, is severely underrepresented, and to provide evidence

of feminism's role in taking female characters further than the conventional roles that they so stereotypically had been placed in through the evolution of literature and fantasy in general. Strong female characters have indeed surfaced, with Éowyn and Tolkien providing a stepping-stone for future authors' depiction of empowered female characters in fantasy literature, such as Martin's Daenerys Targaryen, Maas's Celaena Sardothien, and Sapkowski's Yennefer of Vengerberg.

It was revealed in the analysis of Éowyn that her fights against patriarchy differed from those of Yennefer's and that she had to achieve agency through a much more thorough transitional journey. She was consistently denied and had no real say as a woman in a society where patriarchy ruled her as a caretaker and nurturer with a passive position of power. Tolkien's intentions were arguably always to empower Éowyn and through her gender disguise managed to immortalize her contributions as an equal in the field of battle. Yennefer, when introduced, had already undergone a transition to power and agency and is portrayed as an empowered female character who shows no traits of the stereotypical woman in fantasy literature as explained by Sapkowski in his complete rejection of fantasy clichés. Yennefer is never seen as a passive character and takes a central role in Sapkowski's world without needing a backstory of events to move her closer into the core narrative.

The scholarly field of female characterization in fantasy is surprisingly underdeveloped with few sources that touch upon the subjects. Lori M. Campbell meaningfully brought the lack of research to attention in *A Quest of Her Own* where she explains that she too "[w]as surprised to find very little substantive work had been done on the female hero" (Campbell 5). However, with Campbell and Dassler both, in part, attributing female character development to Zimmer Bradley, who was identified as an inspiration for Sapkowski, and the ever-increasing popularity in high-fantasy fiction with empowered female protagonists capable of projecting true agency,

one can say that female characterization as a conventional stereotypical role in fantasy is being looked at through the rear-view mirrors of feminism.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Lloyd. "High Fantasy and Heroic Romance." Horn Magazine, December 1971
<http://www.hbook.com/1971/12/choosing-books/horn-book-magazine/high-fantasy-and-heroic-romance/> Accessed 2023-09-27
- Benvenuto, Maria Raffaella. "Against Stereotype: Éowyn and Lúthien as 20th-Century Women." *Tolkien and Modernity I*, edited by Frank Weinreich and Thomas M. Honegger, Walking Tree Publishers, October 2006.
- Brunoro, Giacomo "Sapkowski: The Witcher - Lucca Comics & Games 2019." *Sugarpulp.it*
<https://sugarpulp.it/sapkowski-the-witcher-lucca-comics-and-games-2019/> Accessed 2023-09-24
- Campbell, Lori M. *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*. McFarland & Company, 2014.
- Clute, John and Grant, John. "Gender Disguise". *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, edited by John Clute and John Grant, 1997. https://sf-encyclopedia.com/fe/gender_disguise Accessed 2 January 2024.
- Clute, John and Grant, John. "Secondary World". *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, edited by John Clute and John Grant, 1997. https://sf-encyclopedia.com/fe/secondary_world Accessed 5 January 2024.
- Clute, John and Grant, John. "Sex". *Science Fiction Encyclopedia*, edited by John Clute and John Grant, 1997. <https://sf-encyclopedia.com/fe/sex> Accessed 5 January 2024.
- Coutras, Lisa. *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle-earth*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

- Croft, Janet Brennan, and Leslie A. Donovan, editors. *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Mythopoeic Press, 2015.
- Cutali, Daniele. "Interview with Andrzej Sapkowski". *Sugarpulp*, 13 July 2015, <https://sugarpulp.it/en/26893/> Accessed 2023-10-29
- Dassler, Jessica. "Women in Literature: The Impact of Feminism on Fantasy Literature, 1950-1990." *International Social Science Review*, vol. 97, no. 4, 2021, pp. 1-20.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 2011.
- Downs, Jack M. "Radiant and Terrible: Tolkien's Heroic Women as Correctives to the Romance and Epic Traditions". *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy*, edited by Lori M. Campbell, McFarland & Company, 2014
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1963
- Frontgia, Terri. "Archetypes, Stereotypes, and The Female Hero: Transformations in Contemporary Perspectives". *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1991, article 3. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol18/iss1/3>. Accessed 2023-10-18
- McClusky, Ben. "Bloomsbury Announces New Epic Novel from Sarah J. Maas." Bloomsbury Publishing, www.bloomsbury.com/uk/connect/latest-news/bloomsbury-announces-new-epic-novel-from-sarah-j-maas/. Accessed 2023-10-9
- Michel, Laura. "Politically Incorrect: Tolkien, Women, and Feminism." *Tolkien and Modernity* 1 (2006): 55-76.
- Milacic, Milos. "Andrzej Sapkowski: The Creator of 'The Witcher'". Thecollector.com, July 6, 2023, <https://www.thecollector.com/creator-the-witcher-andrej-sapkowski/>. Accessed 2023-11-01

Rawls, Melanie A. "The Feminine Principle in Tolkien." *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A.

Donovan, Mythopoeic Press, 2015.

Sapkowski, Andrzej. *The Last Wish*. Gollancz, 2020.

Tassi, Paul. "Netflix's 'The Witcher' Has Sold Out Physical Copies of the Books on Amazon, in Stores." *Forbes*, 5 January 2020,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2020/01/05/netflixs-the-witcher-has-sold-out-physical-copies-of-the-books-on-amazon-in-stores/?sh=170a6630102a>. Accessed 2023-09-24

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Two Towers*. Houghton Mifflin, 1954.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. Houghton Mifflin, 1955.

Workman, Sarah. "Female Valor without Renown: Memory, Mourning, and Loss at the Center of Middle-earth." *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy* (2014): 76-79.

Yu, Charles. "George R.R. Martin, Fantasy's Reigning King." *The New York Times*, 15

October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/t-magazine/george-rr-martin-got-interview.html/> Accessed 2023-09-27