

THE PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE:

THE

# WITCHER<sup>®</sup>



EDITED BY RACHEL KOWERT, PHD



# THE PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE



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THE WITCHER

EDITED BY RACHEL KOWERT,  
PHD

Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press

Pittsburgh, PA



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THE PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE

## Psychgeist of Pop Culture Series

Edited by Rachel Kowert, PhD

Carnegie Mellon University: ETC Press  
Pittsburg, PA

Over the last few decades interest in pop psychology has grown faster than our Netflix backlogs. This series highlights iconic pop culture content from television, film, literature, and video games through an examination of the psychological mechanisms that endear us to these stories for a lifetime.

Series titles

*The Witcher* (2023), edited by Rachel Kowert, PhD



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Please note that throughout the book several acronyms are used to abbreviate the chapter titles from The Witcher series of books by Andrzej Sapkowski:

The Last Wish, TLW

Sword of Destiny, SoD

Blood of Elves, BoE

Time of Contempt, ToC

Baptism of Fire, BoF

The Tower of the Swallow, ToS

The Lady of the the Lake, LoL

Also note that when referencing the The Witcher Netflix series, the seasons and episodes are abbreviated. For example, “S1 E2” refers to Season 1, Episode 2, Four Marks.

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# THE WITCHER

# WELCOME TO THE CONTINENT

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Rachel Kowert, PhD

“Do you know what learning gives you? The ability to use sources.”

-Vysogota of Corvo to Ciri, *The Tower of Swallows*

In a world where men are monsters and monsters are men ... Who is the real monster?

The *Witcher* series of books first entered the world's hearts and minds in 1990 when Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski published his first collection of short stories entitled *The Witcher* (*Wiedźmin*). Over the next two decades, these stories would grow into a series of six fantasy novels and 15 short stories. Today, they have been translated into 37 languages and have sold more than 15 million copies worldwide.

Flash forward to 2023, the time when this book is being written, and *The Witcher* has become a transmedia powerhouse. Not only are they a best-selling book franchise, but a critically acclaimed

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video game series (selling more than 50 million copies worldwide) and a popular *Netflix* series.

*The Witcher* has all the makings of a classic fantasy series. Magic and mystery. Love and loss. Monsters and men. At the center of it all is the witcher, Geralt of Rivia. A monster-hunting, mercenary for hire. Throughout his adventures, we learn that Geralt, and all witchers, are seen as an unfortunate necessity of society at best and a monster themselves at worst.

In this series of edited essays, we explore the psychology behind what makes this fandom so captivating. Topics discussed within these pages include grief, trauma, and resilience through the eyes of Yennefer and Ciri, leadership and parenting through the experiences of Tissaia and Vesemir, the ethics of the Witcher code, and the embodiment of Geralt himself (among others).

In the end, I, and the other authors whose words are contained within the following pages, hope that examining this series from a new, psychological lens will help uncover why, in the Continent filled with fantastical magic, we feel so drawn to the stories contained within the world of *The Witcher*. And, if we just look hard enough, we may even find ourselves and our lives reflected within them.



# EMBODYING GERALT THROUGH VOCAL PERFORMANCE

---

Doug Cockle

I would like to be able to say that my performance as the voice of Geralt emerged through a process of rigorous academic and practical research into the psychology of his personality, his world and his place in it. I would like to be able to say that this research led me to experiment with vocal tones and rhythms and that through structured improvisation I “found” his voice in a moment of creative inspiration. I would like to be able to say all of this, but all of it would be a bald-faced lie.

My vocal performance was essentially “found” when, in the audition for *Witcher 1*, it was suggested that I think of Clint Eastwood in “Dirty Harry”. This was the research and inspiration which led to my performance in the games. Fairly boring on the surface.

I have been told by a certain editor of this book that:

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“Your embodiment of Geralt is iconic. You bring humanity and (some may say... I would say) kindness and empathy to the character that could have easily gotten lost as someone who was created to be a reclusive, nomadic, ...grouch.”

Gee... Thanks Rachel!

As ever with creative endeavors, there is more to this story than simply “Dirty Harry”. Choices were made, consequences suffered... or celebrated and over time an iconic character was brought to life fully in Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt and its DLCs. Please grab a stool or a bench or a corner of the tavern bar and with a strong Redanian Ale in hand, or a nice glass of Est Est, join me as I channel good old Dandelion and tell you the tale of my journey with Geralt of Rivia.

### On acting

Embodiment refers to the representation of expression of something in a tangible or visible form. But before we explore the development of Geralt and his voice – how I approached the embodiment of him – I would first like to offer some context.

Acting is acting; Whether the performance is for stage or digital media (television, film, radio, voice over, etc.) the fundamental nature of acting is the same. Different mediums require different approaches due to the specific freedoms and constraints put upon the performer by technical requirements, but the act of acting is, at its core, the same.

I would like to share with you two thoughts on acting from one

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of the great American acting teachers of the 20th Century, Mr. Sanford Meisner<sup>1</sup>

Acting is “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances (p. 15)”  
and “The foundation of acting is the reality of doing (p. 16).”

These two thoughts on acting have become the starting points in my approach to performance. Any former student of mine (I have taught acting at university level for many years) will very likely now be grinning away recognising the truth of this as it also forms the basis of how I teach acting.

This is what the actor is attempting to accomplish during performance: To really do, as much as possible, what the character is attempting to do as truthfully as possible. Of course, this does not mean that the actor puts them self or others at risk of physical injury and so safety measures developed in rehearsals, however short they may or may not be, must be taken, but as much as the actor is able they must do what the character needs to do to accomplish their goals in this moment of the story.

Voice acting in video games is a somewhat unique environment in which to do this. While in theater, film and television the actor more often than not will have other actors to work with and respond to in performance, a costume to wear, props to be handled and a set or location to perform within, all of which inform and contribute to the actor’s efforts to behave truthfully in an imaginary environment, in voice acting none of these exist. A typical recording session for a video game has the actor in a soundproofed room with a microphone, a pair of headphones and a tv monitor with the script on it. They are wearing their own

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clothing, have no props and the room is often sterile of anything but cables and a stool to sit on if desired. There are no other actors but there is usually a director and an audio engineer in the control room visible through double paned glass and able to be heard through the headphones. The actor normally has little to respond to other than the director's reading of the other characters' lines or, if very fortunate, the other actor's already recorded lines being played back in order to give some sense of the normal call and response dynamic between performers on stage or screen. It is a challenging environment in which to attempt a truthful performance.

When asked what the main difference between acting on stage and screen and acting for video games is, my response is that the actor must engage their imagination in a more focussed, playful and creative way while recording for games. Not that the actor's imagination is not important in other mediums, but that because most acting for video games is performed in an environment lacking all or most of those helpful other things that the actor can use to assist their immersion in the world of the character. The actor in video games must create those things in their own imagination. I suppose it is like the difference between actually playing a sport and imagining yourself playing a sport. A crude but somewhat helpful comparison I hope. While actually playing the sport the player focusses on responding to the environment and the gameplay using their imagination to inform strategy and tactics for winning the game. Imagining yourself playing a sport requires you to not only consider strategy and tactics, but to also create the game itself, the environment and even the other players' actions which requires a very different engagement of the

individual's imagination. I believe the same to be true for acting in video games.

### Embodying Geralt

As already mentioned, I came to perform the role of Geralt via an audition in late 2004. While it is a very concise version of what happened in the audition, my description above of the moment when Geralt's voice was found encapsulates well what actually happened. I was offered the role and we recorded *Witcher 1* sometime during the Spring of 2005.

Typical for most game recording sessions at the time, I was given little information about the character or their world prior to recording. In 2005, the wonderful books by Andrzej Sapkowski, on which the *Witcher* video game was based, had not yet been translated into English and I knew nothing of the Polish television series from 2002. Available to me were the concept art samples and the knowledge of the *Witcher* world that the crew from CD Projekt brought with them to inform my approach to performing Geralt. These resources and my own love of Fantasy art, literature and films are what informed my early performances of Geralt's voice.

When I first arrived at the studio I was met by the head of the studio, the audio engineer who would be managing the technical side of the sessions and a team of four or five CD Projekt staff who would be overseeing the recordings. They shared with me some concept art which gave me an insight into Geralt's world and his place in it and then we began recording. Lest it be thought that this might seem to be a slightly rushed introduction to the



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richness of the Witcher world, this is a fairly typical scenario when recording voices for games.

From the CD Projekt team I learned that Geralt is a mutant human; That witchers are created through a process of rigorous training, education and eventually exposure to strong mutagenic substances that, with the help of specialist magic, transform a normal human into a different being. A being that is still human, but is stronger, faster, better coordinated, tougher and able to endure more than a normal human. This alchemical process is called the “Trial of the Grasses” and, I was told, renders the object of the process “emotionless”. This “emotionless” state of being was to become my greatest challenge in embodying Geralt.

Actors deal in emotion. It is a large part of what we do. The idea of performing a character who is emotionless is anathema to an actor. All human beings have emotions. We express them. We suppress them. We manipulate or utilize them. Emotions are central to our humanity. To perform Geralt as “emotionless” was to remove his humanity. Which was precisely the point. He was meant to be “other”; To be outside of accepted humanity. A tool to be used when needed and discarded, often with disdain, when finished with it.

I was never comfortable with Geralt being emotionless. Not only because I am an actor dealing partly in emotions, but because characters, for me, are most interesting when their actions are at least partly the result of strongly felt emotions. My own training as an actor has led me to value emotions in performance resulting from strong efforts to “do” something and either achieving that something or being denied it. However, the need to do something

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has to emerge from a desire, which itself can be considered an emotion. Geralt had to have reasons for doing things, a need, a desire, to achieve something. Even the simple need to earn coin by killing monsters for communities under threat is a desire to be fed, clothed and, dare I say it, to feel needed and useful?

Early on I took the opinion that Geralt was not emotionless. Instead, I chose to see him as a man, doing a challenging and difficult job that needs doing but is inherently exceptionally dangerous, for people who largely do not value him or his occupation and are often frightened of him. He lives the life of the necessary but derided and feared outsider. He feels undervalued, hated, scoffed at and wary of those around him. He feels deeply. However, he cannot allow his feelings to determine his actions. That way death lies. Thus, he suppresses them.

I never openly discussed these thoughts with the CD Projekt team as I felt it was not important to the task at hand to do so. It was however important for me to have that understanding of Geralt in order to do things truthfully under the imaginary circumstances. So I carried on secretly giving Geralt feelings.

This did result though in a constant need for the CD Projekt team to pull me back from the emotion precipice. Each recording session was punctuated by, among other things, notes from the team such as “Great! Now let’s just do that again and flatten him out a bit more” or “too much... don’t care so much about it.” It is perhaps important to point out that I was not going full bore wailing or laughing with abandon. These were notes that required very tiny adjustments to performance on my part, but they were

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indicative of the pushing of the emotional boundaries that I was playing with whether consciously or unconsciously.

Thankfully, as the game series moved through the years, the narrative designers and writers allowed Geralt more of an emotional life and I was able to play more with those inner desires and how Geralt expresses them in his speech. Whether it was me giving Geralt emotions which inspired the writers to expand his world of feelings or the writers finding their confidence and realizing the scope for and value in allowing him an emotional life that I could then play with which got him to where he ended up, I'm not sure. I think though that it was probably a combination of the two factors: A collaboration.

### Geralt and me

I am sometimes asked how much of me is in Geralt and/or how much of Geralt have I taken into myself. A very difficult question to answer! I am of the belief that an actor can only really bring their own lived experiences, thoughts, feelings and knowledge to bear when portraying a character. That the only way to actually find truth in performance is to work from the self. I like to think that "character" is actually the sum total of the actions that we take, both in real life and in acting. After all, an actor can't really be someone else. An actor can, however, behave as if they are someone else. Costumes, sets, props, other characters help to define the where, when and why around the character's actions, but it is the actions themselves which an audience unconsciously identifies as "character". This is, I think, a fancy way of saying that the only way I know how to inform a character's actions, to embody a character, is to place myself in the role of that character.

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To use me; All the bits that best fit into this character as I understand them. With this in mind... Geralt is me. Embodying him is really an embodiment of me. He, as a character in the game, is partly made up of all the bits of the real me that work for Geralt. Video Game Geralt, the voice at least, is Doug.

As to what bits of Geralt I have taken on in my own psyche, I have no idea. If I gave something of myself to create my performance of Geralt, then perhaps I have acknowledged and maybe celebrated those aspects of myself which informed my performance. I would be hard pressed to point out exactly what aspects of myself those might be. There is a potential laundry list involved in that which is probably best suited to a therapist's sofa than to this chapter in this book.

I can say this though. Playing Geralt has given me opportunities to meet so many wonderful people over the years who I would very likely never have met had I not played Geralt. From the amazing people who I worked with on the game, to the millions of Witcher fans all over the world who I've had the great pleasure to interact with in various ways, I have found myself in a global community the likes of which I couldn't have dreamed up. Geralt has given me the whole of *The Witcher* community.

Also, over the years my vocal cords have been trained, much like an athlete trains their muscles. A voice which, at first, was a damaging strain on my body and energy has become one which I easily fall into in real life and don't realize I am doing it until I hear myself say something completely boring in that iconic voice; Something like "Damn... have to fold the laundry" or "Where the

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heck is the remote control... I left it here yesterday” suddenly take on epic proportions.

I guess you could say that Geralt’s voice is firmly my own now, and mine his, and he will be with me always.

Good Luck on the Path my friends.

Love and Roach whiskers,

Doug/Geralt

### Notes

1. Longwell, D. & Meisner, S., (1987). Sanford Meisner on Acting. New York, NY. Random House Inc. Pg. 16.



# THE OUTSIDER WITHIN

---

*Geralt of Rivia Through Monster Theory*

Seth Pierce, PhD

## Introduction

Monster hunters occupy a liminal space. They are hired to rid the world of the monstrous but are often viewed as monstrous by the same people who hire them. They hunt those entities that cause fear but are feared themselves as something monstrous. Often the line between monster and monster hunter become blurred. In Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher* novels, and the media properties they have inspired, Geralt of Rivia embodies the monster hunter who is both needed and rejected, desirable and feared, monster hunter and monstrous. Geralt's position puts him in good company as many monster media franchises place the figure of the monster hunter in-between what society desires and what society fears.

For example, In *Netflix's Castlevania*, the monster hunting

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Belmonts clan is required to battle Dracula's horde, while being held in suspicion by those who need them. In a scene from the first episode, the last of the Belmonts, Trevor, is caught with the family crest and attacked as the reason Dracula's hordes have returned. While fighting off his drunk assailants, he attempts to lecture them on his family's role in preventing evil, not causing it<sup>1</sup>. Even though Trevor becomes a protagonist and engages in his family's monster hunting work, there remains a wariness of his close dealings with the monstrous.

Joseph Delaney's bestselling *Last Apprentice* series also displays social reticence around monster hunters. Spooks, the seventh sons of seventh sons, possess special powers to help fight "the Dark." However, as necessary as they are to the county they serve, locals keep their distance. In one scene from *The Witch's Revenge*, Tom, the would-be apprentice of the spook, is told by his brother, "The only friends you'll have are the ones you'll buy"<sup>2</sup>. Tom, as narrator, admits that he would likely spend his life "alone." As Tom's training progresses, he returns to the family farm to save his baby nephew from a witch. Even though he is successful, what is done to defeat the witch is so horrible that even his sister-in-law, a constant support against his brother's wariness, becomes frightened of him.

This theme is repeated in Rebecca Roanhorse's dystopian *Trail of Lightning*. The story features a female Navajo monster hunter navigating a post-apocalyptic world. Written in first-person, Maggie the monster hunter often muses on her status. She ponders her ability and worthiness of friends, as well as her place in society. She tells the reader that she is not a hero, but "a last

resort” when heroes have died. She contemplates her future noting that “I could be a monsterslayer, or I could be a monster”<sup>3</sup>. Regardless of gender or race, the figure of the monster hunter occupies a liminal space. Societies need them, but are also wary of their work, their proximity to the monstrous, and their superhuman abilities.

While the monster hunter trope appears to be well established, this trope is not merely superficial. This chapter will explore the monster hunter, specifically Geralt of Rivia, through the lens of the “outsider within” and monster theory. These lenses will add depth to the trope and help us to “read” Geralt of Rivia, the witcher, in a way that speaks to contemporary realities and monsters that society must battle.

### The “Outsider Within”

Geralt of Rivia is the primary protagonist of *The Witcher* series of books. As a child, Geralt is given up by his mother (witchers typically begin as orphaned boys) to the witcher school at Kaer Mohren. He is subjected to an alchemical process called The Trial of Grasses. This process mutates and enhances his body in order to fit him for the dangerous work of a witcher. Most boys do not survive the trials, and due to young Geralt’s resilience in face of the trials, he is given more extreme measures to complete his transformation.

In *The Blood of Elves*, an anonymous source entitled *Monstrum* is cited at the beginning of chapter five that gives insight into witchers. It explains that while witchers are the self-appointed “stalkers of evil” they also prey upon the fears of simple honest

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folk in order to obtain gold. The entry lists witchers as “a godless changeling”, an allusion to the alchemical mutations that result from the Trial of Grasses<sup>4</sup>. In sum, witchers are monster hunters for hire, altered by an alchemical process that make them as monstrous as the monsters they hunt. The stories in the franchise are largely told from his perspective as an “outsider” looking “within” the worlds and lives of those around him and employ his services.

The term “outsider within” is a term coined by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins in 1986. The term was developed to refer to the black female experience of being included in some of the more private areas of white culture, but not being fully accepted within it. This experience includes both roles as slaves as well as feminist scholarship haunting the margins of white feminism. Their unique status creates a special standpoint from which to critique American and white culture. The work of black feminists involves reclaiming agency and deconstructing “images that foster self-definition as the objectified ‘other’”<sup>5</sup>. Black female work has constantly fought the “dehumanization essential to systems of domination.” For example, Collins notes how black female domestic workers were privy to insider views of the white families as they cared, cooked, and listened to them; but also noting how they were never fully a part of their white “families”<sup>6</sup>. In the process they are seen as an “other” that stands in contrast to “the assumed norm of white male behavior”<sup>7</sup>. For white patriarchal culture, the black feminist is monstrous, even as the black feminist fights against the monsters of racism, sexism, and oppression. Building on feminist scholar bell hooks, Collins discusses the “construct of dichotomous oppositional difference”

which is the “lynchpin in systems of race, class, and gender oppression”<sup>8</sup>. This element seeks to remove complementary elements from a person option instead for diametrically opposed elements such as “black/white, reason/emotion,” or in the case of a witcher, human/monster or human/mutant. These dichotomies are “unstable,” always threatening to break down.

This concept of the “outside within”, the experience of not being fully included into broader society is a useful way to understand the intersectionality of identities of Geralt of Rivia, monster hunter. In particular, in understanding his role as an “outsider within” the broader world of the Continent. In fact, the monster hunter fantasy trope in and of itself embodies the intersectionality of the outsider within status. Throughout the stories within The Witcher universe, we see the struggles that Geralt has attempted to overcome being an “outsider within.” For example, Geralt does not originally come from Rivia (Geralt’s mother gives him up for adoption when he is very young), but learns to mimic a Rivian accent, pointing towards his attempt to assimilate into a larger society wary of witchers. This is an intercultural communication dynamic related code switching known by some as “intelligibility enhancement.” It can become so critical for assimilation and integration that people seek out services to help them modify their accent<sup>9</sup>.

In fact, the monster hunter fantasy trope in and of itself embodies the intersectionality of the outsider within status. Witchers are physically and intellectually powerful, but they are also marginalized and stigmatized socially, and considered a mixed race, or mutant. As the various narratives unfold, we learn that

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witchers are used by society to hunt monsters but are kept at arm's length. They are viewed with prejudice and are seen as expendable. In *The Time of Contempt*<sup>10</sup>, an officer, commenting on the witcher's request for a high wage due to the danger of fighting a manticore, remarks, "...tough luck, it's a witcher's fate to risk his neck, and that a witcher is perfectly suited to it, like an arse is perfectly suited to shitting."

Witchers also care nothing for human politics, as when someone tries to bribe Geralt to not to fight a striga in *The Last Wish* due to local politics. Geralt not only refuses but turns the briber into bait for the monster<sup>11</sup>. While this may seem a contrast to activists trying to speak truth to power, a witcher's lack of political involvement, at least in Geralt's case, has more to do with refusing to become a pawn of wealthy or royal families. They are independent contractors fighting the world's evils (which does ultimately bring them into political conflict) and not interested in aligning themselves with established political powers. Witchers are often seen as expendable, adding to their outcast position within society. They are labor to be used, not a companion to care about. They require gold, not good friends.

Fictional monster hunters mirror the work of real-world activities fighting monsters of oppression. Society both needs them and fears them. Selecting Geralt merely fits within the theme and focus of this book, but in no way diminishes the many other witchers of varying race and class throughout the transmedia property.

In sum, Geralt is born with no social class and taken in by a brutal guild of fighters trained to engage in a work with a high

mortality rate. His body is subjected to torture which transforms him. Geralt's yellow cat eyes allow him to see what others don't and his work on the margins, often serving wealthier patrons, gives him a unique standpoint by which to watch the workings of humanity. Witchers are outsiders within. They battle the monsters that threaten society, while society views them with suspicion. Their labor might be appreciated, but their ontological status or their capacity for relationships is not. Witchers have an intersectionality of being humanoid but not completely human. They are under appreciated but needed. They are visible as a threat, but invisible when it comes to the dirty work they are paid to do and keep silent about. These elements make witchers not only a fantastic metaphor for the outsider within, but a figure fit for monster theory analysis.

### Monster theory

"In a world where men are monsters and monsters are men, who is the real monster?" This question, asked to me by the editor of this volume when she first pitched this project to me, encapsulates the ambiguity of monstrosity. Monsters do not fit neatly into categories or definitions.

This is particularly true in the world of *The Witcher*. In *The Last Wish*, Geralt is called upon to slay a striga that murdered everyone in King Foltest's palace. As he investigates, he learns the striga is the cursed daughter of the king's incestuous relationship with his sister Adda. The King wishes Geralt to lift the curse if possible. Geralt's task is accomplished due to the fact he possesses superhuman strength and speed, enhanced by potions that further morph his body<sup>12</sup> It becomes hard to tell where humanity

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ends and where monstrosity begins. Not only when contrasting Geralt the monster hunter and the striga, but the incestuous human relationships and curses that brought about the princess' condition in the first place.

Reading the monstrous, or even defining the monstrous, is a challenging task. Monsters by their very nature defy our categories, so how do you categorize something that resists categories? In 1996, humanities scholar Jeffrey Cohen developed monster theory to help people define the monstrous, as well as read them to see what they represent. The theory helps unravel why cultures create monsters and how they function in a society. Cohen reflects on the origin of the term “monster” and concludes that while monster can mean something evil, often we use the term to refer to that which is “other”—or outside our normal categories. Furthermore, Cohen’s monster theory includes seven theses, or elements, to help understand what the monster represents<sup>13</sup>. Each of the seven theses helps unpack who Geralt is and what he represents as he is a fusion of humanity and the monstrous.

### **The monster is a cultural body**

The first thesis of monster theory states that the monster is “a cultural body”<sup>14</sup>. This thesis suggests that a culture’s monsters represent its fears and anxieties. Witchers represent a lot of varying ideas, but perhaps one is the fear that systems of power might benefit from the work of those on the margins. Geralt is often on the outside of human politics, operating in their shadow, and is wooed by those in power who misunderstand his role in society.



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For example, in *The Last Wish* when Geralt agrees to accompany Dandelion to Queen Calanthe's court to keep an eye out for him, the queen engages him in conversation. She asks him his thoughts on those gathered at her court. He gives his observations, but then calls her out on her implications that he would make her an excellent mercenary or assassin. Geralt informs her that she, like many others, misunderstands his work. He does not kill people for money. Yet, as the vignette continues, Geralt finds himself the recipient of the "child-of surprise," Ciri, the granddaughter of the queen<sup>15</sup>. Geralt is both an outsider as a monster hunter, and yet closely bound to some of the most important work that directly affects the world's populations.

There are many ways to read a monster. I suggest that Geralt embodies the anxieties and fears of cultures to face the monsters they often create. Geralt embodies the horrific abuse of children by a society that requires them to clean up the evils they produce due to individual cruelty, greed, or imperial expansion. This will be seen more as we explore the next thesis.

### The monster always escapes

Cohen's second thesis has to do with the fact that, no matter how dead the monster seems, it finds a way to return. Geralt repeatedly courts death and sustains life threatening injuries. Yet, he returns in new scenes and sequels to continue to do battle on behalf of humans who are both grateful and reticent of his presence. This thesis also points out how monsters are re-adapted to reflect new cultural fears and anxieties (Dracula being a prime example).

*The Witcher* is a transmedia property and scenes of death and

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escape are adapted across platforms. One of the most notorious cases involves the tale of Adda the White, a princess cursed to be a bloodthirsty striga. The story appears in *The Last Wish*, *The Witcher 1* video game<sup>16</sup>, and season one episode three of the *Netflix* series. In the books, the source of the curse is ambiguous. It may have been Adda's mother, the King's sister, who had an incestuous affair. Or it may have been placed by Ostrit, a courtier who was angered by the incest. The *Netflix* series went with the latter choice, adding Ostrit's jealousy of Adda, perhaps reflecting the cultural fear of incels and their misogyny, rather than government officials having a scandalous affair.

While successful in lifting the curse, Geralt has his throat ripped out and is left for dead. Yet, he wakes up in Melitele's temple, recovering from his life-threatening injuries. More monster hunts throughout the transmedia property show Geralt coming back from the dead. Whether it's coming back from being swallowed by a selkie in the "Of Banquets, Bastards, and Burials"<sup>17</sup> episode of the *Netflix* series, or miraculously surviving a near fatal stabbing in novel *The Lady of the Lake*<sup>18</sup>, Geralt continues to escape to terrorize monsters and haunt the dealings of humans, elves, and magic users.

### The monster is a type of category crisis

The word "monster" initially referred to divine signs, warnings, revelations, and omens<sup>19</sup>. In contemporary usage, it often deals with what is "other" rather than evil. Cohen observes that monsters "are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structure"<sup>20</sup> More simply, monsters mess up categories. Their

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bodies are weird mixes of other bodies. They are a threatening entity “suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions”<sup>21</sup> Geralt is a mutant. He appears human, but his strength, his speed, and his yellow cat eyes tell a different story. Geralt can imbibe potions that would kill humans but enhances his own abilities. Witchers can also live for hundreds of years, unless they are killed first. Geralt is nearly 100 years old in *Witcher III: Wild Hunt* but looks like he’s in his late 30s and moves like someone in their early 20s.

Despite their prowess in monster fighting, they also possess human qualities of loyalty, friendship, and love. One of the most human relationships on display across the finish is Geralt’s care for Ciri as a “child of surprise.” His protection and training of her demonstrates paternal qualities. His willingness to self-sacrifice on her behalf shows his ability to love. Geralt is both human and non-human, a liminal being that breaks down stereotypes and false dichotomies associated with mutants and monsters.

### The monster dwells at the hate of difference

Monsters are “an incorporation of the Outside...all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within”<sup>22</sup>. Essentially, monsters embody what we see as different from being “normal.” Monsters function to reinforce the categories of what a culture considers normal and abnormal. Whatever specific fears and anxieties a monster represents, they are difference personified. The label “monster” is used by those communicators who shape culture by demarcating what is acceptable and unacceptable. When people deploy the term

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monster of someone or something else, they are reinforcing that they are what is normal.

Witchers are often called names and viewed with suspicion. Their monstrous nature even offends cats. While their labor is appreciated, they are not. In *The Last Wish*, Geralt enters a tavern to ask after a character named Shrike. A group of patrons take in Geralt's appearance of pale hair and pointy ears. One calls him an "albino, mutat, freak of nature" and questions how such beings can be allowed in civilized society. The group discusses whether they should fight him and then discuss his status as a witcher. A half-elf, Civril, suggests that witchers are an "insult" and deserve to be "burned"<sup>23</sup>. This type of interaction is littered throughout the novels and games (taverns a common place) and highlight the noticeable physical differences of the witchers, as well as their special abilities.

### The monster policies the border of the possible

While monsters terrify and offend, they also provoke curiosity. What would happen if we used alchemy or science to create monsters? How could we use them? Classic films have explored this many times, and *The Witcher Series* is no different. Cohen suggests that monsters embody a curiosity of what might be possible.

Throughout *The Witcher* franchise, discussion around the ability to create witchers arises. The ability to create witchers not only represents a revitalization of the witcher guilds, but also potential for enterprising leaders to create super soldiers to do their political bidding. The officially licensed, but now defunct,

International Witcher School Larp in Poland also had players wrestle with this question. In one dramatic scene in the March 2022 episode, an ambitious sorceress attempts to mutate one of her servants into a witcher. The experiment resulted in the gruesome death of the servant, but not the ambition of the sorceresses—or the players hoping to survive their turn at the trial of grasses<sup>24</sup>.

Outsiders within hold possible correcting perspectives, but also the possibility of exploitation. White patriarchal systems might benefit from the labor of outsiders within by incorporating a select few as a type of virtue signal or tokenism to mask the extent of harmful systems. Yet, there also exists the possibility that those fighting the monster of injustice will inspire those inside damaging systems to make real change.

The fear of the monster is really a kind of desire

While monsters have always terrified, they have also fascinated. Whether people seek to interpret the spiritual meaning in Christian bestiaries, interpret monstrous iconography in sacred texts, or shell out top dollar to see the latest horror in 3D on the big screen, monsters' unending popularity reveals humanity's draw toward them. Academia has seen a surge in monster studies with events such as the Global Conference Monsters and the Monstrous at Mansfield College in Oxford University (2014) and special calls for research demonstrated by the five-year symposium on religion and the monstrous by the American Academy of Religion<sup>25</sup>.

There are at least two ways in which Geralt embodies the desire

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of the monster. The first, is the desire of Geralt's protégé, Ciri, to undertake the trials. She trains incessantly in the witcher combat arts with impressive effort. Her elder-blood makes her a formidable opponent, but not a full-fledged witcher like her father-figure. In season two of the Netflix series, "Turn Your Back," Ciri nearly goes through the Trial of Grasses, but is stopped by Geralt just before Vessemmer prepares the injection.

Geralt informs them that, despite Ciri's elder blood, the trials would kill her. Ciri, through tears, pleads with Geralt to change his mind. Geralt affirms that Ciri is "already enough" and is "extraordinary." Ciri persists, telling Geralt she wants to be like him, indicating she desires the witcher's apparent ability to lose their emotions which would help her overcome the traumas of her past. Geralt informs her that not even witchers can forget who they are or murder all their feelings<sup>26</sup>. Witchers represent a desire for those who wish to gain strength over their past wrongs and overcome difficult emotions.

Second, desire for the monster is demonstrated in the number of trysts Geralt has with willing partners across all media platforms. Whether it's the infertility of the witcher as a result of the mutations, their physical attributes, a fascination with the monstrous, or their ability to pay in gold, Geralt (particularly in the Netflix series) is seen with several lovers. Even in the games, players can "romance" numerous characters that result in explicit cut scenes. Witchers, along with other non-human monster slayers such as Selene from *Underworld*, possess a sexual allure that humans find almost irresistible.

Tying monster theory back to the idea of the outsider within, it

is important to note the fetishizing of the black body in colonial history. There exists, alongside a terrible history of turning black bodies into monsters<sup>27</sup>, and a hyper-sexualization of them as well. Caren M. Holmes, Africana Studies scholar, points out that, “The perception of black people as hyper-sexualized and uncivilized paved the road for dehumanization and sexual exploitation imposed upon black men and women brought to the New World”<sup>28</sup>. Holmes notes that this “white supremacist patriarchal agenda” is still profiting off the stereotype of the hypersexualized black woman within modern American media and sex culture. In this regard, the literary figure of the monster hunter also represents the fetishization of the “other.”

#### The nonster stands at the threshold of becoming

The final thesis concerns itself with our monsters interrogating us. Why did we create them? What do they say about us? They represent a part of us that we often want to forget and hide away. Yet, if we hear them out, they may transform us. The classic example occurs in *Frankenstein*, where the creature’s interrogation of his mad scientist creator reveals that humanity’s ambition to play God is the real monster.

The Witcher’s narrative of claiming unwanted children and exposing them to torture and death in order to fight society’s monsters is disturbing. Perhaps nowhere in the franchise is this more graphically rendered than in *Netflix’s* animated prequel *Nightmare of the Wolf* (2021). In one scene, weaponless adepts are thrust into a swamp full of horrors to see who survives. Kids are ripped to shreds and the few survivors are collected to continue the training.

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Another example of thesis seven has to do with one of Geralt's nicknames: The Butcher of Blavekin. The name was obtained when Renfri, an exiled princess, sought out the mage Stragbor who cast her out due to being born under a black sun. Both individuals wanted Geralt to take their side and help them eliminate the other. Geralt refused and thought he had convinced Renfri to drop the conflict and leave the area. However, she tricked him.

The day after meeting with Renfri, Geralt learns that he was duped and that she planned to hold market goers hostage, killing them until Stragabor appeared. Geralt tries to stop the hostage situation but is attacked by Renfri's guards. He dispatches them and is forced to fight Renfri as well, killing her. While he saved their lives, the villagers only know that he murdered people and begin throwing food at him and the alderman asks him to leave. The people dub him a "butcher," further monstrifying the witcher.

There are many ways to read this element of the franchise. One might see it as a critique of the extremes to which late capitalism will exploit a worker. It may also be seen as a societal critique of how people with no support or agency are exploited and turned into monsters. Films ranging from *Zootopia* (2016) and *Joker* (2019) offer commentary on this reality, challenging viewers to examine how or why they have created the monsters they fear or love to condemn.

Outsiders within are often on the outside because they have been placed there, restricted there, or told that is where they belong so many times, they believe it themselves, a concept known as



“stereotype threat”<sup>29</sup>. Witchers are trained to do one thing, so the heartless monster slayer for gold becomes a stereotype throughout the media franchise. While Geralt does reflect that stereotype in many ways, he often breaks it, challenging those who use witcher labor, but have little personal regard for them overall.

### Conclusion

Those who fight evil, whether injustice or monsters, are often labeled as monstrous by the ones that need them most. Even Christ was called a demon by the religious leaders of his day<sup>30</sup>. The figure of the monster hunter has much in common with contemporary activists. They represent intersectionalities that offer perspectives and actions that can help rid, or at least help contain, the monstrous tendencies of those who want to retain power at all costs.

The figure of a witcher, especially found in Geralt of Rivia, causes us to reflect on those people whose labor we enjoy, but whose friendship we keep at a distance. Geralt of Rivia as an “other” calls us to question the boundaries we draw and how we treat those who transgress them. The Witcher franchise consistently challenges viewers as who we think is monstrous often turns out to be heroic, and those who appear heroic often turn out to be the villain. Finally, witchers, like all monsters, lead us to reflect on the monsters we create and what responsibility we need to take for creating them.

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# ETHICS AND THE WITCHER CODE

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Christopher Leech

## Introduction

The Continent and the World of the Witcher is one governed by various codes, morals, and ethics. This is the fabric that keeps people and kingdoms together. Kingdoms may have different laws, and different groups may have different aims, but one thing entangles them all: everyone, everywhere is working from some form of moral or ethical code.

This chapter will discuss how ethics form a central part of *The Witcher* world. First, we will explore ethics and their function. This will then lead to a brief discussion of some of the psychological constructs that feed into ethical decision-making, including cognitive dissonance, emotions, and social cohesion. Following this, we will explore how ethics broadly function within the Continent, particularly during wartime. The chapter will end with a discussion of ethical codes by examining the

Witcher Code itself and how that guides our favorite broody witcher, Geralt of Rivia.

What are ethics?

“What is ethics? [sic] The study of morality. Of the precepts of conduct: of being decorous, noble, decent, and honest. Of the heights of goodness, to which probity and morality carry up the human spirit. And of the chasms of evil, into which malice and immorality are flung . . .” (ToS, p. 2031)<sup>1</sup>.

The world of *The Witcher* is filled with discussions of ethics and morality. Kings talk about their divine right to justify war. Priests talk about faith to justify their misdeeds. And Geralt of Rivia is driven by the “Witcher’s code”. Ethics can be thought of as “the study of what is morally right and what is not”<sup>2</sup>. They are the internal anchor that allows you or I to decide what we think is the right (or wrong) decision at any one time. Ethics are sometimes referred to as our morals, values, conscience, inner voice, scruples, or codes.

Some forms of ethics are quite broad and shared among large groups. This is referred to as global ethics. For example, the sense of individual responsibility to look after the planet to mitigate climate change<sup>3</sup>. Other elements of ethics also cross geographical borders but remain intact within cultures or sub-groups. For example, the ethical standards held by medical professionals to do no harm when helping those in need<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, many religions even sharing some ethical points. For example, nearly all religions are believed to principally operate on the doctrine of “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you”<sup>5</sup> (Gensler, 20135). In

this sense, religion is also capable on T facilitating ethical guides for specific groups of people, across geographical location<sup>6</sup>.

This can be considered on an even more micro scale within our groups and communities. Religion can often lead to smaller, local communities despite its global nature. Many religions highlight the need to engage in a social contract with those in your community, regardless of any religious divide as “they are your neighbour”<sup>7</sup>. This can also be true to the institutions in which you belong, the workplace, school, sports team, or drama group – by signing up and taking part you agree to those rules, and common customs even if some of these are unwritten and not considered improper within the law<sup>8</sup>. For example, the opposite can also be true. Think of handball in football/soccer – this is a “foul” in the game, but it isn’t illegal to play basketball.

However, variation in ethical guidelines within groups is not universal. Two people could find themselves in the same situation and react entirely differently while both being guided by their set of morals or ethical guidelines. This is because how we determine what is ethical or moral in any situation can vary considerably and is driven by a range of factors – the culture of your geographical location, moral decision-making modelled by friends and family, religious ideologies, and past experiences. Fundamentally though, with every choice we make – we try to understand if it is “right” or “wrong”.

This is no less true for Geralt and our friends on the Continent even if their world looks a little different to our own. Ethics are central to the decisions that happen throughout the Continent, with many characters differing in their perceptions of what is

right and wrong. For example, Emhyr believes in the idea of the lesser of two evils, as he states, “The ends justify the means.” Geralt, on the other hand, does not and maintains “evil is evil.” These examples illustrate a key takeaway from any discussion of ethics: there is no “one size fits all” when it comes to ethics and moral decision-making.

Let’s consider this example: While roaming the streets of Oxenfurt, you find a coin purse on the floor filled with coins. In each of these three different scenarios, think about how your reaction may differ:

1. The coin purse features a university house insignia on it.
2. The coin purse features the same insignia and has a name embroidered on the inside.
3. The coin purse has no significant features, there is no way to identify the owner.

For option one, it isn’t possible to know who owns the coin purse, but you have an idea of where it is from. Meaning, you could at least return it to that location at which point what happens next is out of your control. You could equally decide to keep the coins and just return the purse.

In option two, it is much clearer who the owner is, the coin and the purse mean something to them and it makes it easier to ensure you can witcher-ly hand it back to said person directly.

However, with option three there is no clear way to return it to the owner. What would you do? Hand it over to a town guard? You

could try and find the person yourself – but suddenly everyone lost a full coin purse. Finder’s keepers, loser’s weepers? Maybe you take it to a nearby tavern and buy everyone a drink – share the wealth? Suddenly you’re having to put more energy and thought into what the “right” thing to do is and in truth there isn’t a correct answer. Mayhaps you think well, “I can’t return it, I should keep it”. Would your decision change if, as the coin purse is in your hand you notice out of the corner of your eye a grumpy stallkeeper looking at you while holding a carrot? How long have they been watching you? What do you do now? Does this matter?

When thinking about our decision-making in scenarios one and two, you may have found it easier to decide based on what would be the morally “correct” choice. However, option three was more difficult. Why? This is because of the way humans (and witchers) utilize ethics in decision-making processes. Specifically, the drive to reduce ambiguity, increase positive emotions, and maintain social cohesion. Let’s now consider these three areas in greater detail.

Why we do the things we do: Ethical decision making

### Cognitive Dissonance: Making impossible choices

Cognitive dissonance is the feeling of struggling to make a choice. More formally, it is the “state of having inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes relating to decision-making and attitude change”<sup>9</sup>. Or, more informally, the state of mind you likely experienced when trying to decide in scenario number three in the previous section.

The amount of cognitive dissonance that you may feel in any



situation, can vary depending on the importance of the decision. For example, deciding what to have for lunch is something simple. Whereas something meaningful and important is going to generate a large amount of dissonance. For example, when you are deciding which house to buy, if you should quit your job, or who to romance in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red)<sup>10</sup>.

The dissonance that you feel in any situation is further increased if there is a high similarity between two choices<sup>11</sup>. For example, picking between the house of your dreams and one you do not like at all elicits much less dissonance than choosing between two nearly identical houses. Which to choose? Do you make a list, ask for advice from friends, toss a coin (for your witcher) or do you follow your heart? These choices may not sound that ethical but think about the coin purse again – think about how hard it might have been to make those choices and how long it may have taken you to decide as the situation changed.

Here's another example: Geralt and you are going to be in control of a trolley on a track. The track is about to separate into left and right, the trolley is gaining speed and cannot be stopped – you must pick a direction. Below are three pairings representing the left and right tracks.

- A Nilfguardian Commander or Dandelion/Jaskier
- Ciri or Dandelion/Jaskier
- Ciri or Yennifer

Initially, this is hardly a choice at all! Suddenly things get tougher. You may find options two and three much harder –

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congratulations that's cognitive dissonance. You may be feeling some emotions about who to pick, maybe you're feeling some social pressure to agree with Geralt as he's aggressively standing next to you... You could argue this is entirely unethical, as it involves a loss of life. But you need to choose and there isn't a "correct" answer. I'm sure you and Geralt can work it out...

**Emotions: To feel too little, or too much.**

Emotions can be somewhat complicated and can be attributed to numerous things, including our neurophysiology (i.e., brain chemicals)<sup>12</sup> or the nature of our social environment (i.e., our friends and family)<sup>13</sup>. For example, think about how much Geralt can say with only a grunt and stare off into the middle distance. It's perhaps most true that a combination of these factors, and many more impact emotional response. However, it would be silly not to acknowledge the fact that you may act differently if you're having a good or bad day.

Emotions may seem like a sideways example especially as witchers don't have emotions – or at least aren't supposed to. We know that witchers are created through excessive trials (e.g., the trial of the grasses) to reduce their emotional reactions, turning them into killing machines. To counterbalance this and to perhaps help witchers make decisions, they have the Witcher Code. Yet, time and time again we see Geralt act on emotions – for better or worse.

“Do you expect me to stand by and watch?” ‘No,’ Geralt said, straightening his headband and the sword on his back. ‘I’ve had enough of standing by and watching. I’m fed up with my own helplessness. But first we have to stop them from getting away.’ (BoF, p. 1680)<sup>14</sup>.

It would be fair to argue that in fact Geralt is led by his love for his friends at various points. It's this emotional bond that is the driving force and has been known to get him into trouble. Ethics and emotions then, beg the question of is it ever right to make decisions fueled on emotion and not logic? Is Geralt right to harm others in his pursuit of Ciri? Again, there is no definitive answer.

### Social cohesion: What would your friends say?

Social cohesion refers to how individuals act when in a group or community. The particularly relates to the set of behaviors outlined by said group or community. This can also include creating or having defined roles, sharing resources and being seen as part of a group, instead of a singular person<sup>15</sup>. Social cohesion attempts to explain decision-making in two ways. One, actions are predominantly informed by the desire to fit into our social surroundings – our class, village, friend group or team. Or two, actions can also be categorized as the desire to go against the views of the majority<sup>16</sup>.

We see Geralt change his behavior in line with both forms of pressure brought on by social cohesion, leading him to act differently and sometimes against his somewhat grumpy nature. For example, while at Kaer Monhen (the Witcher frat house) Geralt appears much more relaxed, as he plays the role of both student and teacher. He aims to guide Ciri in her witcher training along with some other witchers while also being respectful and listening to Vesemir. This is entirely different to how Geralt might act while bargaining the price for dispatching a Leshi. Geralt is within his community, with his witcher dude bros not dealing with people he knows to hate him.

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On another occasion, Geralt and Yennifer attend the Sorcerous ball-dinner party. Geralt is, very much like many of us – disappointed that everyone eats so daintily and acts politely in front of each other only to immediately say two-faced things behind their back. All this, and Sorceresses can openly read his mind. Here we see Geralt complies with the social contextual competencies, despite it not being what he is used to, he perseveres to please and declare his love for Yennifer. That is, he eats the dainty hor'dourves and does not openly complain about the lack of adequate food at the party. What exactly is driving Geralt to behave this way? Only, Geralt knows. But we can be sure it is being driven by an internal justification of what he believes to be right – in this instance act as Yennifer would like him to.

This battle with social cohesion continues throughout Geralt's adventures. Geralt finds himself at a party, and hates it, then loves it, then hates it again. Geralt repeatedly declares it's only ethical to leave the group to not put them at risk. Each time, the party argue back and convinces Geralt they are already in danger, so he may as well carry on. Eventually Geralt sees the error of his ways and the value in his friends – or so we hope. With our psychological constructs outlined, we better understand just some of what ethics are, how ethics feature in decision making and lastly some of the factors that impact those choices. Now, let's turn our focus to the Continent.

Ethics and code in the world of The Witcher: Global and group ethical codes

Across The Continent, there are many kingdoms each with their own King or Queen that rule with the idea of divine right (i.e.,

they can do whatever they choose with little to no consequence). You also have distinct groups of people who inhabit the world; Humans, Halflings, Dwarves, Elves, Gnomes, Merpeople, and of course Monsters. Each has its own history, even if that history is turning up during the Conjunction of worlds. For everyone to co-exist somewhat, everyone had to make the best of it. Thieves, Knights, the students of Oxenfurt, Bards, Mages, Farmers and more all have rules and ethics within which they operate.

### Cultural ethics: Wartime

The present discussion of ethics so far has focused on said ethics functioning as we would intend them to. This assumes, to at least a small degree, that everyone is an ethical person – even if this isn't law-abiding specifically. It is now important to investigate one of the core elements of The Witcher series and one that completely re-writes the fabric of what we know ethics to be. War.

“Wars are waged for two reasons. One is power and the other is money.” (SoD, p. 779)<sup>17</sup>

War, by definition, sees one group use its force to make gains either through intimidation, violence, or political mobility. Those starting wars often believe they have a just cause – they are doing what is necessary for them to achieve their goals and therefore, everything is justified and ethical<sup>18</sup>. This can lead to horrific and traumatic things happening to sometimes innocent people. Soldiers, who are just other men, suddenly begin to commit these acts without cause<sup>19</sup>. It is argued philosophically that war allows people to act as their “more natural” selves, suggesting violence is an innate part of humanity<sup>20</sup>. War then, becomes a new social

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contract<sup>21</sup> allowing those wishing to enact violence to do so, not only without punishment but with praise and accolades.

Considering if war is ever ethical is in of itself a multi-faceted question, as people fighting on both sides believe they have a right to attack, defend or retaliate. What is important to consider is the sudden shift in what is ethical<sup>22</sup>. What if an opposing force, say, Nilfguard acts with a brutal and violent force? They have no problem destroying villages and food stores, they will remove anyone and everyone in their way. It can leave you and your forces wondering how do you fight back? If your opponent is fighting dirty, is it not reasonable to then fight dirty back? After all, all is fair in love and war.

Another interesting ethical quagmire within war relates to the medical profession as noted earlier. Within war, how do the doctors, nurses and healers' function? They may not be fighting or doing direct harm, but should they not treat a detainee, or someone from the other side? Is it ethical to treat someone who is the enemy?<sup>23</sup> These questions are important to consider but can be regarded as rhetorical as they are used simply for ethical illustration.

War is present on the Continent from the literal arrival of humans, right through to the present conflict for Ciri between Nilfguard, the rest of the Continent, two groups of mages and of course Geralt and the party. Add to that the ever-present struggles for power from religious groups, civilians and the monsters – conflict is inherent to the Continent. With a sudden change of side or banner, a neighbouring village could be destroyed or now become a potentially deadly foe. Ultimately, part of what enables

people to move within these politically motivated ethical choices relates to individuals and personal ethics. After all, witchers need not involve themselves in the conflicts of man. A witcher is neutral, or are they?

**Group ethics: Bards and mages**

We see examples of ethics among individual groups also. For example, in *A Little Sacrifice* (a story within *A Sword of Destiny*) we meet Essi Daven a fellow bard, after a Bard-off (Rap Battle) and duet between her and Dandelion, the two discuss how copyright and ownership of songs are acknowledged and respected among bards. No one likes a bard who sings the songs of others without credit.

Mages have rules and magic that is banned – Goetia (Demonology), and Necromancy are forbidden by the Brotherhood of Sorcerers. Equally, it is strongly recommended (banned entirely in the show) to try and wield Fire chaos. Chaos, how magic users gain the energy to perform magic is taken from the four elements, Water, Wind, Earth and Fire. You can gain chaos from any source and use it for whatever purpose. You could gain Chaos from a body of water, to light a candle for example. Fire chaos is regarded as all-consuming and can cost an inexperienced mage their life. Something about this form of energy requires the highest level of mastery to use. During a sequence in *A Time of Contempt*, Ciri draws on fire chaos and is possessed by a presence that wishes to destroy everything. Here we see some of the ethical practices of the magic users on the Continent – made even more serious in the show with fire being banned entirely. Minor (TV Show) spoiler, Reince says drawing

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on fire chaos sacrifices some of his soul, and Yennifer is so drained from using it that she is unable to use magic at all for some time. Some sorcerers try to use fire chaos during the battle of Sodden and are immediately turned to dust due to their inability to control it. Demonstrating not only the importance of heeding such a warning, but also the necessity for such a warning in the first place.

### Individual ethics: The Witcher Code

The Witcher Code forms the ethical crux of our beloved heroes Geralt and Ciri. This poses a critical question – is the Witcher code real? In short, yes and no. Does a physical tomb, book, scroll or tablet with a list of rules for witchers exist? No. Do witchers act within certain principles generally speaking? Yes. Geralt himself even explicitly says there isn't a code when speaking to Lola (a priestess who has taken a vow of silence):

“...I have at times hidden behind a code. People like that. Those who follow a code are often respected and held in high esteem. But no one's ever compiled a Witcher code. I invented mine. Just like that. And keep to it. Always. Not always.” (TLW, p. 135)<sup>24</sup>.

We see a clear and repeated doctrine shared among the witchers at Kaer Monhen (that witcher frat house) when teaching Ciri. Witchers don't kill out of fear, they kill to save lives. Geralt doesn't kill a dragon and other intelligent creatures. This demonstrates the complex nature of the code. But we see it in action, time and time again.

“Even if it turns out that it was the mermaid, the Witcher won't



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kill the mermaid, because the code forbids him. The code solves the dilemma for the Witcher.” (SoD, p. 587).<sup>25</sup>

During one of the misadventures of Geralt and Jaskier – Geralt is tasked with killing a “devil” which is later revealed to be a Sylvan, an intelligent and harmless creature that Geralt refuses to kill. This doesn’t end as well as we’d hope for our hero as Geralt and Jaskier find themselves being interrogated by some Elves. Geralt even resigns himself to being killed, accepting that at least he lived and died by his own rules. In a similar vein – Geralt has the same feelings about Dragons. Stating he would never kill one, due to their intelligence and not being creatures of chaos. The show and book differ somewhat on the events that take place, but, needless to say, a melee breaks out, the dragon is defended, and Geralt is proven right.

During the events of *Blood of Elves*<sup>26</sup> Geralt, Ciri and a poorly Triss Marigold are reunited with some familiar faces from the dragon quest. Yarpem Zigrin is leading a garrison containing precious and secret cargo but is aware that as war has broken out – Scoia’tael (Elven Commando units) could be upon them at any moment! Yarpem, like many, would be aghast to learn that Geralt would have no intention of stepping in, should such an event occur... In a heated exchange Geralt says “Please don’t count on my sword. I have no intention of killing these, as you call them evil creatures...”. Yarpem retorts to Ciri that this is damning to himself and the others and expects Ciri to replicate Geralt “Today’s subject: the Witcher’s behavior in the face of conflict between intelligent races”. When Ciri doesn’t quite understand – this is expanded upon to say that ultimately this was the world of the

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elves, dwarves, gnomes, halflings and more until the humans turned up (and made witchers). As you might expect, said attack is forthcoming and it's Ciri that provides one of the best quotes from the series about ethics:

“A witcher has to defend people. From the leshy, the vampire, the werewolf. And not only from them. He has to defend people from every evil. And in Transriver I saw what evil is. A witcher has to defend and save. To defend men so that they aren't hung on trees by their hands, aren't impaled and left to die. To defend fair girls from being spread-eagled between stakes rammed into the ground. Defend children so they aren't slaughtered and thrown into a well. Even a cat burned alive in a torched barn deserves to be defended. That's why I'm going to become a witcher, that's why I've got a sword, to defend people like those in Sodden and Transriver – because they don't have swords, don't know the steps, half-turns, dodges and pirouettes. No one has taught them how to fight, they are defenseless and helpless in face of the werewolf and the Nilfgaardian marauder. They're teaching me to fight so that I can defend the helpless. And that's what I'm going to do. Never will I be neutral. Never will I be indifferent. Never!” (BoE, p. 950).

It's in this spirit that Geralt learns that in attempting to be neutral he is complicit in the violence around him. Geralt is far from a hero; he does a lot of shady doings. He sleeps with a university student when her age isn't clear, tortures a guy, mercilessly kills a beast in a cave (despite feeling sorry for it) just because he needed the money, oh and brutally murders eight bandits who were about

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to assault a woman just because he wanted to kill them... The Witcher code is not as clear then.

### The Witcher Code: Geralt of Rivia

One of the most fascinating points to make here, is that for the most part the Witcher code as we know it is viewed only through the lens of Geralt. We don't spend the largest amount of time around other witchers and much of what it means to be a witcher is shrouded in mystery. It would be easy to think that we have a pretty good handle on Geralt at this point, but it is his ethics or scruples, if you will, that get him into the most trouble...

“Had it not been for the foolish scruples of the Witcher, and his impractical principles, many subsequent events would have run their course quite differently. Many events would probably have not taken place at all. And the history of the world would have unfolded in an alternative way. But the history of the world unfolded as it unfolded, the sole cause of which was that the Witcher had scruples.

[...] But the Witcher had scruples and was accustomed to acting according to foolish, impractical principles.” (ToC, p. 1333 -34)<sup>27</sup>

You wake up in the early hours of the morning, it's dark out. You are in a place that isn't home, and it takes a few seconds to process where you are. Suddenly, you hear nature calling to you. The only trouble, you can't quite remember where the latrine is. You could always decide to relieve yourself elsewhere... We've all been there, even Geralt and it was his reluctance to pee off a balcony or into a potted planet that caused literal chaos. Not the element chaos... But chaotic events... It's hard to divulge this further without big spoilers, but let's just say the world of *The Witcher* would have

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been very different if Geralt hadn't tried to make it to the latrine one night.

As Geralt continues to adventure, he begins to adapt and grow. As he puts it "I'm getting old [sic] I'm starting to develop scruples.". By being forced into a small party, albeit begrudgingly and only eventually accepting them we see growth. Another instance from *Baptism of Fire* highlights this.

"You let that crusty monstrosity go, even though you're a Witcher and it's your professional duty to exterminate monsters like that. But the beast didn't do your Surprise any harm, so you spared it and just drove it away by banging on a cauldron lid. Because you're no longer a Witcher; you're a valiant knight, who is hastening to rescue his kidnapped and oppressed maiden." (BoF, p. 1669)<sup>28</sup>.

Even in the face of his code, Geralt is forced to challenge himself and consider the best cause of action. In many ways, it is useful the code doesn't truly exist as this allows Geralt and our heroes to maneuver around tricky territory. A rather upsetting and emotionally challenging event happens and Geralt – the witcher with no emotions, is tasked to comfort someone in pain. And he does a decent job at it too! Perhaps there's something else to this Witcher code, but first one final point.

### Ethics side quest: Video game Geralt

I would be remiss if I didn't briefly discuss the Witcher games. While considered canonically separate and distinct from the books and *Netflix* series, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* shows events after the story. Because it's a game, Geralt doesn't do very much without your input. This means that you're tasked with making

ethical decisions. This is certainly fun for gaming reasons, but I wonder how you make those choices? Do you make the choices you want to? Do you make them in line with the Witcher code as Geralt would? Maybe you just wreak havoc. This is conjecture, and the relationship between player and avatar is a whole different kettle of fish. I mean research.

Conclusion: The choice is yours

As has been discussed within this chapter, ethics are complicated and impacted by warring and opposing causes. As in our world, this is also the case for Geralt, his friends and the population of the Continent. The relative peace and harmony are thrown into disarray when war breaks out and this causes a shift in the principles in which people act ethically.

The Witcher code is very much a touchstone to discuss the role of ethics in *The Witcher* stories. It is my view that if you look beyond the magic and monsters the tales of Geralt are focused entirely on ethics. At various points little happens but characters talking, and trying to understand the situation they are in. To this, I say the story is about ethics. It represents the basic struggle we all recognize. To be in impossible, perilous and emotionally fraught situations trying desperately to do what is right. To do what is right, in order to protect and be with the people we hold most dear, those we love the most. Regardless of the complexity of ethics, I think we can all take something away from this tale. Protect the marginalized, listen to the intelligent, and love everything you have. Nothing, not even The Witcher code can help you make the hardest decisions. But it comes down to you,

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and your autonomy – only you can do what is “right”. What you do after reading this chapter, the choice is yours...

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## MONSTERS OF MEN

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*Geralt and non-toxic masculinity*

Rachel Kowert, PhD & Kelli Dunlap, PsyD

What do James Bond, Don Draper, and Gaston all have in common? They are strong, capable, conventionally handsome, and unemotional (unless provoked to anger). They embody rugged self-reliance, are frequently found womanizing, and are no strangers to violence. They are stereotypical “manly men,” renowned for their physical and mental prowess. They represent the type of guys who other men want to be like and who the ladies want to be with. In short, they are all characters who embody traditional and idealized masculine norms.

But what about Geralt of Rivia? Originally introduced as the protagonist in *The Witcher* book series by Andrzej Sapkowski and now elevated to the status of video game and television icon, Geralt shares the aforementioned masculine traits. He is physically powerful and incredibly capable. Like other witchers, he trades in violence and is infamous for his stoicism. He is

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universally depicted as an accomplished lover and, especially in the books, a bit promiscuous.

On the surface, Geralt seems to be just like every other ‘alpha male protagonist’ trope. This is most notable when his words are quoted without context or his actions documented as isolated incidents. However, his stereotypically masculine veneer conceals a more sophisticated man. At first glance, Geralt could be described as a simple, one-dimensional badass. However, repeated observation of his actions and gradually increased insight into his motivations reveal a complex, nuanced, and deeply human character. He prioritizes self-care. He is prudent with his use of physical aggression when he feels it is unwarranted or unethical. He frequently relies on others and accepts their support. While James, Don, Gaston, and Geralt are all male protagonists who were created to be the epitome of “masculinity,” the first three lack the empathy and humanity demonstrated by Geralt of Rivia.

This chapter will explore the portrayal of Geralt of Riva as a unique representation of healthy masculinity by exploring how his actions throughout the books, video games, and Netflix series rebuke the traditionally idealized gender roles associated with male protagonists in media.

### Gender roles and masculinity

There have been countless debates amongst scholars of various backgrounds (e.g., anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists) discussing how gender norms develop. How do people of a certain gender learn what the rules, norms, and expectations are? One validated pathway is through gender norms. Gender norms come

from the world around us. They are produced and reproduced through actions, are embedded in institutions, are reinforced by other norms of one's culture, and are quick to form but slow to change.<sup>1</sup> The media we consume can be a particularly powerful vehicle for messaging around behavioral norms related to gender.<sup>2</sup> For example, consistent portrayals of a strong, successful man displaying feats of unconditional physical toughness (i.e., the idea that men should be physically strong and constantly push themselves to their physical limits), over time, can lead to an internalized ideal and aspirational goal associated with being a strong, successful man. Masculinity, as a gender norm, is socially constructed – defined by social, historical, and cultural expectations rather than by biological differences.

Masculinity is a term that encapsulates the role, behaviors, and attributes considered to be appropriate for men and boys as determined by a specific social or cultural system<sup>3</sup>. As masculinity is defined by expectations of society, what is considered masculine is dependent on culture and context. In traditional Western cultures, masculine includes traits like independence and an absence of emotional expression<sup>4</sup>.

Defining masculine traits in direct opposition to feminine traits is a nearly universal feature of masculinity across societies. Indeed, the roles, behaviors, and attributes that are considered appropriately masculine for men are usually diametrically opposed to the roles, behaviors, and attitudes considered appropriately feminine for women<sup>5</sup>. For example, the idea that men must be strong, women more fragile. Men must be outspoken, women more demure. Men must not cry, women are

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more emotional. Further, regardless of the particular attribute, the dichotomy between what is considered masculine and feminine are nearly always hierarchical in nature. Masculine traits tend to be considered more valuable and more desirable. Thus, not only are masculinity and femininity opposites, but they are also unequal.

Believing and perpetuating the idea that masculine traits are superior to feminine traits is the foundation of gender inequality, positioning men in a way that errantly implies inherent authority over women. The term for this in social gender research is patriarchal masculinity<sup>6</sup>. Adopting this type of framework for masculinity means that those with the most masculine traits are entitled to the most power. Colloquially, this concept is known as toxic masculinity.

### Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity is a term that has gained popularity to describe a type of masculinity where men utilize dominance, violence, and control to assert their power and superiority<sup>7</sup>. Thus, this is not just about demonstrating masculine traits but asserting themselves and their perceived “gender superiority” over others. Such assertions can take many forms. For example, the phrase “boys will be boys” has commonly been used to justify and validate harmful male behavior. There are many traits of toxic masculinity, which can include, but is not limited to: unconditional physical toughness, physical aggression, emotional suppression, fragile ego (i.e., inability to admit you are wrong even in the face of overwhelming evidence), and sexual aggression/violence.

One of the most insidious factors of toxic masculinity is that enforcing these roles and expectations on others is inherent to its design. Maintaining power requires maintaining others' perceptions of men as powerful. As such, a large portion of toxic masculine energy is channeled into promoting and reinforcing masculine norms. This can manifest as fathers teaching their sons that "men don't cry." Or friends teaching friends what appropriate "locker room talk" is. Toxic masculinity is the reason the most affronting insults directed at men are those that compare them to women (e.g., "You run/scream/cry like a girl"). The mere notion that masculinity could be independent of the subjugation of the feminine creates a threat to the hierarchical benefits afforded to patriarchal masculinity and diminishes the authority of the 'might makes right' mentality.

The impact of toxic masculinity is deleterious. Toxic masculinity has been linked to violence against women<sup>8</sup>, justifications for violence<sup>9</sup>, and sexist attitudes and beliefs<sup>10</sup>. Toxic masculinity is also a factor motivating men's sexual, domestic, physical, and political violence against others, and is associated with poor physical and mental health in men<sup>11</sup>.

As with traditional gender roles, the ideologies associated with toxic masculinity are learned, internalized, and enforced through social mechanisms, which include close friends and family as well as portrayal of masculinity within entertainment media<sup>12</sup>. This is the driving force behind the representation of 'alpha males' or, as discussed earlier, "traditional male protagonists". For example, research has found that when watching television where women are objectified, male participants showed a greater proclivity to

engage in sexual coercion, gender-based harassment, and increased conformity to masculine gender norms, than men who watched television programs omitting such themes<sup>13</sup>. This is why an overrepresentation of toxic masculinity is problematic: it can insidiously change beliefs about what are “normal” or “acceptable” expressions of masculinity. What gets repeated, valorized, and exists in the absence of equally powerful counterexamples, becomes normalized and expected.

Traditionally, traits associated with toxic masculinity have dominated the characterization of male characters in the media. Most depictions of gender characteristics in media include portrayals of men as dominant, physically aggressive, and unemotional<sup>14, 15</sup>. An analysis of the 30 top-grossing animated movies for children revealed that masculine themes associated with toxic masculinity were prevalent and tended to emphasize physical aggression (i.e., violence) and social dominance (e.g., inspiration of fear)<sup>16</sup>. Concerningly, toxic masculinity has been found to occur in more than a third of all scenes on adolescent television shows<sup>17</sup>. Further, these patterns hold across genre, with comedies, crime shows, and dramas being equally likely to depict toxic masculinity<sup>18</sup>.

### A case study of non-toxic masculinity: Geralt of Rivia

On the surface, Geralt meets all the criteria for being a traditional, male protagonist. He is physically powerful, a talented swordsman, self-sufficient, knowledgeable, sexually desirable, and frequently in a leadership role. Geralt exhibits exemplary masculinity. However, key elements of patriarchal masculinity –

those that cause demonstrable harm to oneself, others, or society – are notably absent from his presentation.

For example, Geralt is a nearly unparalleled physical specimen yet he does not have unconditional physical toughness. He is independent and self-reliant, yet maintains strong connections to others. As his character develops, we see Geralt become more free in expressing his emotions, rather than falling into the traditional masculine trope of fearing or smothering them. He uses discretion when employing physical aggression, despite frequently receiving requests from others to use violence to solve problems and frequently finding himself in life-threatening situations. It is important to note that these differences become evident over the course of the series and are the result of significant character growth. At the start of both the novels and the TV series, Geralt is very much the lone wolf, a broody and mysterious reluctant protagonist who holds himself apart. By the end, however, his social and emotional connections are deeply rooted and the strengths he has been known for – the stoicism and unconditional toughness – have eroded away.

In the following section, several key features of toxic masculinity will be addressed and ways in which Geralt of Rivia breaks the mold and presents us with an alternative representation of masculinity will be explored. Specifically, Geralt's portrayal as a strong, competent male protagonist is counter to the toxic masculinity traits of unconditional physical toughness, fear of emotions, hyper independence, and social dominance via physical aggression. Specifically, ways in which Geralt's portrayal counters traits of toxic masculinity (i.e., unconditional physical toughness,

self-neglect, fear of emotions, and social dominance via physical aggression) will be examined.

**Toxic trait: Unconditional physical toughness**

Unconditional physical toughness is the cornerstone of toxic masculinity. It is the idea that men should be physically strong and constantly push themselves to their physical limits. This can include not prioritizing sleep, “pushing through the pain” when injured, and discouraging help-seeking behavior for physical ailments. A real-world example of this belief in action is the U.S. Marine Corps phrase “Pain is weakness leaving the body.” While this mentality may be useful in the kind of life-or-death situations Marines may face in the line of duty, the gym is not enemy territory. Demonstrating masculinity through physical toughness and self-reliance is associated with negative health behaviors, such as delayed help-seeking, help avoidance, and ignoring medical recommendations<sup>19</sup>.

There is an inherent, inevitable flaw with associating physical strength with importance and power. By setting up physical strength as the source of power, people who hold toxic masculine beliefs will eventually find themselves without power. Age comes for everyone and a decline in physical strength, stamina, and self-reliance is part of the aging process (if one is lucky). There are also unpredictable and traumatic life events that alter a person’s physicality, such as car accidents and illness. Further, because this type of masculinity views assistance – even medical assistance – as a sign of weakness, those who hold these beliefs often wait until issues become life-threatening and more difficult to treat, ultimately leading to poorer health outcomes<sup>20</sup>.



Geralt has literal superhuman physical capabilities. He is strong, agile, and can slay monsters that no one else on The Continent has been able to restrain. However, Geralt is also a mortal man who repeatedly gets his butt kicked and requires frequent medical attention.

Throughout all the *Netflix* episodes (to the date of this writing) and through most of the books, Geralt is portrayed in peak physical condition. He has strength and stamina that surpass most other beings in the world. Geralt can also take a beating. Geralt's introduction in the first chapter of the first book ends with him moments away from death after fighting a Striga. This scene conveys the first of countless injuries Geralt receives throughout the series. Although he frequently relies on himself to heal from his injuries via witcher mutations and self-crafted potions, he does not balk when offered medical help from others. For example, Nenneke in the temple Melitele and the dryads of Brokilon both nurse Geralt back to health after near-fatal injury.

Despite typically bouncing back after battles against both monsters and men, Geralt experiences major injuries following an encounter with the sorcerer Vilgefortz. Amongst other serious injuries, his left forearm and right femur were shattered. He was brought to Brokilon forest by Triss and Tissia and left in the care of the dryads, the women of Brokilon forest known for their healing skills. In the beginning of *Baptism of Fire*, the third book in the Witcher saga, Geralt's arrival in Brokilon is described as "...the cripple with a broken arm and leg [the sorceress] had been dragging with her. A cripple who had turned out to be the

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Witcher...The mutilated Witcher screamed and fainted by turns..." (BoF, p. 4).

Under the care of Aglais, leader of the Brokilon healers, and due in part to the regenerative power of Witchers, Geralt is up and walking again within a month. However, unlike previous wounds, Geralt shows physical signs of his recent injuries: "He was limping somewhat and slightly dragging one hip..." (BoF, p. 10). Although Geralt recovers and continues his journey as a Witcher, a journey that frequently leads to physical combat, his body is forever changed following this injury. He is no longer "unconditionally" a physically able man. This is a point made clear when leaving Brokilon Geralt and his sporadic travel companion Dandelion the Bard (known as Jaskier in the Netflix series) find themselves caught in the middle of a fight between soldiers and hawkers. "[Geralt] ducked under their swords, parried their blows, dodged aside and suddenly felt a piercing pain in his right knee. He could feel himself keeling over. He wasn't hurt; the injured leg, which had been treated in Brokilon, had simply crumpled under him without warning." (BoF, p. 55).

The pain of his injuries continues throughout the book, even outside of battle.

"The slowly healing bone in his left forearm and his right knee still gnawed with invisible fangs of a dull, nagging pain, made worse by effort and the constant damp." (BoF, p. 82).

"I say 'thank you,'" the Witcher said, getting up with difficulty and rubbing his knee, which had begun to torment him again." (BoF, p. 231).

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“The Witcher hissed and swore, and shifted his position, because the pain shot through his knee again as he sat. He caught sight of Regis looking at him intently. ‘Is that a fresh injury?’ ‘Not really. But it’s tormenting me.’” (BoF, p. 128)

‘Pleased to meet you,’ the Witcher lied, without returning the bow, partly because his knee was painning him intensely. (ToS, p. 105).

While Geralt may have superhuman strength, he is not invincible. Although his wounds have healed, in the books he experiences chronic pain due to nerve damage and osteoarthritis<sup>21</sup>. His injuries have caused a physical impairment which makes it harder for him to exist in his world and in his role. In other words, Geralt has a disability.

In the same way patriarchal masculinity practices creates a hierarchy of power of the masculine over the feminine, ableist practices model a hierarchy where people without disabilities have greater inherent value than people with disabilities<sup>22</sup>. Disability, as defined by the medical model, views a disability as the result of a deficiency or abnormality within an individual, something broken in need of fixing<sup>23</sup>. Despite growing awareness of the social model of disability, which situates disability as the result of social or environmental factors rather than individual limitations<sup>24</sup>, the medical model is still the traditional view and continues to propagate the perspective of disability as an individual tragedy, misfortune<sup>25</sup>, or defect.<sup>26</sup> Combining patriarchal masculinity with ableist beliefs creates a recipe for both social devaluation of men due to injury and the potential for significant internal distress due to loss of identity, perceived social status, and misalignment with one’s expected gender role.

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Typical of fictional media, protagonists frequently roll through physical trauma without a second thought, receive suspiciously convenient and thorough medical care (e.g., full rejuvenation following a magical potion) or present in the next scene or episode as if nothing had happened. While this is the case for Geralt in much of the *Witcher* series, his battle with Vilgefortz in left a lasting impact. On the Continent, and within our world, the loss of physicality is a loss of power and status through the lens of toxic masculinity (and subsumed ableism therein). When this occurs in fiction, it's often done in a manner suggesting pity for the wounded person or it falls into the trope of "better dead than disabled." At the opposite end of the trope spectrum is the 'magical cure' where the disability is fixed (i.e., returned to 'normal' / perceived status). For Geralt, there is neither pity nor miracle cure. This is touched on in the book *Baptism of Fire* in a conversation between Geralt and Regis,

"My thigh-bone and forearm were broken, but the strong pain is in the knee and elbow.' 'That's typical,' the barber-surgeon nodded. 'The dryads' magic reconstructed your damaged bone, but simultaneously caused a minor upheaval in your nerve trunks. It's a side effect, felt most intensely in the joints.' 'What do you advise?' 'Unfortunately, nothing. You'll continue to predict rainy weather unerringly for a long time to come. The pains will grow stronger in the winter.'" (BoF, p. 129).

In this example, Geralt resists giving into self pity or the elicitation of others' pity. Moreover, he demonstrates an understanding that his power does not lie exclusively through unconditional physical toughness. Although Geralt's injuries would not always result in a full recovery, his survival and

continued functioning depended on his ability to adapt to a changing body, accept chronic pain, and reframe his perspective on the relationship between power and physical perfection. As a function of this flexibility, his presentation of masculinity is antithetical to the notion of unconditional physical toughness. He was thrashed by Vilgfortz, healed by the women of Brokilon, has his joints seize and give out during battle, he lives with chronic pain, but is no less our manly man.

**Toxic trait: Self-neglect**

Another facet of toxic masculinity is self-neglect, an inherently destructive behavior. Self-neglect can be thought of as the opposite of self-care. Similar to the concept of unconditional physical toughness, survival in the context of self-neglect implies unconditional capability. Continuing that logic, one could conclude that self-care is unnecessary for the unconditionally capable. In contrast to self-neglect, self-care assumes conditional capability and is positioned as a feminine counter.

It is important to note that when discussing self-care, we are discussing it in its original intent and context. Over 2,000 years ago Socrates identified care of the self as a foundational “practice in the pursuit of truth”<sup>27</sup>. Care of the self is about the process of becoming who you can be. It’s partially about the relationship we have with ourselves, about treating ourselves with kindness and respect and behaving in ways that align with our core values. It is about eating properly, giving ourselves enough time to rest, moving our bodies in ways that help it remain strong and flexible. But, it is also about our relationship with others, specifically those boundaries which teach others about how we want ourselves to

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be cared for. This is the understanding of self-care that inspired activists like Audre Lorde who famously said “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”<sup>28</sup> Self-care as self-preservation, as living true to your core values, and as a radical act of political warfare is the lens through which we view Geralt as a beacon of self-care.

Throughout the books, Geralt’s inner thoughts and outward behaviors reflect an admirable amount of self-preservation through unapologetic self-care. One component of self-care is authenticity to oneself, regardless of the social pressure to meet the expectations others have set for you. In the Blood and Wine expansion of *The Witcher 3*, Geralt witnesses a situation in which a small group of sexual aggressors harass a she-elf. Geralt chases them away, however, the she-elf expresses that although Geralt will move on the harassers will return. She accuses his motives as being shallow, egocentric, and within his own self-interest. She argues that the world doesn’t need another “real man” (i.e., a knight in shining armor) but rather a revolution where culture is transformed. Geralt replies with a quote taken directly from *Time of Contempt*:

“It is incredible... how much my neutrality outrages everybody. How it makes me subject to offers of pacts and agreements, offers of collaboration, lectures about the necessity to make choices and join the right side... It’s not my game... I won’t choose. I’ll respond to events. I’ll adapt to what others choose. That is what I’ve always done.” (ToC, p. 146).

This is an example of how Geralt prioritizes self-care over the need to exert dominance, display unconditional physical

strength, or to be someone's knight in shining armor. Geralt is choosing to behave in the way most authentic to himself which, in that moment, is further inaction.

Examples of Geralt's self-care are potent, despite being limited in frequency. However, it is noteworthy that he encourages self-care in others. When speaking with Renfri about leaving in the book *The Last Wish*, he tells her that forgiveness is for herself, not for the other person. She is encouraged to unburden herself from the expectations and ideas of others. By modeling self-care and advocating for similar behavior in others, Geralt serves to disrupt unhealthy stereotypes surrounding self-neglect and provides evidence that authenticity and self-respect engenders a strength that is more sustainable than the facade of invulnerability.

**Toxic trait: Fearing emotions**

A fear of emotions is a cornerstone of toxic masculinity built on the idea that it is inappropriate for men to talk about their feelings and, therefore, men should avoid conversations about their emotions. Through the Trial of the Grasses (the process that makes witchers, witchers), the participants are meant to learn to suppress their emotions. As noted by Doug Cockle in the opening chapter of this volume, emotionless expression is thought to be a cornerstone of how a witcher interacts with himself and the world around him. In contrast to the fear and avoidance of emotions associated with "toxic masculinity," Geralt expresses his emotions, particularly softer ones, with regularity. This is reflected in a dialogue between Triss and Geralt, wherein she tells him "don't play the unfeeling mutant" (TLW, p. 106).

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Throughout his endeavors, Geralt also expresses empathy for others through his reticence to kill weaker creatures (“I am not going to kill mecopterans. Nor any other harmless creatures” ; TLW, p. 184), his love for Yennifer, and his expression of sadness at the loss of those important to him.

One of Geralt’s more poignant expressions of emotion is his response to hearing Ciri recount her trauma. During the narrative of *The Witcher*, Geralt takes in an adolescent girl, Ciri, into his care as his ward. Despite her noble upbringing, Ciri endures a significant amount of trauma prior to entering Geralt’s care. Her hometown was seized by foreign invaders, nearly everyone she has knew and loved has died, and she herself has had to run, fight, and kill for her own survival. The following interaction occurs during Season 2, Episode 1 of the *Netflix* series:

**Geralt:** I sleep like shit too

**Ciri:** You don’t sleep at all.

**Geralt:** ...makes for fewer nightmares. Except for the one about the rock troll. Overly friendly. Tough image to shake. What are yours about?

**Ciri:** The black knight has me on his horse. Cintra is burning. I’m too helpless to stop any of it.

**Geralt:** You escaped

**Ciri:** I was lucky.

This acknowledgement of Ciri’s past was discussed by Henry Cavill (the actor who first brought Geralt to life in the popular *Netflix* series of the same name) when he said in an interview about the show: “I wanted [Geralt] to recognize her trauma, because it’s very easy to forget – you see a character like Ciri and



you think, ‘She’s been through trauma,’ and it’s really terrible – but we also forget that Geralt’s been through trauma... From someone who has gone through that, he’s going to have that sense of patience with her, and that sense of waiting. She’s been through a lot; she’s going to lash out from time to time. Instead of him lashing out in return, he’s going to sit back and try to understand”<sup>29</sup>.

The acknowledgement of Ciri’s trauma is notable in and of itself, but the way in which Geralt consoles Ciri is also not a traditional display of masculinity. Particularly as men who view themselves as more masculine tend to be less likely to engage in “helping” behavior, including consoling others.<sup>30</sup>

Geralt’s expression of emotion is also apparent in his displays of fraternal love for Jaskier, romantic love for Yennefer, and paternal love for Ciri.

Despite Geralt’s protests about Jaskier throughout the *Netflix* series, Geralt values his friendship with his bardic companion. Geralt saves Jaskier from Torque, attended the ball of the royal court with him by his side, opened up to him about his insomnia (S1, E5) and when Jaskier was choking on his own blood, Geralt found a mage to save his life.

Geralt also has an emotional interdependence on Yennefer. Not only does he spend a significant part of the narratives of *The Witcher* actively pining for her (e.g., searching for her, rereading her letters), he directly expresses his love for her through words and public displays of affection (perhaps most notably at the banquet in Aretuza in *Time of Contempt*).

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The parental relationship Geralt shares with Ciri is another example of Geralt's emotional connection with others. While the enthusiasm with which Geralt initially accepted Ciri as a ward slightly differs across mediums (i.e., the show versus the books), once partnered Geralt displays clear signs of paternal affection for Ciri. This is evidenced through his paternal displays of emotion and affection throughout the narratives of *The Witcher*, especially when his desire to protect Ciri is at odds with his other desires. We see this in the TV show when he holds his sword to Yennifer's throat upon discovering her betrayal of Ciri to the Deathless Mother Voleth Meir. It's also prominent in *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* when he agrees to work with the Nilfgaardian emperor Emhyr var Emreis, despite his distaste for the man and his politics, in exchange for a chance to find Ciri.

### Toxic trait: Social dominance

The traditional toxic male exerts his social dominance over others. This can be physical (e.g., aggression) or social (e.g., exclusion and coercion). Physical dominance through aggression is using forms of violence, such as hitting, kicking, scratching, throwing objects, cutting, and slicing with one's sword (steel or silver). While Geralt often engages in what would be considered "physically aggressive behavior" – Witchers are bounty hunters, after all – he does so with prudence.

While Geralt is not afraid to use his physical strength when necessitated, he is not observed to use it ubiquitously as an expression of his male dominance.

For example, when speaking with Renfri:

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**Renfri:** People call you a monster too

**Geralt:** A mutant

**Renfri:** What if they come after you? Attack you?

**Geralt:** They have.

**Renfri:** Why not kill them?

**Geralt:** Because then I am what they say I am (S1, E1)

It is clear throughout *The Witcher*, that Geralt does not delight in killing. He may be a monster hunter by trade but he will walk away from a fight if he can or if it does not fit his moral or ethical code. Geralt does not exert social dominance over others, as traditional masculine roles would suggest he would do.

The same could be said of social dominance. The expression of social dominance would include behaviors such as social exclusion or coercion. This can include dismissive, antagonistic, or even extreme stubbornness. While Geralt is certainly assured in himself and his actions, he is also open to admitting wrongdoing and changing his mind. As he says in one of our favorite quotes from the entire series:

“Mistakes,’ he said with effort, ‘are also important to me. I don’t cross them out of my life, or memory. And I never blame others for them.”  
(BoE, p. 90).

### Conclusion

Traditional male protagonists tend to be case studies in toxic masculinity. They exert unconditional physical strength, neglect their own needs as an expression of their strength and toughness, self-neglect, fear of emotions, and exert their dominance over others (i.e., physically and socially). However, Geralt of Rivia

breaks this mold. With him we are presented with a beacon of non-toxic masculinity: A capable, strong, and handsome male character who also has limitations, values self-care and emotional bonds, expresses emotions, and shows physical restraint. This representation of masculinity provides an important contrast within a landscape of self-destructive male role models in media. Perhaps even more importantly, in the end, what Geralt teaches us about masculinity is that strength and power are independent concepts.

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## BARDIC INSPIRATION

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*Jaskier's Music Through the Lens of Therapeutic Song Analysis*

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### Introduction

Catchy melodies, clever lyrics, and viral earworms may rule over our musical soundscape, but this is hardly a new phenomenon. All throughout history we have had masters of music and wordcraft by way of minstrels and bards, and they have used their talents to tell embellished stories, entertain nobles, and even provide political commentary. The traveling bard Julian Alfred Pankratz (better known as Jaskier in the *Netflix* series *The Witcher*), however, gave himself a mission to elevate the public standing of the witcher Geralt of Rivia through his troubadour tunes. But when his subconscious feelings begin to reveal themselves through his songs, we see a more complete picture of Jaskier, the closest friend Geralt ever has, sometimes even despite himself. It is here that examining the bard's inspiration through

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the lens of therapeutic song analysis can truly show and help us explore his thoughts, feelings, and desires.

Jaskier – known as Dandelion in the books and games – is Geralt’s “close friend and steadfast companion” who sets out to “chronicle... his story which [he] shall sing to the end of [his] days”<sup>1</sup>. While we see that he is a bard with potential at the beginning of the *Netflix* series<sup>2</sup>, it is not until he joins with the Witcher that his own tales begin to truly take shape and benefit the both of them. The seven songs throughout the show illustrate a journey of their own, wherein Jaskier starts out rather disliked and full of falsehoods (“You Think You’re Safe”) but gradually moves to telling more and more truths and becoming a traveling tavern star (“The Golden One”). We bear witness to his attempts to retell Geralt’s adventures in a positive light in “Toss a Coin To Your Witcher,” but also see how he is impacted when their relationship breaks down in “Burn Butcher Burn.” Jaskier masterfully manages to go from entertaining crowds with “The Fishmonger’s Daughter” to attempting to secretly convey his feelings in “Her Sweet Kiss” to finally admitting to no regrets in “Whoreson Prison Blues.” Truly digging into all of these songs is where music therapy’s song analysis can help pick all of these intentions apart. As such, this chapter is an examination of all of Jaskier’s songs and how they reflect his inner workings through a music therapy lens.

Music therapy is a discipline in which a certified therapist helps the client to promote, maintain, and restore health “using music experiences and the relationships that develop through them as dynamic forces of change”<sup>3,4</sup>. Therapeutic song analysis is a



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receptive method used in music therapy to help explore thoughts, feelings, and experiences through lyrics and musical song qualities. Particular attention is given to the music itself because of how it can integrate with the lyrics to “reflect and contain the complexities of human emotions and interactions”<sup>5,6</sup>. In analyzing both the music and the lyrics simultaneously, we are able to analyze human experience itself<sup>7</sup>. While Jaskier cannot be his own music therapist (nor Geralt’s), we can use this lens to examine how his own works progress in allowing him to explore his thoughts, express emotions, cope with difficult experiences, and find meaning in his life. As his relationship with the witcher ebbs and flows, Jaskier finds his own voice and truth – “For today... I know the truth is a precious seed”<sup>8</sup> and we are invited along for the journey.

Please note that it is highly recommended that each of the songs presented are listened to prior to the analysis. These songs can be found on any platform where music can be streamed or downloaded, such as Apple Music. Additional musical context can also be found on the YouTube channel Songs of Healing (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoyzq1hBFd6BOJLLqb2aXhg>)

### You Think You’re Safe

Geralt: They don’t exist.

Jaskier: What don’t exist?

Geralt: The creatures in your song. (S1, E2)

As we first encounter Jaskier, the troubled troubadour is singing “You Think You’re Safe”<sup>9</sup> in a tavern to a highly displeased

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audience in the episode “Four Marks” from season 1 of *The Witcher Netflix* series. This is his most disorganized and least well-received song in the entire series and is made up of only voice and lute. His lyrics are filled with approximate rhymes that feel forced to fit the song (“drawers” with “horror,” “potion” with “abortion,” etc.). Musically, the chordal structure and his liberal elongating ends of phrases all feel like they should stoke interest. The crowd, however, tells him in no ambiguous terms that they do not care for his attempt at entertainment as they pelt him with old bread. Jaskier spots Geralt in the corner of the tavern and calls him out as being a witcher. A patron of the tavern asks him to go after “a devil eating all our grain.” Geralt agrees, but wastes no time in telling Jaskier that his “pike with the spike” and “flying drake” are not real monsters and neither are devils eating grain. These lyrics reveal Jaskier before his time with Geralt – musically competent, but incapable of writing plausible lyrics that can please a crowd.

Attempting to latch himself to Geralt, Jaskier suggests he can come up with tales and songs to spread “the tales of Geralt of Rivia, the Butcher of Blaviken,” which immediately earns the bard a solid gut punch, but he persists. Jaskier’s insistence on fixing Geralt’s “image problem” is his given reasoning for staying with Geralt, but the audience has already seen that the bard also serves to benefit. Geralt’s only criticism of Jaskier’s first song was that the monsters he spoke of were not real – by following the witcher on his adventures and hunts, the bard would have a front row seat to real experiences and creatures for his material. Jaskier wastes no time in this endeavor, giving us “Toss a Coin to Your Witcher.”

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### Toss a Coin to Your Witcher

Look, I promised to change the public's tune about you – at least allow me to try. -Jaskier (S1, E2)

“Toss a Coin to Your Witcher”<sup>10</sup> is the first song we hear that was written after Jaskier gets to go on an adventure with Geralt. He sold himself to the Witcher as a barker that would change the public's perception of Geralt and he quickly attempts to make good on the promise. His writing shows immediate musical differences from the preceding song in tempo and structure. While Jaskier's song of Posada was marked by unpredictable tempo changes and chord progressions that were hard to follow, “Toss a Coin” brings about a completely new sound with a wider vocal range. The tempo stays steady throughout, making space for Jaskier to hold out the ends of lines without bringing the progression to a standstill. The chord progression here is also more predictable than “You Think You're Safe,” paired with catchy lyrics that can easily be taught from tavern to tavern and anywhere in between. The bard's rhyme scheme even gains complexity in mixing ABCB and AABA patterns and wordplay with “he can't be bleat,” as opposed to “beat.” To further push the point of polish, the lutenist gains percussion, strings, brass, and a female vocalist accompanying him on the song.

While writing the song, Geralt protests at Jaskier taking creative liberties with the events that occurred, asking about the bard's newfound respect. When the bard replies “Respect doesn't make history,” the Witcher goes silent, save for a characteristic grunt. Two episodes later in “Of Bastards, Banquets, and Burials,” Jaskier has the whole tavern singing along with the chorus as

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the Witcher is paid and he triumphantly declares “I’ve made you famous, Witcher.” The bard seems to have accomplished his goal of changing public opinion, but he then uses this as a bargaining chip to convince Geralt to be his bodyguard for a night. While there is truth to Jaskier needing a favor, this also serves as his first omission of feelings he did not reveal to Geralt.

It does not take Jaskier long to realize that Geralt’s list of motivations is not long and he focuses mostly on coin. “Toss a coin to your Witcher, a friend of humanity” is meant to convince potential patrons that the otherwise uninviting Geralt does good deeds for all and should be compensated accordingly. Our troubadour, however, also stands to benefit from this new partnership – the crowd was not only finally listening to him, but singing along enthusiastically. Jaskier does not think to thank Geralt for this because he only recognizes the service that he is providing, not that such a scene seemed impossible before he linked up with the Witcher. The bard’s prideful ego prevents him from recognizing this, much less saying it out loud to Geralt – “That’s my epic tale, our champion prevailed.” In their next conversation, Geralt declares “I need no one. And the last thing I want is someone needing me.” Jaskier retorts “And yet, here we are” and this is the closest he comes to telling the Witcher that he needs his friend-who-says-they-aren’t-friends.

### The Fishmonger’s Daughter

It is one night bodyguarding your very best friend in the whole wide world.

How hard could it be? -Jaskier (S1, E4)

At the wedding banquet that Jaskier begs Geralt to accompany him to, we hear his third song: “The Fishmonger’s Daughter”<sup>11</sup>. On the surface, it is a jovial song for an audience filled with ale and mischief. The chordal structure is his simplest yet and even his vocal range is reduced, making it extremely easy for the crowd to sing along. The enthralled partygoers sing with Jaskier, some dance, and many clap along as he doubles the speed of the song. He is also joined by a flute, a tambourine, and a violin, as he sings and plays lute. The lyrics are spoken by “a puck” and described as potentially fathering a “hairy young faun” should the fishmonger’s daughter not be dissuaded from going after him. Given that a “puck” is described as “a fairy and merry wanderer of the night,”<sup>12</sup> such a character is the perfect narrator to delight Jaskier’s audience. It also, however, serves as a bit of foreshadowing for the entrance of Lord Urcheon of Erlenwald and his cursed beastly appearance “lest your grandkid be born...”

### Her Sweet Kiss

Jaskier: Life is too short. Do what pleases you, while you can.

Geralt: Composing your next song?

Jaskier: No, I’m just uh... trying to work out what pleases me. (S1, E6)

When we first encounter “Her Sweet Kiss,”<sup>13</sup> it is sitting in Jaskier’s lap as he’s actively writing it. He asks, “Is the whole metaphor landing or is it too cerebral?” after being unable to decide between “gorgeous garroter” and “lovely garroter.” Back in the first episode “The End’s Beginning,” Geralt’s name is directly likened to sounding like “garroter,” so we can only take this to be referring to the witcher himself in the lyrics. However, there are two other characters in this song – “Her” and the Narrator.

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The verses present his most complex rhyme scheme yet with ABCBDD as his vocal range also expands to its widest usage with a pleading tone throughout. The Narrator asks his “love” how it could possibly be just that “her love” storms in and destroys with naught but a kiss. The Narrator of this tale also, however, feels resigned to continue trudging on this path of watching this calamitous relationship continue. While she is not named in the song beyond being a storm and a current, Yennefer is consistently surrounded by destructive forces of nature and this song was actively being written upon her running once again into Geralt and Jaskier. The witcher even calls her a tornado in their argument after their battle. But what of our Narrator?

The early version of the song that we first see in Jaskier’s notebook had slightly different lyrics from what he ultimately settled on. What this could have sounded like can be heard at the video channel mentioned in the introduction. From what we can decipher from the book,<sup>14</sup> we see:

“If I were a man of more merit  
if I were a man of resolve  
I’d leave you behind  
Get my fair peace of mind  
From a bottle of grain alcohol  
But I’m weak  
My love”

There is no mention of “Her” in sight. We only hear an instrumental version of the piece during the episode and the final lyrics at the very end, notably after Yennefer and Geralt fight. Subsequently, Geralt unleashes his rage at Jaskier. Even after

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Geralt blames the bard for the djinn binding him to the sorceress and for his Child Surprise from the wedding banquet, Jaskier's only protest is "that's not fair." He resigns himself to get the details of Geralt's last battle from the rest of the party and retreats with a simple "see you around, Geralt." It is after this exchange that we hear "Her Sweet Kiss" in its final form where Jaskier continues to assure that he will continue on this path as a penance. Despite understanding that the Witcher needs time alone, the troubled troubadour as the Narrator still seems willing to walk alongside him whenever he will take him back to trudge along together.

Our troubadour hero undergoes quite the journey with these first four songs. In "You Think You're Safe," we see the bard as bothersome, no one wanting to pay attention to his tall tales before he falls in with the Witcher. With "Toss a Coin to Your Witcher" and "The Fishmonger's Daughter," we see what our pair of protagonists accomplish together. But once "Her Sweet Kiss" enters the fray, Jaskier shows both Geralt and the audience how vulnerable he is at the mere thought of losing all that he has gained. In his next songs, we shall see our troubled troubadour telling the truest tale yet, scorning his once best friend, and finally attempting to heal from it all just as Geralt makes his way back into Jaskier's life once more.

### The Golden One

I'm an artist, Yennefer. It's my job to put myself in other people's shoes. Even if they are, in your case, large, clunky, and I don't know, probably full of snakes or something. -Jaskier (S2, E4)

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“The Golden One”<sup>15</sup> is the only song that we hear two lines of at most in “Redanian Intelligence” and yet we know exactly what it is describing and what actually happened. In the complete recording of the tune, we hear him retell the tale of Geralt’s encounter with Villentretenmerth the golden dragon and his Zerrikanian bodyguards Téa and Véa. Jaskier follows suit with giving a narrative that is nearly completely true just as “Her Sweet Kiss,” but cannot resist throwing in that the “loveable old lutenist won the hearts of the huntress pair” as he’d hoped for when they first met. If one were keeping score, this is the first stretch of the truth that we have seen from Jaskier since “Toss a Coin to Your Witcher,” which was littered with hyperbole. Had one not sought this piece out beyond the two-line context of the episode, it would also be a surprise to hear a full instrumentation of lute, voice, strings, tambourine, brass, solo violin, percussion, tin whistle, and more. The bard also gives us his widest vocal range yet, covering two full octaves and a key change before the last chorus, the only one of his entire repertoire. While he otherwise tends to sing in B-flat minor or C minor, “The Golden One” sees him veer entirely off into G minor, a key he has not touched since “You Think You’re Safe.” Yet despite the musical breadth covered, there is almost a reluctance to enter into any sort of depth.

While this song recounts the facts of the adventure with the golden dragon, Jaskier’s retelling feels almost distant and out of character. He only refers to Geralt as “The Witcher,” which we have not seen since “Toss a Coin” and having just referred to him rather differently in “Her Sweet Kiss.” Due to Geralt abandoning Jaskier directly after this experience and the bard’s response simply being “I’ll get the rest of the story from the others,” we



are left imagining that these lyrics must have been written soon thereafter, but before the gravity of Geralt's desertion landed. In singing "we're all fools," our lyricist could be referring to everyone involved – Yennefer was fooled into her relationship with Geralt, Geralt was a fool for thinking she would not find out about his djinn wish, and Jaskier was a fool for loving Geralt as he did only to be so callously tossed aside when things went terribly wrong. "The Golden One" may have been a sort of traumatic emotional shock response, but the next song makes Jaskier's emotions the clearest they have ever been.

### Burn Butcher Burn

Is this what pleases you? -Jaskier to Geralt (S2, E7)

When we hear the first chords of "Burn Butcher Burn,"<sup>16</sup> Yennefer is on the run in Redania and is told of "The Sandpiper" who performs at a tavern every night. There is a faint "with no one by your side" as she argues with an elf for leaving his friend to die in a sewer. From upstairs, we clearly hear "as I burn all the memories of you" and she realizes the Sandpiper's true identity. We then see our beloved bard for the first time since he was left behind, resplendent in new garb and a feathered hat and accompanied by several bandmates on the tavern stage. The troupe of cello and drums bring a weightiness to Jaskier's lute and voice, but it does not feel like a grounding weight. His song begins with a slower introduction that leads to the fuller instrumentation, but by the end it feels wild and out of control as the tempo speeds up and he just repeats "burn" over and over again before unraveling entirely towards the end. Even his choreography where he strolls around the pub draws surprised

shrieks from his audience as he leaps off a table and whirls around on stage, only to end up sitting on the corner out of breath. The weight in the instrumentation does not help center him; it is instead squarely on Jaskier's chest and he has found his voice to scream from the rooftops, or rather, the tabletops.

As much as “The Golden One” felt like a distant retelling of a tale, “Burn Butcher Burn” is as raw, up close, and personal as we have ever seen Jaskier. He speaks of Geralt's “swords and stupid hair,” but only refers to him as “Butcher,” a reference to “the Butcher of Blaviken” nickname that once earned the bard a punch to the stomach upon uttering it. Instead, the bard now flips his gut punch onto the audience and turns it into his most painfully honest song since “Her Sweet Kiss.” His lyrics drip in sarcasm, cynicism, and pain – but even the troubled troubadour cannot stop talking between verses as he asks his audience to “toss a coin if you can,” another familiar phrase from a past life. The lyrics ask “What for do you yearn?” in a reminder that before being abandoned, Jaskier was trying to work out what pleased him and yet here he is still wondering what Geralt wants instead. Even having been left behind and tossed aside, our bard can only bring himself to burn memories as if they were a page from his notebook. He even says that he laughs as they burn, but as he repeats “burn” in his frenzied ending, there is a realization that he cannot even wish harm on his old friend. He just wishes his own memories of Geralt were nothing but ashes, perhaps in a futile hope that they may hurt just a little less.

Upon reuniting with the bard, Yennefer tells Jaskier that she heard his song and says “Geralt must have left quite a sour taste in

your mouth.” “What? He- No one leaves any tastes in my mouth, thank you very much. I sing of universal matters, my dear, generous Lady. Emotions which anybody could experience. That song could be about anyone. Anyone... Fine, yes, when I wrote it, it did come from the heart. Perhaps a broken one.” Despite this being the very woman whom he openly told Geralt not to trust and that he calls his worst enemy, the bard admits all of this pain to Yennefer within moments of seeing her again. With this admission, we see – at last – an alignment of Jaskier’s music, with his feelings, and his openly-spoken words. “Her Sweet Kiss” was the closest he came before this moment without actually tipping over into telling Geralt about his own feelings and every song before that did not focus on his own emotions in any way. “We’re better off without him,” he says as he clinks a full flagon with Yennefer, almost as if he needs to convince the both of them at once.

### Whoreson Prison Blues

People do stupid things when they think they’re trapped in a corner, Geralt. And they say stupid things. That’s what friends do. They come back. -Jaskier (S2, E7)

In its original form, we hear “Whoreson Prison Blues”<sup>17</sup> sung by Jaskier, played on spoons, and vocally accompanied by his three mouse friends in his prison cell. One would once again be forgiven, however, for not seeking out the final recorded version, which adds guitar, cello, piano, bass, and percussion to his expected lute and voice arrangement. Just as in “The Golden One,” we only hear a snippet of a stripped down version in the episode, only for the credits to gift us with the rest. He has kept

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his vocal range wide since “Her Sweet Kiss,” perhaps showing that he has found his voice. This is also his slowest song of the seven and only the second in which he directly talks about himself: “If I had to do it over, I’d do it all again.” He also says this merely hours after being tortured for information on Geralt’s whereabouts without having an answer. The bard’s slow-down to introspection is only mitigated by the fact that he’s playing on spoons and singing with/to mice.

Jaskier sings this tune just before being reunited with Geralt, unbeknownst to him. He practices with his little jailhouse mouse choir as the guard threatens to cut his tongue out, but is then rudely interrupted by a commotion outside his prison cell. Upon finding that the source was Geralt beating up the guard and unlocking his cell door, Jaskier pauses for a moment before embracing his old friend, but he quickly makes it clear that it was not in immediate forgiveness. The chorus lyrics “Go fuck yourself, you whoreson, ‘cause you’re through fuckin’ with me” directly manifest in conversation as Geralt interrupts Jaskier and he immediately retorts “Don’t fucking ‘Jaskier’ me, I’m talking to you, this is how this works.” The shift in their relationship is immediately apparent. Jaskier is willing to allow Geralt back into his life, but on his terms and in a dynamic in which he refuses to be steamrolled like before.

Jaskier is now entirely direct in his addressing Geralt, asking him something he has been wondering and worrying over ever since “Her Sweet Kiss.” When our beloved bard points out to The Butcher that he previously wanted to ignore Ciri as his Child Surprise but that has since changed, he asks “Is this what pleases

you?” We have seen him progress from only telling partial truths in songs to directly telling truths but still only in songs to having the confidence and fearlessness to say exactly what he is feeling and thinking to the very person that he called his best friend. Jaskier even calls out Geralt for having said “stupid things, that’s what friends do” but then “they come back” and the witcher manages a rare and seemingly sincere apology.

### Concluding thoughts

Through the lens of therapeutic song analysis, we have seen the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that Jaskier has throughout the first two seasons of “The Witcher” Netflix series. The troubadour began as a lonely act making up stories in a small tavern that hated his performance. With the help of Geralt’s adventures and missteps, he grew to become a traveling tavern topline. His external persona gives audiences all the theatrics and perhaps exaggerated stories, but his inner thoughts and feelings needed songs to hide behind, at least initially. Geralt’s impact on Jaskier also propels the subconscious emotions to the surface where his songs become cohesive narratives of truth but simultaneously instant crowd pleasers. Jaskier’s bardic inspiration ends up allowing the audience to explore his thoughts, see how he copes with traumatic events, and share his experiences in finding his new, better purpose as Yennefer describes it.

As described in music therapy literature, “to analyze music is to analyze human experience...the structure of human experience in music is homologous with the structure of music itself”<sup>18</sup>. “By analyzing the interaction between music and lyrics, a more holistic description emerges of the songs”<sup>19</sup> and how they show

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everything that Jaskier initially cannot or does not reveal but learns to do so over time. Our bard transforms from the unwelcome sidekick to a tolerated presence to a wounded solo act, and finally a confident consenting confidant to the witcher. Jaskier makes it clear that he will only consider being with Geralt again on his own terms and fully embraces this as they part together – the ever-talkative troubadour and his best friend the witcher once more.

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## WHAT IS LOVE?

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*Triss, Don't Hurt Me*

Celeste Sangiorgio, PhD

Why are individuals attracted to some people and not others; what makes affection grow into relationships or wither, like a rose of remembrance, into apathy?

Characters in *The Witcher* are driven towards each other by the same forces that drive love and intimacy in our world – familiarity, communication, and reciprocity – but are also driven by and create tangible, observable magic within their romances.

Rejection and acceptance are baked into Triss Merigold's romance and intimacy throughout the course of the novels and games. She kindles, loses, rekindles, loses, and... changes her romance with Geralt over the years of *The Witcher* stories. She is woven into Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri's family unit, with unique relationships and shared experiences with each person. Triss is accepted and rejected in turn at royal courts, secret societies, and



by witchers, sorceresses, and other outcasts. What does Triss Merigold's relationships with others tell us about attraction, love, intimacy, and relationships – in our world and the world of *The Witcher*?

A Little Girl from Maribor, the Fourteenth One of the Hill, and Venerable Triss the Fearless: Who is Triss Merigold?

A sense of self – someone's understanding of who they are as a person – is anchored by personal beliefs, goals, and life experiences.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> A sorceress's sense of self might be anchored by her beliefs about magical values, as well as her unique life experiences.

While some experiences are shared in *The Witcher* – all individuals live in a world where magic is real and has affected their lives – other experiences are not shared. Elves experience racism; non-royals receive little protection, witchers are raised by witchers, and sorceresses often train at Aretuza. Reacting to, understanding, and interpreting shared and nonshared experiences makes each sorceress and person unique in their development and sense of self.

Triss Merigold's thoughts about herself, the world around her, and the people in it are presented and changed throughout the course of the *Witcher* novels and games. As her values change, her expectations of herself, others, and her relationships also change. Different names are given to her sense of self following different experiences: sometimes she calls herself “a girl from Maribor”; at other times she is called “the Fourteenth from the Hill” and “Venerable Triss the Fearless”<sup>4</sup>. Which of these

identities does Triss accept and which does she reject? Her acceptance or rejection of these ideas, or titles, about herself throughout the course of *The Witcher* series affects her ability to form and develop relationships with others.

**Identity and values: Past and present family and friends**

Witchers and sorceresses live within a network of overlapping and contrasting social and personal experiences, obligations, and goals – friendships, vendettas, politics, lovers, and otherwise<sup>5</sup> (see Figure 1). Triss enters into *The Witcher* series with a similar network: she is friends and colleagues with Yennefer and she is an excellent sorceress, with relationships in Kaer Morhen, a membership in the Chapter, and a station in the Royal Court of Temeria. Her private sense of self – her personal beliefs, values, and desires are displayed in the text of *The Witcher* books as well.

It is rare for witchers and sorceresses to speak of their pasts – potentially due to their long lifespans. One reason for this may be that the early experiences that affect them are far enough in their past that they are no longer thought about; another possibility is that witchers, sorceresses, and other individuals with long lifespans are more affected by recent or sustained events.

Triss's references to her past offer small windows into how some negative experiences in her life history anchor her values in the present. There are multiple times where Triss seems to have negative experiences where she felt powerless or alone. When she discusses her childhood in Maribor, a coastal city, she rejects the feelings of helplessness she had – she is “not a little girl from a tiny tower in Maribor anymore”<sup>6</sup>. Instead, Triss describes herself

as a “free woman... belong[ing] to herself”<sup>7</sup> and a “typical enchantress”<sup>8</sup>. For Triss, it seems like her magic and identity as an enchantress gives her freedom, a place in the world, and power that she did not have and presently values.

The few glimpses of Triss’s history with powerlessness can offer crucial insights into the origins of her values around helping others as well as the uncertainty and fear she feels about her ability to independently help others. At one point in *The Witcher* novels when Triss is sick and delirious, she yells “that someone called Kevyn kept his hands to himself, and immediately after that [declares] that destiny cannot be avoided”<sup>9</sup>. It is possible that Triss’s fever dream is not influenced by her past experiences; however, another interpretation is that Triss’s nightmare is inspired by an assault or danger she experienced in the past. In either case, Triss’s statement connects an assault to destiny that cannot be avoided. Her statement shows that she experiences fear and threats from others but responds that destiny, or justice, will meet those who threaten her.

If family or hometown experiences shaped Triss’s values, it is not revealed in her conversations with others, her inner thoughts, or her actions. Details of events and circumstances in Triss’s childhood and adolescence are unclear. Trade cities such as Maribor are diverse in income levels, housing, jobs, and people. Triss may have been raised wealthy or without money; she may have had siblings or had no family at all.

Early, core experiences like relationships with caregivers are universal – humans, dogs, wyverns, sorceresses, and witchers all experience a form of childhood, development, and the significant

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relationships and experiences within. However, individuals with long lifespans have more opportunities over time to develop deep and significant friendships. Triss has long, and significant relationships with the sorceresses of the lodge, particularly Yennefer. Triss and Yennefer have known each other anywhere between 20 to 70 years, as Yennefer refers to Triss as a “friend” when meeting Geralt in *The Last Wish*,<sup>10</sup> approximately 20 years before the events in the books and game. The mutual understanding and shared language of Yennefer and Triss’s friendship is shown in actions. They can read each other’s body language on a deep level, and each can tell just by looking at each other when one of them is upset or happy. In Triss’s words, they know each other “too well to be fooled” and each can tell when the other is “pleased” or “weary”<sup>11</sup>.

## ZONES OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE

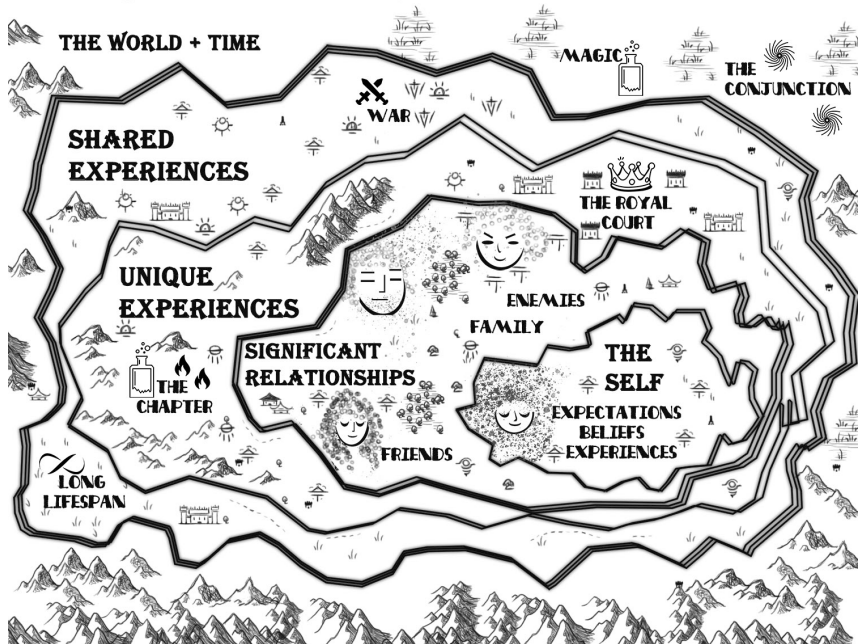


Figure 1. A map depicting Triss Merigold's identity in terms of cultural, personal, and shared experiences, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Frame Model

### Identity and values: Power, Fear, and Intimacy

Expectations, beliefs, and values that are cultivated through years of experience drive people towards decisions, relationships, and personal growth. At the start of *The Witcher* series, Triss has spent decades steeped in mage culture and politics. She has multiple, high-level positions: she works in the Temerian court, determines mage policy as a member of the Chapter, and takes on additional projects (such as assisting with Ciri's training). It is possible to connect her present positions to her past: she has obtained a number of powerful roles in the present; she is no longer powerless.

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There are many possible reactions to meeting goals: satisfaction and developing new goals, identifying the next step, or changing values. Triss appears to have met her values for power and belonging in her work at the start of *The Witcher* novels, however, she has not stopped pursuing powerful roles, relationships, and actions. She seeks out powerful roles and relationships with conflicting values, like assisting the witchers and working for the Chapter. When Vesemir points out this conflict, Triss response, “But as for loyalty... I am loyal. And believe me, in this matter I can be loyal to both you and to the Chapter”<sup>12</sup> when asked if she could assist Ciri and serve as a member on mage organizations. Triss’s expectation that she can balance ambitiousness and relationships is continuously challenged, such as when she is unable to advocate for Yennefer while also serving on The Lodge<sup>13</sup>.

Power can be connected to physical and magical ability, but friendships, relationships, and other groups can be physically and emotionally protective as well<sup>14</sup>. It is possible that Triss’s initial interest in relationships with Ciri, Geralt, and Yennifer is motivated by interest in power and belonging. Intimacy, shared history and reciprocal interest and development, is expressed differently across different relationships;<sup>15</sup> Triss developed different expressions of intimacy in her relationships with Geralt and Ciri, romantic intimacy and familial respectively. Triss and Geralt’s initial meeting and foundational relationship development is not shown in the books or the games. In her recollection, Triss links her interest in Geralt to Yennefer, stating that she was “jealous” and “fascinated” by Yennefer and Geralt’s

relationship; and later saying to Geralt, “I envy Yennefer... I envy her and you”<sup>16</sup>.

It is possible that Triss used a framework of familiarity with Yennefer to understand and create a mental image of Geralt, though it is impossible to know how Triss conceptualized and built her relationship with Geralt because this relationship developed between novels. Familiarity alone, or exposure through repeated contact with someone, can be sufficient to create attraction and long-lasting bonds, called the Mere Exposure Effect<sup>17, 18, 19</sup>: Geralt is a frequently discussed topic among the sorceresses, and it clear that multiple sorceresses are interested in Geralt solely through familiarity, without having met him. He is approached and discussed by sorceresses on multiple occasions, including a mage cocktail party in *The Time of Contempt*<sup>20</sup>.

#### Envy and longing

Beyond familiarity, Triss is forthright in her discussion of a common theme that surfaces in the novels: people envy Yennefer. Triss states directly that she envies Yennefer’s relationship with Geralt, whereas Sabrina Glevissig states, “congratulations, Yenna. I envy you. And you know how sincerely I can envy”<sup>21</sup> and Philipa describes Yennefer’s relationship with Ciri as the reason “why we envy you” when speaking to Yennefer)<sup>22</sup>. Upon meeting Yennefer, Ciri is described as feeling “a burning envy... an overwhelming desire to possess what Yennefer had”<sup>23</sup>. No reason in the text or games is given for why Yennefer consistently elicits envy in others.

Classic psychological theories, often referred to as psychoanalysis

or psychodynamic theories, could be used to interpret this envy as objectification: Yennefer is seen as an aspirational, ideal identity<sup>24</sup> for Triss and others to aspire to, as a woman, a sorceress, and in other social and personal roles. By extension, Yennefer's relationships with others become objectified and thereby possessable as objects<sup>25, 26</sup>. Though complex (see Figure 2), object-relations theory boils down to the idea that people's inner worlds are alive and driven by a need to support or reject beliefs about themselves, others, and the world around them. There is more flexibility for multiple aspirational goals, or possible selves, in newer psychological models (see Figure 2). Triss's statements that she is "jealous" and "fascinated" by Yennefer and Geralt's relationship and her repeated interest in the "rapture" that she feels from the "tingling" and "pleasant, piercing vibration"<sup>27</sup> from Geralt's witcher medallion indicate that she sees Geralt at least in part as instrumental, an object of fascination, pleasure, and personal development.

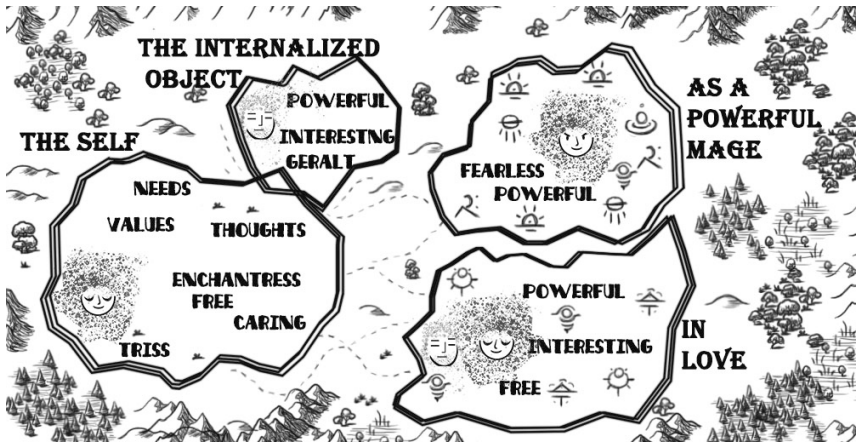


Figure 2. A map depicting Triss Merigold's identity in terms of her ideas about herself and personal goals, adapted from object-relations theory



Only human and not perfect

Triss's romantic desire and sexual interest in Geralt is present throughout the course of the novels: she thinks "I would prefer to sleep with Geralt in the worst," after their first interaction in the books and describes herself as "angry and aroused" when he does not demonstrate sexual interest<sup>28</sup>. In her descriptions of her own actions towards Geralt, Triss thinks, "I've no control over myself" and says she "can't even think logically"<sup>29</sup>. Triss's romantic and sexual interest in Geralt, does not appear to have ever been consensually reciprocated in the course of the novels. In her perspective, Triss recalls "seduc[ing] the witcher – with the help of a little magic" which led to "guilt, anxiety and pain. His pain"<sup>30</sup>.

Sexual assault, physical abuse, and misconduct are pervasive in the culture of *The Witcher* series. Nearly every female main character either experiences sexual assault in the course of the novel or in the prior to the events in the novel. Triss appears to share this history with her peers in her experience with "Kevyn" that she recalls when sick and delirious<sup>31</sup>. Geralt is compelled by magic into sex multiple times throughout the course of *The Witcher* series; the guilt, anxiety, and pain that Geralt feels can be interpreted as a natural response to surviving perpetration of sexual misconduct. In this way, Triss is acting as a "typical enchantress"<sup>32</sup> in the culture of the Witcher world; there is a clear history of magic users removing consent in their own sexual encounters and through their "breeding individuals into pairs" to create a child of Elder Blood<sup>33</sup>. An argument can be made that it is unclear what magic was used to compel Geralt to sleep with Triss: it is possible that the magic Triss used could fall anywhere

on a spectrum from enhancing attractiveness to full subservience/compulsion. However, any pressure or misrepresentation in order to secure sexual contact with another person meets criteria for sexual coercion because it fails to provide the information that is needed for evaluating consent, therefore effectively removing consent<sup>34</sup>. Triss's initial sexual contact with Geralt fits criteria of sexual coercion.

Geralt also must navigate, appraise, and express his own values regarding magic, romantic relationships, and sexual interest and misconduct in his response to Triss. Geralt communicates that he prioritizes preserving friendly intimacy with Triss, responding "Mistakes... are also important to me. I don't cross them out of my life, or memory. And I never blame others for them. You are important to me, Triss, and always will be. You never let me down. Never. Believe me..." in response to Triss's apology. Geralt's words appear to have made an impression on Triss, as she mentions them in a conversation with Yennefer, "I accept that, because I was indeed to blame. But I have to tell you one thing... He knows how to forgive"<sup>35</sup>.

Negative emotions, such as guilt, are important signals in identity development and change: pain and embarrassment can indicate that someone has not acted in accordance with their own values<sup>36, 37</sup>. This process, called cognitive dissonance (see Figure 3) can explain why Triss does not appear to use magic for coercive purposes for the remainder of the Witcher series: Triss experiences frustration, rejection, and anger in response to Geralt's lack of reciprocity in her romantic interest but never again uses magic to coerce Geralt into having sex<sup>38</sup>. It is possible

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that these negative emotions drove her to reappraise her own values, reprioritize her social roles, and develop a new sense of self. Others often point out that Triss attempts to negotiate conflicting roles: loyalty to the witchers, her friends, and the lodge. Triss comes to recognize and reject indecisiveness in herself due to the pain it has caused her, stating that she “believed[d] them [the sorceresses of the lodge] when they explained that there are more and less important matters” and “no point saving people” she knows and loves but now feels “robbed”<sup>39</sup>.

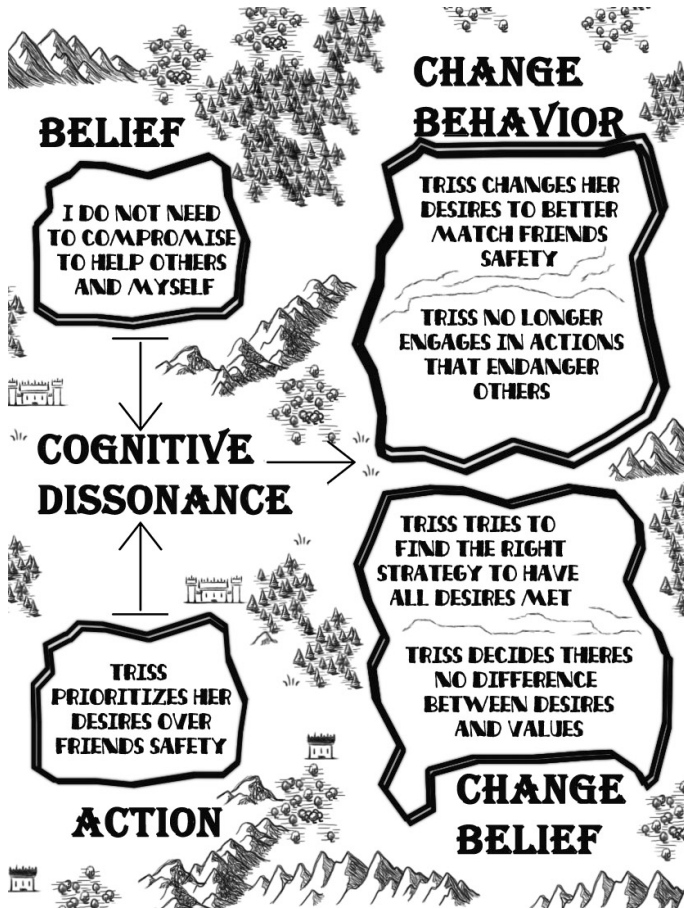


Figure 3. A map showing Triss's personality change through cognitive dissonance.

There are elements in *The Witcher* books and games that indicate that Triss changed as a result of feeling robbed: she became known as “Triss the Fearless”, a title likely given to a decisive person who can “commit acts of insanity” like “run and save” her friends “like a madwoman”<sup>40</sup>. However, Triss is demonstrated to be working with Royal Courts and with the sorceresses lodge in *The Witcher*<sup>41</sup> and *The Witcher: Assassins of Kings*<sup>42</sup>; despite

this, she is an active, decisive supporter of the nonhuman cause in *The Witcher: The Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red)<sup>43</sup> game, indicating that her character change is maintained in *The Witcher* games.

### Romance as Developmental Narrative

Triss, Geralt, and Yennefer are locked in complicated, overlapping intimate relationships. Sometimes, in the course of the books and the games, events that happened to Yennefer are transferred to Triss, further complicating these relationships and the shared history among these three characters. For example, in *The Witcher: Assassins of Kings*<sup>44</sup>, Triss is compressed into a jade figurine. While she is captured; in *The Witcher* book series, Yennefer is “packed” and “kept in a box as a jade statuette for a month and a half” following the massacre at Thanedd<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, the text of a fantasy that Geralt shares about his future with Yennefer is used as Triss’s dialogue describing her fantasy of a future with Geralt in *The Witcher*,<sup>46</sup> Triss describes a fantasy she has of a future with Geralt: ““A house... Nice dream. You could breed horses and sheep, I’d tend the garden, cook meals. We’d sell what we grew to buy copper pots, iron rakes... We’d age with dignity. Evenings you’d play bagpipes of your own making, as a remedy for my gloom.” In the *Time of Contempt*, Yennefer reads a dream from Geralt’s mind and describes it back to him, saying:

“‘A pretty dream,’ said Yennefer, stroking him [Geralt] lightly on the shoulder. ‘A home. A house built with your own hands, and you and I in that house. You would keep horses and sheep, and I would have a little garden, cook food and card wool, which we would take to market. With the pennies earned from selling that wool and

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various crops we would buy what we needed; let's say some copper cauldrons and an iron rake. Every now and then, Ciri would visit us with her husband and three children, and Triss Merigold would occasionally look in, to stay for a few days. We'd grow old together, beautifully and with dignity. And should I ever get bored, you would play for me in the evening on your homemade bagpipes. Playing the bagpipes – as everyone knows – is the best remedy for depression”<sup>47</sup>.

The most complex overlap between Triss and Yennefer is likely the introduction of Alvin in the first Witcher game. Alvin is a young boy with identical powers, presentation, and needs as Ciri: he acts as a medium and shares Ithlinne's prophecy of world destruction, has the capability to warp through space and time as a magical Source, and elicits a paternal reaction from Geralt. Unlike Ciri, the gameplay of *The Witcher*<sup>48</sup> requires that Geralt identifies who he would like to create a family system with: Triss or Shani. Whether players choose Shani or Triss, Alvin ends up lost to time through the course of events in the game and returns as the primary antagonist of the first Witcher game.

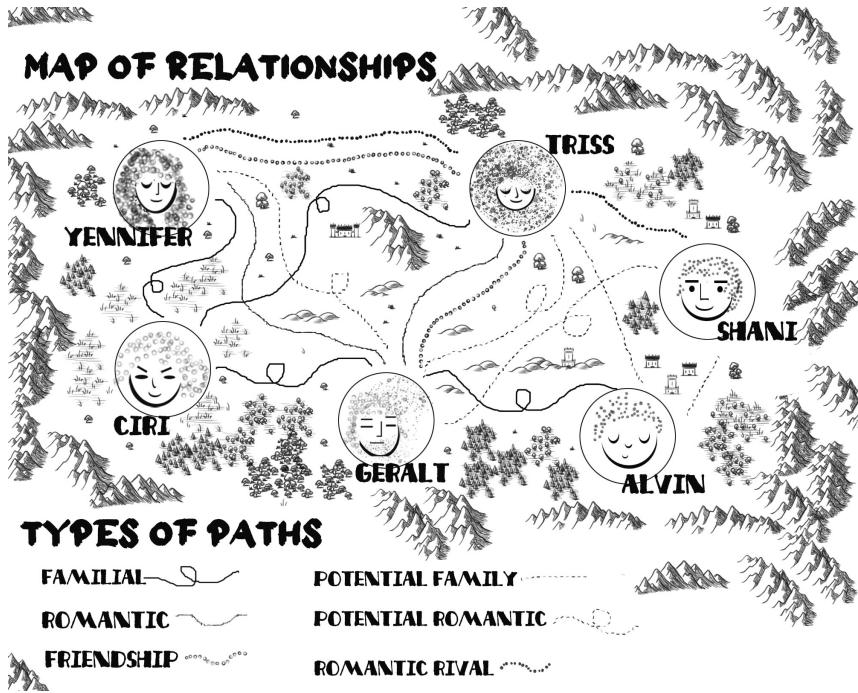


Figure 4. Map of stated relationships and potential relationships in the Witcher book and game series.

The development of Triss into a parental figure is a departure from her relationship with Ciri, who she refers to as her “little sister”<sup>49</sup>. In describing her motivation to rescue Ciri in the books, Triss says “I owe it to Ciri... I love that girl like a sister” and Yennefer says, “you were the maid’s [Ciri’s] mentor, almost like an older sister, as you yourself said”<sup>50</sup>. Triss, Yennefer, and Geralt are shown as complex and protective caregivers for Ciri, they teach her life, social, and academic skills and share their philosophies on life and the world around them. Similarly, Geralt mentors Alvin in the first Witcher game, which impacts Alvin’s philosophy when he’s returned as an adult and antagonist later in the game. Conversely, Triss’s interactions with Alvin are shown to be

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prototypical, she limits Alvin's sugar intake and requests that Geralt act as a disciplinarian, and not impact Alvin's development.

Per the psychosocial stage model, (Figure 5) <sup>51,52</sup> individuals are motivated along the course of major life events to first learn and then share their identity with others through different types of relationships. Children, like Ciri in the books, are challenged through adolescence to become confident in, explore, and develop a sense of self. Ciri's identity and understanding of her own motivations was crucial throughout the books: her decision of whether to "leave a trail of death,"<sup>53</sup> become a "witcher-girl," or sit as a sorceress of the Lodge are crucial to how Ithlinne's prophecy is fulfilled.



## LIFE STAGES & CHARACTERS





GROUP NAME	AGE	CRISIS CONCEPT			
INFANTS	0 to 18 MO	TRUST VS MISTRUST			
TODDLERS	18 MO TO 3YRS	AUTONOMY VS SHAME DOUBT			
PRESCHOOL	3 TO 6 YRS	INITIATIVE VS GUILT			
CHILDHOOD	6 TO 12 YRS	INDUSTRY VS INFERIORITY			
ADOLESCENTS	12 TO 18 YRS	IDENTITY VS ROLE CONFUSION			
YOUNG ADULTS	19 TO 40 YRS	INTIMACY VS ISOLATION			
MIDDLE ADULTS	40 TO 65 YRS	GENERATIVITY VS STAGNATION		<b>TRISS</b>	
				<b>GERALT</b>	
				<b>YENNEFER</b>	
SENIORS	65 PLUS YRS	INTEGRITY VS DESPAIR			

Figure 5. Table of Eriksonian stages divided into groups by age and crisis and indicating which Witcher character is in each phase.

For the majority of their lives, witchers and mages remain within two life phases: intimacy vs. isolation (adulthood) and generativity vs. stagnation (middle adulthood). The relationships that witchers and mages engage in can indicate which stage a specific witcher or mage is in. A sense of belonging, or intimacy, can be found in the groups that witchers and mages affiliate with (e.g., the Lodge, Kaer Morhen). The goals of the lodge, council, chapter, and witcher schools are oriented towards the concept generativity, to pass on knowledge and leave a mark on the

## THE WITCHER

world<sup>54</sup>, <sup>55</sup>. For witches, generativity is achieved by preserving the natural order and protecting vulnerable people; for mages, generativity is achieved by raising new mages and influencing the course of history. Triss is described as the “youngest among” the members of the Lodge<sup>56</sup> and presents as younger in her goals: she is oriented towards exploring her relationships and affiliation with others, likely placing her in the young adult phase of intimacy vs. isolation. Triss’s story arc throughout the book series focuses on her ability to identify and develop relationships in which she can express her authentic self. At the end of the books, she can be understood as having achieved this goal by rejecting the lodge and becoming the person who would go on to be called “Triss the Fearless” by history.

In contrast to Triss, Yennefer and Geralt are presented as being within the generativity vs. stagnation life stage. Yennefer is introduced in the *Witcher* short stories as seeking a cure for her infertility so that she can conceive. Geralt’s discussion of his personal philosophy is oriented towards generativity: he often discusses his place in the world and the impact of his help. As Geralt finds that he can be more fulfilled in his ability to be seen and share his skills in his paternal relationship with Ciri than in being a Witcher, stating, “being a witcher doesn’t interest me any longer. I’m retiring,”<sup>57</sup> before hanging his sword on the wall of an inn.

It is possible that Triss’s character, grown from her experiences in the course of the novels, transitions from interest in intimacy to interest in generativity, or the mark she will make on the world. In *The Witcher*, Triss is interested in developing a parental

relationship with Alvin, further supporting her developing interest in generativity. However, in *The Witcher* and *The Witcher: Assassins of Kings*, Triss appears to have returned to a balancing act among her relationships with the sorcerer's lodge, the witchers, and royal courts, culminating in the unfortunate events and persecution of sorcerers and non-humans in *The Witcher: The Wild Hunt*.

*The Witcher: The Wild Hunt*, the third game, presents Triss as an autonomous, competent individual who is committed to protecting others, consistent with the trajectory of her character that was established in the novels. Triss is fully committed to rescuing mages from Novigrad and supporting her friends despite risks to herself: she is Triss Merigold the Fearless.

#### Mutual and Unrequited Love

Throughout the course of the events in the witcher series, Triss Merigold becomes confident in herself as a strong, self-assured woman who shares her values of love and justice with the world around her. As a strong, self-assured woman, Triss does not need a romantic relationship with Geralt to reinforce her beliefs about herself, as in object-relations (see Figure 3) or cognitive dissonance (see Figure 4); she can now self-perpetuate these beliefs. Likewise, Triss as seen in *The Witcher: The Wild Hunt* accesses generativity through her actions in support of others and does not need Geralt to create a generative situation or role (e.g., parenthood). She is seen as a leader by the mages of Novigrad and goes on to both have a high status position and lead a community in Kovir.

At the start of the Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt, Triss and Geralt are well situated to begin a romantic relationship, defined as a relationship with shared history and mutual interest, respect, passion, and interest<sup>58</sup>. Love can be thought of as combinations of three core components that are combined into different types of love that are found in different types of relationships (see Figure 6). These three components are: 1) physical and sexual interest (i.e., passion), 2) emotional and mental closeness (i.e., liking, intimacy), and 3) environmental, time, and domestic responsibilities (i.e., commitment). The most complex love, called consummate love, occurs when all three of these components – passion, intimacy, and commitment – are reciprocated among individuals. Other relationships call for different combinations of these elements: for example, companionate love (commitment and intimacy) is a common type of love shared among friends and family.

## TYPES OF LOVE

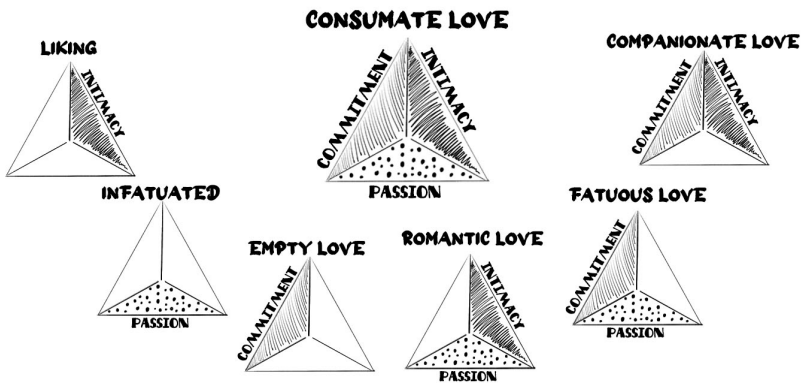


Figure 6. Sternberg's Model of Love, with different combinations of the core components of love into different possible experiences of love.

The three components of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment are present in varying degrees throughout the course of Triss and Geralt's relationship. In the *Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings*, Geralt can choose to give Triss a rose of remembrance that is said to never wither as long as love is shared between the giver and receiver. Despite Geralt's romantic actions towards Triss in the *Witcher* games, the rose of remembrance can only be found wilted in Triss's home. One interpretation of this is that the story about love protecting a rose of remembrance from wilting is a story and is not true. Another interpretation is that Geralt and Triss did not share consummate love, with all three components of love, until the events of *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*. Rather, it is possible that Triss and Geralt shared romantic love (passion and intimacy, without true commitment) or empty love (commitment and passion, without intimacy). Triss says that she kept the rose "as a warning," which may indicate that she also wants to remember her change and progress.

True love can be described in our world, but in the world of the *Witcher* books and games love and destiny have tangible, observable effects. In *The Witcher*, a werewolf curse is broken through the use of "true love," which may also be described by consummate love. Similarly, a curse that impacts Ciri's father is broken when he successfully fills his destiny by formalizing his relationship with Ciri's mother; the curse is broken despite Ciri's father stating "the fact" that he "never loved her"<sup>59</sup>. However, there are several ways to interpret this statement: 1) it is unclear if true, consummate love has to be mutual, potentially it can work if it is sent in one direction, and 2) it is possible that Ciri's parents

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shared mutual affection and Ciri's father is lying or otherwise has lost his understanding of their relationship over time.

Taken together, while it is possible that Triss and Geralt shared types of intimacy and different types of love prior to the events of the *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*, it is much more likely that they can develop and share true, consummate love during the course of the final game in the series, *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*. Triss develops her sense of identity and self through the course of the *Witcher* series: transitioning from interest in others as a way of knowing herself into understanding that she can interact with others as a way to express and share her values. In her new, confident sense of self, Triss is ready to enter into a mature, mutual relationship with Geralt, should he share interest in intimacy, passion, and commitment.

### Concluding thoughts

Triss is a complex woman who has supported and injured friends and groups throughout the course of the events of the *Witcher* stories. As she develops, she becomes more self-assured and oriented towards sharing her values with others. Triss at the start of the series needs support and guidance, which she attempts to find by listening to others (e.g., the Lodge) or possessing their relationships (e.g., Geralt). Triss explores the discomfort that these actions bring her and uses this to propel her into new ways to share her values: by autonomously working in accordance with her own values. The *Witcher* and *The Witcher: Assassins of Kings*, games 1 and 2 respectively, depart from this trajectory, but Triss recovers her development and supports others and herself with confidence in the *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt*. In *The*

Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt, Triss has worked on herself and developed into a person who can create true, consummate love – with intimacy, passion, and commitment – with Geralt, should he be willing to.

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# PSYCHOLOGY OF ATTACHMENT

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*Yennefer of Vengerberg*

**Marie Shanley**

Content warning: This chapter includes discussions of suicidal ideation.

## Introduction

Like many characters in *The Witcher* series, Yennefer of Vengerberg's story is one of tragedy, trauma, love, and loss. How she navigates through the Continent reflects these collective life experiences, both good and bad. In this chapter, we will explore Yennefer's narratives through the lens of attachment theory and explore how her actions and decision-making processes reflect an insecure attachment style that developed from the trauma of her childhood.

Attachment theory is a psychological theory that explains how our early childhood experiences impact our ability to socially relate to others throughout our lifespan. Successfully "attaching"

with our caregivers (i.e., having a secure sense of connectedness) through appropriate and consistent care in childhood provides us with the foundation to form healthy, reciprocal social connections with others in adulthood<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, if we do not receive consistent care, and lack security due to inconsistent or neglectful parenting, we will form an insecure attachment, not develop a secure foundation from which to grow and learn from and will have difficulties connecting with others later in life.

While attachment can be thought of as either secure or insecure, there are also three variations of insecure attachment: anxious (aka “preoccupied” in adults), avoidant (aka “dismissive” in adults), and disorganized (referred to as fearful avoidant in adults)<sup>2</sup>. Although, in the 1970s these categories were further refined into three styles: secure, insecure avoidant, insecure ambivalent<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>.

An anxious (ambivalent) attachment style is reflected in children who do not have their needs met when they ask for help. They feel anxious as they want to remain near their parents, punctuated by a fear of abandonment. In adulthood, anxiously attached children may be referred to as preoccupied because while they desire close, intimate relationships they may have a hard time maintaining them for fear of being rejected. This preoccupation with being abandoned often interferes with their ability to create strong connections with others. Avoidant attachment is often the result of neglectful caregivers who did not display affection when it was requested, resulting in children who avoid interacting with their caregiver for fear of being rejected again.

Disorganized attachment is kind of a catch-all category that is

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thought to meant to describe insecure attachment styles that do not fit into the above two types. For those with disorganized attachment, their ability to connect with others is generally unpredictable, and often leads to individuals behaving in contradictory ways without obvious goals or intentions. This is often the case for children whose parents would behave in a way that was frightening, causing the child to always need to adjust for unpredictable and scary actions while still being forced to rely on such parent. In adulthood, this may develop into someone always seeking relationships, only to reject the partner when they feel they're getting too close or purposefully seek out partners who they expect will reject them.

In contrast, a secure attachment in this context refers to a person's capacity to connect well and securely with others while also feeling comfortable being alone as needed. If one's caregiver is responsive to the needs of their child and generally loving, a secure attachment will form. Someone who is secure would be unlikely to doubt that they are worthy of being loved.

While Yennefer of Vengerberg (sometimes referred to as Yen in this chapter) is a fictional character, she presents an opportunity to explore how one's attachment in childhood impacts the way they see and interact with their social world throughout their lifespan. Let's explore her attachment journey together.

Yennefer of Vengerberg: A foundation for insecure attachment

Within moments of meeting Yennefer in the *Netflix* series *The Witcher*, we are given insight into her childhood as one characterized by bullying at best and neglect at worst. When we

first see her, Yen is being harassed by two teenagers. They comment on her physical appearance in a derogatory way and ridicule her about the lack of care and love she receives from her father<sup>6</sup>.

Although Yen's father is only seen briefly in the series, there is no arguing that the bullies were right. Yen is seen to be sleeping with the family's livestock, mistreated by her father, and unprotected by her mother. In a time where women were traded off with dowry as they married, and physical beauty was directly connected with desirability, Yen is clearly not portrayed as someone who is valued. Her physical abnormality, a congenital hunchback, is frequently referred to as the source of her unworthiness for her father's love.

Visibly shaken by the neighborhood bullies, Yen conjures chaos (i.e., magical power) and removes herself from the situation through teleportation. This is the first insight we are given into her natural magical ability as well as her coping strategies. Avoidance and withdrawal, both emotional and physical, are very common coping mechanism among those who are insecurely attached<sup>7</sup>. Above all, they strive to avoid intimacy and closeness with loved ones to mitigate any harm that has come to be expected from others. Or, in this case, escape from the active harm that was being done<sup>8</sup>.

Yen's use of chaos to teleport to a safe place quickly gains the attention of Tissaia, the rector of the magical school of Aretuza. Intrigued, she follows the source of the chaos in order to find the unknown mage powerful enough to conjure teleportation spells. She arrives at Yen's family home with intent to take buy Yennefer

## THE WITCHER

from her family and take her to Aretuza for magical training. While Yen's mother protests, her father is quick to dismiss fearful pleas and even goes so far as to remark to his wife that "[Yen]'s no daughter of mine." With no hesitation, he agrees to sell her to Tissaia<sup>9</sup>.

As insecure attachment forms through inconsistent or neglectful care, it is relatively unsurprising the lack of care Yen's father demonstrates when essentially selling his daughter to a stranger. The lack of secure familial base, and consequently lack of developing trust with her caregivers, will come to define the other relationships Yen forms throughout her life journey. In fact, as adult Yennefer would come to later reflect that "Happy childhoods make for dull company"<sup>10</sup>.

### Life at Aretuza

In Yennefer's life at Aretuza, we start to see how her childhood experiences are impacting the way she approaches independent adult relationships. According to attachment theory, neglectful parenting can lead to an avoidant style of connecting with others. This means that as adults, people in this attachment style are likely to seldom, if ever, seek genuine connections with others in order to avoid feeling disappointed from lack of reciprocity. Those with avoidant attachment styles are also likely to exhibit suicidal ideation, perfectionism, mistrust, and a need for approval<sup>11</sup>. Throughout her time at Aretuza, we see these patterns demonstrated in the way Yen approaches social relationships, particularly with her new primary caregiver, Tissaia.

Upon arriving in Aretuza, confused, scared, and feeling out of



control over her life, Yennefer attempts suicide. Her overwhelming sense of hopelessness, loss of control, and lack of a secure base unfortunately led her down a path that is relatively common for those with insecure attachment styles<sup>12, 13</sup>. Thankfully, Yen wakes up to find herself alive. Tissaia urges Yennefer to consider her new life as an opportunity to regain control over her life by studying at Aretuza and becoming a great mage. Yennefer appears uneasy in this interaction, perhaps because she is receiving a rudimentary sign of affection which would be an uncommon experience for those who experienced neglectful parenting in childhood. Notably, a sense of wariness is another commonality among those who are insecurely attached as their expectations are rooted in neglect at best and overt abuse at worst<sup>14</sup>.

After her suicide attempt, Yennefer agrees to start her studies at Aretuza. Her first lesson takes place in the fortress greenhouse where first witnesses, alongside other students, the power that can come with wielding chaos magic. Wanting to prove herself, Yen is visibly upset when she is unable to immediately perform the first task that she and the other students are assigned.

Parental criticism and expected perfectionism are commonly tied to avoidant and anxious attachment<sup>15</sup>. Yennefer's frustration and self-inflicted expectation of instant perfection is clear from the time she begins anew at Aretuza following her suicide attempt. She dedicates her time to becoming the most powerful mage she can be, to never feel rejected in another relationship she finds with a proxy caregiver Tissaia. Failure increases the risk of rejection, which fuels Yen's need to be flawless and competent in

every way to avoid the feeling of failure again. Hence, her strong desire to achieve and never misstep on her journey to being the best mage. Yen frequently considers giving up rather than continuing to pursue things she is not excelling at—another quality common in avoidant style and related to a need for perfectionism<sup>16</sup>.

At the same steady pace as Yennefer gains confidence, so does her ability to wield magic grow. Yet, her mistrust of everyone's intentions consistently stunts her<sup>17</sup>. Mistrust is a commonality among all forms of insecure attachment. Due to a lack of a secure base that one can rely on for support and reassurance, those with insecure attachment styles tend to assume other's actions will be hostile (reiterating the relationships from their childhood) and, as such, tend to avoid forming close, interpersonal connections with others. Yen's mistrust of others is made clear throughout her life at Aretuza.

For example, when her graduating class is assigned locations where they will be stationed once they've completed their studies, Yen is rather upset with hers. Her plan was to return home, so she could show everyone what she had accomplished and how she had transformed. Upon hearing that the collective of mages had other plans for her, she is overcome with anger, and feelings of needing to prove herself once again. When Tissaia explains to her that this might be for the best, instead of trusting her advisor, Yennefer chooses to rebel, and push for a quicker transition to being a mage. Her instincts tell her that no one is looking out for her, and she can only trust herself<sup>18</sup>. She perceives Tissaia's disregard for her desire as a betrayal, instead of an act of care or

a careful political choice. The resulting fallout with her mentor becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts—if she assumes no one cares for her and will eventually abandon her, then no one is trustworthy, and she must look out for herself<sup>19</sup>.

Despite her lack of trust in others, Yennefer constantly seeks validation from others<sup>20</sup>. One way in which we see this is through her physical transformation at Aretuza. Yennefer blames not being conventionally attractive for many challenges in her life, including her rejection from her father. At the end of their training, the mages who have completed their courses are given the opportunity to re-craft their outwardly physical appearance through a special ceremony. Yennefer struggles with determining what her “ideal self” may be, unlike the other graduating mages<sup>21</sup>. Like many insecurely attached adults, Yennefer struggles to understand what her fulfilled self, or ideal self, would even look like<sup>22</sup>. This is the first of many decisions we see her struggle with due to a failure to trust in herself<sup>23</sup>.

Yennefer’s need for external validation is also evident after the battle against Nilfgaard at Sodden Hill, when she loses her ability to perform magic. After being captured by elves, Yen encounters the Deathless Mother, the witch in the woods. Through the visions she forces onto Yen, the witch confronts her about how without her power, Yen feels useless and unimportant<sup>24</sup>. This realization is especially jarring because it forces Yennefer to recognize that herself worth has become intertwined with her magical abilities and confront the possibility that without them, she may, once again, be seen as worthless. That without power she

is at the whim of others once again, just as she was when she was as a child.

However, it is the events that followed Sodden Hill we also start to see the first shift in Yennefer's worldview. Up until now, her actions have been largely defined through withdrawal, avoidance, and the need for external validation. We have witnessed the growth of a powerful mage who has put all her self-worth into her power and status as a beautiful mage of The Continent. However, once she is without that power, she is forced to confront a new version of herself. It is here we start to see a journey towards growth and reconciliation. As a mage without magic, Yennifer begins to reconcile what is truly important to her and she's been missing more than anything else: a family<sup>25</sup>.

#### Romantic relationships: Istredd and Geralt of Rivia

It is not uncommon for attachment styles to change over time as new coping skills are acquired<sup>26</sup>. We also know that neglectful parenting makes for difficulties connecting and trusting others romantically later in life, usually being inclined towards an avoidant style (called "dismissive" in adults)<sup>27</sup>. Up until now, Yennefer has repeatedly demonstrated that she doesn't believe any suitors are worthy of her, by keeping nearly all of them at an arms distance as a way not to get too close and be hurt.

As mentioned earlier, our childhood attachment often defines our adult relationships. While the romantic implications of the theory are still new, the research we have so far resonates with our understanding of Yennefer's romantic relationships. Yennefer's relationship with her father, and the message she received

repeatedly of not being worth anything (or rather, just “four marks,” which is the price Tissaia paid for her) made her certain that “no one could ever love [her]”. She admits to feeling rejected in the episode Four Marks because her hunchback and connection to elven lineage (elves being widely discriminated against in this universe)—all connecting us to understand how her dismissive attachment style serves as a protective wall<sup>28, 29</sup>.

In one of the most popular non-fiction books on the subject *Attached*, the researchers note “Anxious people crave intimacy, are often preoccupied with their relationships and tend to worry about their partner’s ability to love them back. Avoidant people equate intimacy with a loss of independence and constantly try to minimize closeness”<sup>30</sup>. Avoidant attachment style in children is synonymous with a dismissive style in adults and Yennefer’s romantic interactions with follow those notes like a recipe.

The first romantic relationship we see Yennefer become truly vulnerable is with Istredd. While conversing with Istredd about her difficulties controlling her magic during her early days at Aretuza, he expresses genuine concern and helps her improve as a mage by walking her through a series of prompts to relax her mind. Yennefer lets go of fear enough to trust in Istredd and his genuine want to help her, which eventually leads Yen to finally control her chaos. This moment was pivotal in demonstrating to herself that she is capable of trust and that she has the potential to thrive with a secure foundation, and positive reinforcement. We see Yennefer be vulnerable to Istredd, speaking of her past and her interactions with her father. She confides all her fears in him and seems to be interested in him romantically, yet often appears

confused whenever he admits he enjoys spending time with her. It's almost as if she can't hear him or trust him out of disbelief<sup>31</sup>. She is even overtly dismissive of his feelings because she can't trust she won't be hurt by him, so instead she hurts him first. When he accuses her of being with him only to get information from him, she not only confesses but doubles down that this was an appropriate intent. She would rather admit to only being tied to him because she's looking for information to pass along, than admit to having feelings.

In a way, Yennefer uses Istredd's affection to gain confidence, coming to him when upset or needing advice, but is quick to push him away when he suggests that they spend their lives together. While Istredd clearly intends for them to be equal, asking for Yen to travel the world with him. Yen notes that she would feel like she is merely there to support him and likens that prospect to suicide. When Istredd confronts her that her decision to not be together goes against what she has led him on to believe, Yen retorts that his notions of romance are archaic. That "[her] world is cruel. You enter, you survive, or you die." Meaning, love is something meant for naïve people and not meant for her, another flag of her fear of committing. If she perceives the world cruel, and romance to be frivolous, then she is adamant to not let anyone close to her, even if she may suspect her feelings would be returned. She would rather be alone and unhurt romantically, even if doing so would remove her from someone she cares about. This is in line with our expectations of insecure attachments. Yen finds the need for immediate self-soothing (looking out for herself) more valuable, than working on a relationship long term—currently, both with herself and Istredd<sup>32</sup>.

Yennifer and Istredd part ways but she later returns to him to ask for him to reconsider the deal he suggested back in the day, to run away together. Finally, she admits that while it was fun to be the object of desire for other men, to have anyone she wanted it's only made her more worried that people only care for her because of the power she carries rather than who she is on the inside<sup>33</sup>. Unfortunately, Istredd's moved on after dealing with this own hurt, and choses to turn her away. Yen turns her loathing inward instead of lashing out this time, as this conversation forces her to confront that it was her mistrust that led to this upsetting conclusion of their courtship.

Yennifer's relationship arc with Istredd relationship demonstrates both how drastically unable to trust Yennifer is, as well as the progress she slowly makes towards secure attachment through her romantic relationships.

However, the most important love in Yennifer's life is that with the titular witcher, Geralt of Rivia. While the book series alludes to Yen and Geralt being off again and on again, taking at least three books before we know about the exact nature of the spat that had torn them apart, the show is much more explicit from season one. Their first meeting happens while Yen is serving as a mage for the mayor of Rinde. Geralt approaches Yenna (as he gently comes to refer to her) asking her to help him cure Jaskier (Geralt's bard companion) from a Djinn curse. Geralt makes himself rather vulnerable by explaining that he needs her as she is the only one who can help his friend. Of course, this appeals to Yen's ego as it keeps in line with her expectation that no one is a match for her power.

Yennefer strikes a deal with Geralt on the grounds that she finds him intriguing as a sort of colleague in the mystical arts. He is straightforward with her, gruff and dismissive, matching (without knowing) her feelings and expectations of others. Because of how distrusting Yen is, it is common to see her test those she feels a connection with. Even if she feels an attraction to Geralt because of his qualities and feels kin with his distrust of people, it is precisely this experience that makes her then push away and put further strain on their budding friendship, so as not to get too close<sup>34</sup>.

Yennefer becomes so adamant about remaining in control over her feelings, she puts a spell on Geralt making sure he leaves while she tends to Jaskier and attempts to capture the djinn for her own gain. Still Geralt returns to her instead of leaving once Jaskier is awake and well (eventhough Jaskier reminds Geralt she's done nothing but trick him). Geralt believes that it is the right thing to do, and it is precisely his morality that proves him trustworthy in a way that catches Yen's attention. She's pushed him away, hurt his trust, but instead of leaving as she expected, he returns. The fact that Geralt is someone who returns to her also signals to Yen that he cares for her as much as she might dare to admit she cares for him. This is the pivotal moment that starts to crack the presumptions accompanying her insecure attachment.

However, the road of an attachment evolution is often one step forward, two steps back. As we see later during a deadly encounter, Yennefer's body is taken over by a Djinn. It becomes clear that Yennifer may die in her efforts to control it. Geralt tries to help Yen, explaining her efforts are futile and she may die,



to which she responds by screaming her distrust. She contents Geralt wants to control her and command her, not save her life, again, assuming the worst from others. She believes Geralt's desire to save her must be selfish, part of his savior complex rather than as altruistic as it may be. In fact, Yen repeatedly being upset with Geralt for trying to control her comes up argument throughout their relationship. This is likely another holdover from the fact that previously men only wanted to be with her for other means<sup>35</sup>. Whether or not it's true, Geralt will be likely unable to ever prove himself trustworthy as he is battling preconceived notions and inner demons Yennefer will be unlikely to even let him know about.

As is the case with most people in insecure attachment styles, Yennefer needs someone to show her that a good relationship might be possible if she is honest and open about her needs. When Geralt comes to Yen and vulnerably shares how much it hurts him to think how she might leave him at any moment, she finally admits that she also gets upset when Geralt leaves after they are intimate. This is a rare glimpse into the attachment Yennefer feels towards Geralt with an openness she had never granted to anyone else. When she wakes after they spend the night together you can see from her expression that she assumes Geralt will not be there, nervous she's been abandoned again<sup>36</sup>.

The evolution of attachment is a long, difficult journey that requires consistency and care. We see throughout Yennefer's journey that the stoic, honest to a fault Witcher might truly be the only person who can provide those things for Yen.

In Time of Contempt, we catch a glimpse into how far Yennefer

has grown in her trust and secure love for Geralt. At a party being held at Aretuza, Yennefer parades Geralt into the middle of the large hall. While moments earlier he had asked to kiss her in front of the crowd and Yennefer declined, she now asked him to do so. In front of everyone, with just the one request of “Just try not to smudge my lipstick” (p. 119)<sup>37</sup>. Later that evening as they lay down for the night, Geralt is talking about the events of the day. Yennefer interrupts him and asks him to stop rambling and instead “love me.” Yennefer is not only accepting of his love, but she’s also requesting it, feeling worthy within it, and fully trusting it its truth.

### Concluding thoughts

Yennefer of Vengerberg’s self-image remains complicated throughout the series. Her identity adjusts as her relationships with others move and evolve, testing her trust and mistrust of others as well as how she sees herself through them<sup>38</sup>. It’s also what continues to make her a fascinating character to follow.

Yennefer makes being the most powerful mage most of her personality. Her striving for it, the anger she carries when others get in her way, the resentment that comes out when she feels others do better than her are all part of her overall negative view of others a core characteristic of her insecure tendencies. She resists changing her ability to trust to a fault, losing connections with those she cares about in the process. And only recognizing her true feelings in those relationships after it’s often too late, which breaks her relationships with the first people who demonstrate love to her: Tissaia and Istredd.

## THE PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE

Because people with insecure attachment styles tend to have a hard time discerning whom to trust, it's important for them to surround themselves with those who they can rely on<sup>39</sup>. Throughout the Netflix series (so far) every relationship of trust Yen attempts to build in her life: with Tessia, Istredd, and of course, Geralt—results in a few steps forward as much as a few steps back. However, over time we do see Yennefer settle into herself and her trust in others with confidence.

Attachment Theory is ultimately meant to help us decode the puzzle of our ability to connect with others and is an especially helpful guide for those of us who didn't start out knowing our caregivers would be there when we needed them. Seeing Yennefer come from a broken home, unloved and uncared for, and learn to not only accept that love from others, but also accept her own flaws as much as her power—is a hopeful lesson to us all about our ability to heal, connect and find security. And while no person can be flawless, learning to accept yourself so that you can do your best by others is the most noble example of growth towards a secure attachment style Yennefer of Vengerberg can offer us as observers.

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## RESILIENCE AND TRAUMA

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*Ciri Fiona Riannon*

Jared Kilmer, PhD & Elizabeth Kilmer, PhD

### Introduction

Cirilla Fiona Riannon is an integral character in *The Witcher*. Audiences, whether they be reader, player, or viewer, are presented the rare opportunity of witnessing key moments in her life as she matures from child to adult. Introduced as the “Child Surprise,” and the “Lion Cub of Cintra,” Ciri was born a princess of Cintra and was tied through fate to the witcher, Geralt of Rivia, by the “Law of Surprise.” Following the collapse of her kingdom, Geralt becomes an adoptive father to Ciri throughout the rest of her life. The authenticity of this relationship serves as a protective factor for Ciri, as the stability, guidance, and opportunities for self-discovery and self-actualization afforded by this relationship helps to foster the necessary resilience towards the cruelty of the world she resides in. In addition to Ciri’s status as a princess of a fallen kingdom, she is burdened with immense magical power

stemming from the Elder blood that runs through her veins. Her parentage, power, and sex set her up to be coveted by multiple factions, with many vying for control of Ciri and her powers through manipulation and/or force. Throughout her story in the book, it is revealed that many want control of Ciri for her prophesied ability to bear a son who would possess even more powerful magic than Ciri herself. This exhausted trope reinforces the idea that women are singularly / primarily valuable for their childbearing abilities, above and beyond individual accomplishments. The use of prophecy can serve to justify choices made by characters intent on stripping Ciri of her autonomy, individuality, and humanity, and distract from the reader's potential concerns about sexism, sexual assault, forced pregnancy, and incest. Though the argument could be made that by identifying those that want to take away Ciri's control as the villains, the author is implicitly condemning this behavior. However, the lack of acknowledgement or calling out of these specific concerns by most, if not all, characters may serve to unintentionally legitimize the conflict between Ciri and her pursuers. Notably, the currently available *Netflix* adaptation and video game tell the story of Ciri being pursued for her own power, not the ability to bear a son with greater power. However, as the *Netflix* series is not yet complete, this could change in future seasons. Ciri spends much of her life attempting to control her own life and destiny, fleeing from, and eventually outmaneuvering, those hostile towards her safety and freedom. Though Ciri experiences a series of traumatic experiences in her life, her training, support system, and mindset support her resiliency and recovery throughout these experiences.



Ciri is impacted throughout her life by the traumas she experiences. While these traumatic events result in physical and emotional scars, they also temper Ciri into the woman she ultimately becomes. As she navigates growing up in a hostile world, she works to maintain a found family of her closest relationships, act consistently with her values, and display numerous indications of continued resilience. Ciri maintains healthy relationships with Yennefer, Geralt, and other characters throughout her life, and continues to believe that she can have a positive impact on the world, as demonstrated by her continued willingness to help others. In one of the endings of the video game in which Ciri becomes empress, she reflects that if she wants to enact real change, she'll be able to do that more as empress than a witcher. Additionally, she continues to face her fears, especially when other's lives are at stake, as illustrated by her refusal to sit inside during the battle at Kaer Morhen while others fought for her safety.

Importantly, Ciri is not the only example of resilience after trauma within *The Witcher* franchise. Ciri is one example of how community support and individual factors can combine to foster resiliency and recovery, even in response to continued trauma and hardship. Indeed, trauma and hardship are endemic to the Continent of *The Witcher*, inescapable to few, if any, of its residents. However, Ciri is unique within *The Witcher*, as her story comprises a significant portion of her childhood and adolescence, providing audiences with insight and context into her evolving responses to traumatic events. This is in contrast to the adult characters she is associated with, whose development the audience typically has less insight into. As childhood and

early adolescence are particularly important periods for development of worldview and self-actualization, Ciri is well suited as a character to explore resilience and trauma in the world of *The Witcher*.

Notably, the stories of Ciri in *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt Red) video game and Netflix adaptation (Seasons 1 and 2 available at the time of this writing), portray the adolescent and adult Ciri as more well-adjusted, resilient, and likable than the older adolescent and adult Ciri portrayed in some of the book series. In the novels, Ciri and other female characters' experiences are often described by dismissive or bitter male characters. Though this serves to illustrate the challenges that come with a patriarchal culture dependent on gossip, it primes the reader to view female characters through the same lens.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, due to certain constraints (e.g. time), the space available to tell Ciri's story within the game or tv show adaptations pale in comparison to the sheer volume of content available in the novels. As such, the developers of the adaptations needed to make choices to adjust the stories to video game and television mediums. Even if the developers worked to replicate the books as closely as possible in story and tone, they would have to prioritize some stories, shorten others, and omit some entirely. Developers of adaptations often make deliberate choices to vary from the source material, to adjust for changing audience expectations and for their own artistic reasons. There were likely intentional alterations in character design by those responsible for adapting the original source material (e.g., writers and other contributors). Specifically, in the Netflix adaptation, the portrayal of women and their treatment by the "good guys" (e.g., Geralt and Dandelion/Jaskier) was adjusted

to increase the agency of female characters and hold said “good guys” to higher standards in their treatment of women<sup>2</sup>.

### Introduction to terms

#### Trauma

Trauma is a broad term. At its core is an event that can disrupt the relationship between an individual and themselves, other people, and the world broadly. When discussing trauma in clinical settings and in relation to the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), trauma is defined more narrowly as “Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” which the individual encounters through direct experience, witnessing the event, learning about the event (i.e., violent or accidental events), or repeated/extreme exposure to details of the events (e.g., first responders<sup>3</sup>).

It is normal for people to experience distress and disruption to their life (i.e., changes in behaviors and cognitions) after experiencing a trauma, especially for a short period of time immediately following the trauma. Subsequently, mental health conditions (e.g., PTSD) are often not diagnosed unless trauma-related symptoms persist for at least a month after the traumatic event. Trauma related symptoms include intrusive memories of the event, avoidance of reminders related to the event (e.g., memories or people/places/things), negative changes in mood and thinking patterns, and physical and emotional reactions (i.e., hyperarousal and dysphoria, respectively<sup>4</sup>). Individuals who experience trauma may feel guilty, hopeless, overwhelmed, or

numb. Interpersonally, they may present as irritable, on guard, and may struggle to develop appropriately trusting relationships.

#### Post traumatic growth

Post traumatic growth is a theory introduced in the 1990s by psychologists who posit that individuals who experience a traumatic event or events may experience positive growth following the event<sup>5</sup>. This theory was introduced in part as a reaction to contrast the heavy emphasis on negative effects of traumatic events. Some critics have noted that the literature on post traumatic growth is somewhat sparse, and that this concept has been used to justify the existence of suffering, instead of pushing to alleviate the source of systemic inequities that contribute to suffering.

#### Resilience

Resilience is a term commonly used to describe organisms or communities that continue to survive, even flourish, amid circumstances that would generally be toxic, stressful, or deadly. With regard to individuals and their ability to navigate trauma, the term ‘psychological resilience’ is viewed as the intersection of individual and environmental processes that allow people to develop effective methods of coping with (as opposed to avoiding) stressful events<sup>6</sup>. Much of the research on resilience is focused on individuals. For example, one study found that among children who experience chronic stressors, those who have good problem-solving and learning abilities, a sense of self-efficacy, and areas of interest and competence valued by others have higher rates of resilience compared to their peers<sup>7</sup>. Though the focus of research on resilience is often centered around individual factors, this

emphasis fails to account for the communities and systems that can support or hinder resilience. When systems are examined, the importance of community and interpersonal relationships become clear. Perceived social support has been found to be a significant predictor of resiliency following trauma<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, research has consistently found that the development of resilience in individuals is linked to loving, reliable, responsive, and consistent caregiving and environmental conditions during childhood<sup>9, 10</sup>. In this chapter, we will discuss Ciri's resilience with regards to three categories of resources, identified by Bonanno and Mancini<sup>11</sup> – internal resources, lifestyle resources, and external resources.

### Ciri's foundations of resilience

#### Attitude and mindset

Following her reconnection with Geralt, Ciri travels with him to Kaer Morhen, where she is introduced to several other witchers, including Vesemir, Lambert, Eskel, and Coen. With the support of Geralt and the other witchers, Ciri becomes the first woman to be trained as a witcher. Though the specifics of her training differ between mediums, many of the core concepts remain consistent. Ciri learns the history and gains the knowledge of the witchers, as well as engages in significant physical training. Included in this training are ways of thinking about feared events and entities that directly support Ciri's resilience to stress throughout her life. For example, when Triss, a sorceress in the role of friend, teacher, and role-model for Ciri, meets Ciri for the first time at Kaer Morhen, Triss is horrified by the bruises Ciri has received after falling on an obstacle course. Triss asks if Ciri took a several day break to

allow herself to heal before resuming training. Ciri responds that she got right back on: “Coën [a witcher] rubbed it and put me straight back on the comb. You have to, you know, otherwise you catch fear. What? You catch fear. Didn’t you know?”<sup>12</sup>. Though the relative safety of the witchers’ training methods were rightly questioned by Triss when she arrived at the keep, this early lesson in grit likely supported Ciri’s willingness to experience feared or uncomfortable tasks. Such consistent exposure ultimately increases her comfort with feared stimuli, an approach consistent with exposure therapies for phobias and trauma. When individuals experience feared stimuli in a safe environment, they create an opportunity for their brains to re-experience the stimuli as progressively dangerous over time, eventually no longer perceiving the stimuli as threatening or something to be avoided.

Getting back on the proverbial horse wasn’t the only piece of wisdom outlined by the witchers. During her training, Vesemir, another witcher and mentor to Ciri, prompts Ciri to learn about ghouls. Ciri initially protests against the topic of study as a function of previous exposure to ghouls and subsequently developed fear of them. However, Vesemir responds to her resistance by telling her “That’s why you’re learning about ghouls now, Ciri. When you know about something, it stops being a nightmare. When you know how to fight something, it stops being so threatening”<sup>13</sup>. Studies have found that individuals can learn to view stressors as challenging instead of threatening, and when viewing stressors as a challenge, experience better emotional<sup>14, 15</sup> and physical<sup>16</sup> outcomes during and after the stressor. Further, research has linked a growth-oriented mindset

and focus on self-efficacy with resilience to trauma in first responders<sup>17</sup>.

#### Ciri's support system

Despite numerous hardships, Ciri's resilience is bolstered by supportive figures in her life who strive to show consistent care and love towards her. This consistent demonstration of encouragement, solidarity, and unconditional positive regard by those closest to her doesn't merely result in physical and emotional support, it also provides cognitive support. Ciri knows others stand with her and want to see her succeed and thrive. Ciri's robust support network is evidenced throughout *The Witcher* and can be found within her immediate family during her youngest years, in the dedication Geralt and Yennifer demonstrate in their roles as adoptive parents during adolescence and early adulthood, and amongst a wide cast of auxiliary characters in her life (e.g., Vesemir, Dandelion/Jaskier, and Triss).

#### Early years with family

Ciri spent her youngest years with her mother, father, and grandmother, as a princess of Cintra. Though her parents were lost at sea when she was young, she grew up within a community that loved her, with the role model of a grandmother that not only ruled the country, but had the autonomy to pick up arms to defend it herself. Even though more traditional gender norms are present in much of the world of *The Witcher*, Ciri had early role models, such as her grandmother, who demonstrated women can fight, lead kingdoms, and make decisions about their own futures. Even from a young age, the seeds of her resilience were already being cultivated, stemming from opportunities to develop self-

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efficacy, love and guidance from her role models, and consistent messaging in favor of her strong will and intelligence.

Ciri fled her home after the fall of Cintra, biding her time hiding in the forest and receiving assistance from several groups interested in aiding her survival. When Ciri eventually reconnected with Geralt, he introduced her with much of her enduring support system for the rest of her story – the witchers, Yennefer of Vengerburg, Triss Merigold, and Dandelion/Jaskier.

### Geralt of Rivia

Geralt serves as a father figure for Ciri. However, his commitment to Ciri's well-being and safety above his own ego and his personal hopes for her future set him apart from the portrayal of many traditional father figures in popular media, especially in the context of hegemonic masculinity<sup>18</sup>. While living in Cintra, Ciri was told by her nanny that she was connected to Geralt through fate via the Law of Surprise. Subsequently, the belief that their relationship was fated, supported Ciri's willingness to foster a familial relationship with Geralt. Ciri looks to Geralt for guidance through her childhood and adolescence, trusting him to help keep her safe. To Geralt's credit, he doesn't treat Ciri as a delicate flower to be shut up in a tower and protected. He works to help Ciri develop her own skills of self-preservation, independence, and resilience. Geralt advocates for Ciri to train at Kaer Morhen with the witchers of the School of the Wolf, as well as with the sorceresses, Triss and Yennefer, to support Ciri's growth into a capable, independent adult. Together with Yennefer, Geralt acts an adoptive parent for Ciri, providing much of the consistency,



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guidance, and love necessary to support Ciri's resiliency to the inevitable hardships of her life.

As a witcher, Geralt is used to being ostracized by residents of the Continent, where he is often treated as a necessary evil, a "monster to kill the monsters." Geralt's experience of rarely feeling understood or at home with anyone other than outcasts and those also on the fringes of society help him empathize with Ciri and her experience. When Geralt takes responsibility for Ciri's well-being and safety, she's lost her family and home, and is starting to recognize her great power that sets her apart from others on the continent.

### Triss Merigold

Triss is first introduced to Ciri in Kaer Morhen, after being summoned by Geralt to find a suitable teacher to help Ciri learn the basics of magic and control the chaotic forces within her. Triss provides both practical and emotional support for Ciri. She acts as a consultant to the all-male witchers, providing them with insights ranging from information about allowing Ciri to rest during her period, to the potential negative impact the witchers' mushrooms and herbs may have on her physical development. Though Ciri meets Triss with some immediate mistrust, she quickly grows to look up to Triss during her time at Kaer Morhen, seeking her out when she has questions she doesn't feel comfortable asking Geralt or the witchers.

### Yennefer of Vengerberg

Yennefer acts as a surrogate mother to Ciri, providing much of the training in Chaos (magic) that Ciri receives. This relationship

builds slowly, as both Yennifer and Ciri initially present as cold and aloof to each other before developing the warmth and mutual respect characteristic of their relationship. The books spend significant time on the development of Yennifer and Ciri's relationship while Ciri is studying at the Temple of Melitele. In conjunction with training Ciri to control and use her powers, Yennifer also works with Ciri to instill and reinforce self-confidence in her abilities, as well as support Ciri's ability to tolerate distress and frustration when in service of a larger goal. Such experiences served to guide Ciri in her darkest moments, overcoming exhaustion and demoralization endemic to her journey.

Additionally, like Geralt, Yennifer has significant life experience among the fringes of society. Yennifer was born with physical disabilities, and this visible difference was used to excuse the abuse that she received from her family, as well as other students at Aretuza, the school where she developed her own magical powers. As a woman with her own powers, Yennifer is well-positioned to understand much of the individual and societal pressures placed upon Ciri. Yennifer lacked good models of parental care during her formative years, developing the belief that love and affection were weaknesses. These lessons impacted her early relationship with Ciri, and likely contributed to Yennifer's initial cold demeanor toward the girl. Though her affection and care towards Ciri was not always clearly displayed, Ciri expressed trust in Yennifer and in the consistency of their care for each other.

Lifestyle resources

Lifestyle resources related to resilience include an individual's physical health, as well as habits related to maintaining psychological functioning, such as sleep, nutrition, and exercise. Though Ciri certainly lost opportunities for restful sleep on her journey, her focus on physical fitness and readiness, as well as the witcher potions fed to her as a girl, undoubtedly supported her physical well-being. Training montages with Geralt and other witchers abound throughout the books, show and game, with Ciri often a determined and avid participant. From her early childhood under the care of her grandmother Calanthe to her adolescence training with the witchers, Ciri engaged in regular physical activity. Her training with the witchers supported not only her physical abilities, but engendered a deeper understanding of how and why to train with intentionality. She learns how to move, when to retreat, and the value of consistent practice. As a result of witcher training, she is prepared to effectively engage in combat, successfully defeating foes larger and stronger than she was (e.g., Eredin). Her physical prowess and training embolden her, building upon her internal resources, such as self-conceptualization and self-efficacy.

Further, her magical training with Yennefer included mindfulness-based practices, wherein she learned to read her own body, control her breathing, and regulate her emotions. These skills were complementary to those learned in her training with the witchers.

Ciri is a "Child of Elder Blood" and possesses powerful magic that allows her to travel between worlds. Though this magic is

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one of the reasons she is sought after by different factions of the world, it also empowers Ciri to protect herself and seek her own destiny, contributing to an internalized belief that she is a skilled and valued member of society. provides Ciri with powers to help keep herself alive, and contributes to internalized beliefs that she has skills valuable for her participation in society. Beliefs that one has valuable skills have been found to be linked to resilience in individuals<sup>19</sup>.

### Growth over time

Resilience and growth after trauma are rarely immediate or perfect processes. Ciri was affected by the stressful and traumatic events of her life, sometimes struggling to find the path forward. For example, audiences view Ciri's motivation to become a witcher and undergo the trial of the grasses as partially borne from her desire to avoid the painful events of her past. She believes that becoming a witcher will make her "indifferent to the past," in the way she perceives Geralt to be (S2, E5). She pursues this desire single mindedly, avoiding feedback from Triss that recommends against such actions, until Geralt ultimately stops her. When she pushes back against him and pleads to become indifferent to the past, Geralt provides insight into the motivation behind his intervention, hidden by his external stoicism – "That is not how it works. Neither you nor I can just forget who we are. We can't kill our feelings. Our best chance is to kill the hatred that we hold onto and move on" (Season 2, episode 5). Ciri's challenges with trauma contributed to how "real" she feels as a character. Her desire to escape her past and avoid future trauma is understandable and, while flawed, is deeply human. Yet, with the

survival of each subsequent traumatic event, Ciri grows in complexity, maturity, strength, and the wisdom that comes from pain and loss. During her first meeting with Triss Merigold, she reiterated her witcher training, citing the importance of facing the things that scare us with the confident inexperience of a child. Should she have always bounced back from trauma with the same comfort and conviction she demonstrated in Kaer Morhen, she would likely have presented as a one-dimensional and unrealistic character. Additionally, it's important to reiterate that while Ciri demonstrates resilience to her traumas, she was never immune to them. Each traumatic event left scars of varying depth, changing her perception of herself and the world around her each time. Further, while she overcomes more than is fair for anyone to experience, she is privileged with supportive friends and family, magical powers, and a non-insignificant amount of luck. This constellation of resources contributes to Ciri's mindset and attitude evolving over time, as she becomes stronger through recontextualizing and owning her trauma.

### Conclusions

Though this chapter explored Ciri's resilience through internal, external, and lifestyle factors, her development of both internal and lifestyle factors reiterate the power of community and social support. Much of Ciri's understanding of herself and the world, as well as the habits she developed, were the direct result of observing, interacting with, and learning from trusted individuals in her community.

It's important to note that though she learned much with the witchers and did great things in her life, she might have lived a

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happier, equally fulfilling life had her parents and grandmother survived, and her home not been invaded. Many of us are not as lucky or as special as Ciri. We may not have the support system, magical powers, or early beliefs about our own resilience and autonomy. Growth or resilience after trauma should not be used to justify systematic inequities and discrimination that can lead to trauma, especially with disenfranchised or marginalized groups.

If you or someone you know has experienced trauma, it's important to know that you're not alone, and your trauma(s) don't have to be singularly defining features of your life and personality. Though Ciri will continue to make choices influenced by her past, she is able to move forward with intention. There are several effective therapies to address traumatic experiences and support recovery, such as Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT),<sup>20, 21</sup> Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT),<sup>22, 23</sup> Prolonged Exposure (PE)<sup>24</sup>, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)<sup>25</sup>. Treatment for trauma should be individualized and contextualized for each individual.

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## AUTHORITARIAN PARENTING

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*Tissaia de Vries*

Ashley J. Elliott, PsyD & Sarah A. Hays, PsyD

Content Warning: This chapter provides an overview of authoritarian parenting, including discussion of abuse, self-harm, and mistreatment from parents and caregivers.

“I sense your terror, and you are right to be afraid. Chaos is the most dangerous thing in this world. It is around us all the time. Volatile and powerful. But, each one of you showed an aptitude for channeling it – your conduit moment created a new ripple in chaos, reaching me here in Aretuza... But just because you are conduits of chaos does not mean you are capable of magic... Listen closely, your survival depends on it. Magic is organizing chaos. And while oceans of mystery remain, we have deduced that this requires two things: balance and control. Without them, chaos will kill you.” – Tissaia (S1, E2)

The scene where we first witness Tissaia de Vries as a mentor and parental figure was full of emotional range, power differentials,

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and character juxtaposition. We find the sorceress and the young mages in a botanical-lined classroom. The girls stand in front of individual podiums, each topped with a rock and a small bunch of flowers. Though sunlight breaks through the room's large windows, there is a shadow of heaviness and gloom draped around the frame of each young girl. Tissaia's voice, stern and subtly commanding, permeates the room. Each mage's face displays sadness, concern, or emptiness. Tissaia never acknowledges the emotions or the anxious tension. She begins their first magic lesson by explaining the nature of chaos and details how some of the girls' supernatural abilities may lend to them being conduits of the very force she describes.

The sorceress leads the class of magical indentured servants into a lesson on how unforgiving and dangerous magic and the world around them can suddenly become. These young women have no idea that they are being thrust into a world where the magic they are learning to navigate will either name them infamous mistress of enchantment or a mere tool to aid others in gaining power and dominion over all they desire. An illustration of natural and supernatural consequences unfolds for the mages via Fringilla (one of the students in the classroom), as she becomes the first to experience the dangers of magic. Tissaia instructs them to make the rock levitate with an Elder phrase, and the sorceress Fringilla tries this first. She repeats the incantation Tissaia has just finished teaching them. As gravity is defied and transformation occurs Fringilla, who previously was quiet and hesitant to align herself with magical deeds, is excited by what she has called into action. This emotion is short-lived when Fringilla shrieks in horror as she watches her sun-kissed ebony skin rapidly decay as her life force is

drained from her hand and arm. Her fellow mages look on in fear and panic.

There is no comfort from the sorceress. Instead, she goes about her lesson. Fringilla has provided a powerful moment of segue and realization. A rule has been quickly established. Don't ever get ahead of yourself or fail to please your caregiver, for it leads to chaos and pain. Tissaia does not inquire into how Fringilla is feeling or offer her aid. Consequences are inevitable and these girls must learn how to deal with this reality. But how will this learning process impact them? Tissaia goes on to explain how a proper sacrifice or transfer of energy must be offered for the spell to take effect and for balance to be maintained. Taking the flower in one hand, Tissaia levitates the rock with the other. The flowers wither and die as the rock floats in the air. Eager to avoid supernatural punishment akin to Fringilla's, each mage begins to recite the spell and mind the rules that Tissaia has established. There are no questions or check-ins with their mentor. What is present is the fear of discipline that accompanies natural or supernatural authority.

“Sometimes a flower is just a flower, and the best thing it can do for us is to die.” – Tissaia (S1, E2)

The lessons the young mages learn in the rectory at Aretuza are through a combination of observation and minimal guidance. They are taught, through secondary unspoken warnings like poor Fringilla experienced, that there is more than meets the eye to doing proper magic. It could be argued that the approach Tissaia takes with the young girls is one that applies the teaching of natural consequences... that they must deduce what is to be done

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with what the world asks of them. Yet giving the girls partial instructions sets them up for failure rather than success, and deems their consequences as part of the logical conclusion to their actions. Perhaps she was attempting to see who was observant and would ask about the flowers. Perhaps she wanted to see who had been taught how to channel chaos prior to arriving at their now permanent home. Regardless of her reasoning, the method led to unnecessary injury and a hesitation, a fear, to learn amongst the students. Tissaia established her power over the girls on the very first day. Power is central to chaos, as it is to authoritarian parenting.

### Authoritarian parenting

Parenting styles are often discussed in the psychological literature in order to illustrate the effects of parent-child relationships on overall childhood development. This explains the way parents interact with their children and how it sets up their expectations to interact with others, perceive themselves, and the inevitable impact these styles have on adult relationships with self and others.

There are four main parenting styles which are commonly discussed in child development literature: authoritative, permissive, uninvolved or neglectful, and authoritarian<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>. These styles are based on different combinations of two key elements: parental warmth or responsiveness and parental control or demandingness. It is important to note that these parenting styles are not fixed categories, and many parents/caregivers may exhibit a combination of styles or adapt their parenting approach in

different situations. Additionally, cultural factors and individual differences play a role in shaping parenting styles.

Authoritative parenting is characterized by a balanced approach that combines high levels of both parental warmth or responsiveness and parental control or demandingness. Authoritative parents set clear expectations and rules for their children, but they also provide explanations and reasons behind those rules. They encourage independence, offer guidance, and are responsive to their child's needs and emotions. Communication is open and bidirectional, fostering a sense of mutual respect. Research shows that children raised by authoritative parents tend to develop self-discipline, social competence, and have higher self-esteem when compared to their peers who have experienced permissive, authoritarian, or uninvolved or neglectful parenting styles.

Permissive parenting is characterized by high levels of parental warmth and responsiveness but low levels of parental control and demandingness. Permissive caregivers are characterized as lenient, indulgent, and avoid imposing strict rules or boundaries. They often prioritize their child's desires and avoid confrontation or discipline. This parenting style tends to foster a more relaxed and nurturing environment. However, children raised in permissive households may struggle with self-control, have difficulties with authority figures, and exhibit impulsive behavior.

Uninvolved or neglectful parenting is depicted by low levels of both parental warmth or responsiveness and parental control or demandingness. Uninvolved caregivers are emotionally detached, provide little guidance, and are generally disengaged from their

child's life. They may have limited knowledge of their child's activities, needs, or well-being. This parenting style can have detrimental effects on a child's development, leading to feelings of neglect, low self-esteem, emotional instability, and academic difficulties.

Authoritarian parenting is defined by displays of strict and rigid caregiving and an absence of warmth and affection<sup>4</sup>. An authoritarian parent exhibits high levels of parental control and demandingness, but low levels of warmth and responsiveness. This parenting style is central to rules, discipline, consequences, and parental control. It centers the adult in the relationship, focusing on listening to the parent rather than cooperating or collaborating<sup>5</sup>.

Tissaia is a prime example of this parenting style. In many respects, it makes sense why Tissaia feels as if this is the most prudent way to lead the students of her rectory. Her philosophy is one of strict control to manage and channel the chaos in the world. She fears the chaos, and she expects her charges to do the same. In practicality she also likely anticipates rebellion from pre-teenage girls. In her words, they are conduits of chaos; they know just enough to be dangerous. It becomes apparent throughout the lessons she teaches her mentees that there is a steep learning curve that must be respected, that their very survival depends upon.

### Parenting with an iron disregard: Tissaia de Vries

In some cases, Tissaia has offered her students a new life – especially for the likes of Yennefer, a main character throughout the Witcher universe. In the Netflix series, we meet Yennefer

when she is brutally bullied for being physically deformed and left to a life of physical labor by her father who rejects her. She is portrayed as sleeping with pigs, who she tends to, and is told that this is the life she deserves because her father refuses to consider that she is his. We meet Tissaia for the very first time in the whole series when she approaches Yennefer and her father, haggling to purchase her for less than half the price of the pigs she tends; in essence, discarded by her father. She was not saved by her mentor, she was traumatically ripped from a painful environment and thrust into another full of its own demons. The interaction stinks of how little any of these parental figures value Yennefer, and this is continued as Tissaia simply calls Yennefer “Piglet” while she is under Tissaia’s tutelage. She minimizes her students’ experiences, only valuing what they could become rather than who they are as individuals. In fact, Yennefer’s reaction to the first time that Tissaia calls her by her real name is to ask if this means she gets to ascend – up to this point, this is defined as a vague ceremony of achievement. As she soon finds out, it is something different entirely.

Prior to being transported to Aretuza, Yennefer is portrayed as a shameful burden who is hidden and ignored. She seemingly holds no value outside of her physical labor. Tissaia’s mentoring style reinforces this notion of Yennefer’s value, as she incentivizes her students through the concept of worthiness. She is teaching and simultaneously testing them to see who is “worthy of ascension”. Upon ascending, they will be assigned to the courts of kings, spread across the continent to serve the powerful. The primary issue with the concept of their worthiness is the lack of pertinent details in what the alternative to ascension actually is... None of

the girls know, until it has already been done, that the rest are to become eels that act as magical conduits to power the rectory. Yet the risk that comes with ascension is one reason that Tissaia attributes to her authoritarian approach. In a tense and emotional moment, Tissaia and Yennefer discuss how Yen's feelings get in her own way. That if she were to be assigned to a kingdom, and she lashed out because her "precious little feelings got hurt", the responsibility would ultimately fall upon Tissaia rather than Yennefer. That the entirety of the continent expects Tissaia to produce not only competent mages, but tolerant ones in control of their power.

This tracks with classical understandings of authoritarian parenting. In particular, how external reinforcement becomes highly valued and incentivized in order to maintain control and compliance<sup>6</sup>. The separation and isolation of the mages from their birth families/families of origin, unpredictable magic lessons, involuntary pairing of the mages with kings, and ultimately the use of the young women as eels powering their mystical fortress that is Arteuza, make the mages feel as if Tissaia is practically omniscient and omnipotent. She is in control of their fate.

### Impacts of authoritarian parenting: Yennefer of Vengerberg

We see the negative impact that authoritarian parenting can have throughout *The Witcher* through the decision and actions made by Yennifer of Vengerberg and her relationship with Tissaia.

An individual feeling as though they have no control over their gifts, skills, life, or identity can lead to aggression, rebellion, fractured self-esteem, issues related to self-efficacy, and anxiety



or depression<sup>7</sup>, When exposed to an environment where there is no praise, lack of healthy parental communication, and absence of warmth and affection, there tends to be an internal struggle concerning “goodness”, trust, worth, attachment, and self-love. We see this impact almost immediately when Yennefer tries to take her own life by cutting her wrists upon her arrival to Aretuza – and Tissaia’s response is less than supportive. She scolds her about losing control of her emotions and herself by taking this action... Yet in the end, this is how Tissaia herself dies. Did she feel the same control that Yennefer felt in that moment, or did she lose control like she accuses Yennefer?

The sorceress’ challenging lessons, personal motivations, and emotional distance are the opposite of the caregiving style Yennefer desperately needs. The sorceress uses Yennefer’s insecurities and the desire to be accepted to push her, resulting in Yennefer developing a lust for power. Power could make her beautiful. Power could make people see her, let alone admire her. Power could make people love her or even fear her. Power could release her from the shackles of victimhood and provide her with the life and existence she wants and feels she deserves. This power lust leads Yennefer to place herself in dangerous situations, make problematic interpersonal connections, and use people as objects for her own personal gain and pleasure. Tissaia, like most authoritarian caregivers, takes none of Yennefer’s trauma into account until it is far too late for a simple intervention.

In the *Netflix* series and *The Witcher* series of books, there is an important turning point that nods to the effects of authoritarian parenting from both media approaches – namely, Yennefer’s

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physical transformation into a more conventionally beautiful form. In the books, Tissaia is perpetually perfectionistic. She is portrayed as constantly adjusting her physical appearance and clothing to be correct and does the same with her environment even to the moments before death. In that vein, she also is responsible for the physical transformation that Yennefer undergoes – in the book, she herself performs this painful ritual. Furthering her agenda of control even over the physical presentation of her young charges. In the show, however, this is an act of rebellion that Yennefer chooses of her own accord. She does it as a power move against Tissaia when Yennefer refuses to accept her court assignment to the Nilfgaardians. This works for her and is her first real move towards adulthood on her own, usurping Fringilla's assignment to Aedirn's court and setting in stone the future conflict the two will endure.

### Resilience in the face of authoritarian parenting

The absence of positive praise, approval, gentle yet firm guidance, and warmth left these ill-fated women with no choice but to see obedience as a necessity for safety and survival until they could break free and seize power on their own. As the series progresses and the characters begin to develop, we watch Yennefer and Fringilla bound to their own sense of good and evil, and right and wrong. The fight for the power and control they didn't have over their lives as children at Aretuza fuels their magical endeavors and alliances as strong-willed, and ambitious mages. Their calculation and manipulation make them seem cold and strengthened by circumstance, while their skewed sense of self and troublesome interpersonal relationships shows the cracks in the façade. Behind

Yennefer and Fringilla's confident power plays are moments of anxiety, vulnerability, ignored trauma, and discomfort surrounding whom others believe them to be. When these women aren't seen as successful, their decisions are questioned, or people attempt to get close to them, they work to mask their pain and avenge themselves by responding with impulsivity, aggression, and manipulation.

**Tissaia:** "How did we get this way? I gave you all I could give. What more do you want?"

**Yennefer:** "Everything." (S1, E5)

The cost of Yennefer's beauty was great; she, and others like her who undergo the magical transformation, lose their ability to bear children. Yet the next time we encounter Tissaia in the series is when she tries to warn Yennefer that her search for a cure will be fruitless. She reminds Yennefer that she is being "sloppy", an agent of "pure chaos" by wanting to have a baby. That unlike her, Fringilla is flourishing in her southern post that was supposed to be for Yennefer – that Yennefer is on a path of continuous mistakes. That she should return to Aretuza and help to mold the next generation of young minds. She will be forgiven, and she will be back on the path that Tissaia intended for her. But Yennefer wants nothing of the sort... She rebels against this by continuing her own after her own interests. She rejects the control that Tissaia attempts to reassert, embodying her adulthood as a tool to maintain her own boundaries.

A mentoring style that utilized a balance of strictness and warmth, as seen in authoritative parenting, could have provided Yennefer the mages with a foundation for less chaotic attachment,

regulated emotional functioning, a positive sense of self, and respect, rather than fear or disdain of authority figures<sup>8</sup>. If Tissaia's style allowed for safe correction of mistakes, non-judgmental guidance, healthy support, and true empathy, Yennefer may have seen the sorceress' warnings as concern filled advice and not a challenge of power.

When we consider the formation of identity and the development of our unique voices, nurturing is needed for a healthy sense of self and confidence to form. Reinforcement and external validation from our caregivers assist with our creation of personal discernment. This emotional support helps us confirm, deny, or conform when we are considering who we are now and ideally whom we desire to be. How do you know who you are if you've never been encouraged to explore without punishment or being chastised? How do you allow yourself to learn from mistakes if you're being told that you have no room to make an error? How do you grow into an actualized adult if you've never been provided the space, safety, and time to process your trauma and heal your wounds? Intense authoritarian styles tend to extinguish the spark of spirit and a healthy exploration of identity formation and emotional intelligence.

#### From authoritarian to authoritative

While Tissaia "raises" her sorceresses with a clear authoritarian style, over time we see her approach change. She attempts to collaborate or appease more, as is displayed when she encounters Yennefer in Aretuza following their fraught encounter as mutual adults.

When Fringilla and Yennefer are brought to Aretuza shortly after Yennefer begins to seek solutions to her sterility, it is revealed how far from Tissaia and the brotherhood's path that they have strayed. Fringilla displays logic, negotiation, and diplomacy – attempting to convince Yennefer, Tissaia, and the council that the choices that Nilfgaard has made are sound. Yet what she proposes is change, an already raging war between two territories that would revolutionize the continent. A singular, prolific leader, guiding them into a future bereft of the limitations held within the traditions of the council, Tissaia's teachings, and Aretuza. She argues that the tired ways that they preach are a thing of the past, ghost stories and overly-controlled education. Yennefer agrees that perhaps it's time for a change, and this at its core is Tissaia's highest concern in the matter. She values tradition and their way of life above all else. When Fringilla calls for the council to get out of Nilfgaard's way, Tissaia pleads for the council to consider, instead, trying to establish a connection to the city that Fringilla's court is trying to conquer. When her plea goes unanswered, she turns to Yennefer for help.

In a major turning point in their relationship and at this moment in the story, Tissaia steps away from her usual parenting approach to level with Yennefer. To meet her as an equal. With a tense expression and hushed voice, Tissaia relents – admitting that Yennefer was right, acknowledging her directly and showing that she truly heard her in a past argument. Tissaia asks her to join the council's fight against Nilfgaard, to help protect the only thing she has. Yennefer pushes back and asks why she'd protect a place that was so terrible to her – and Tissaia asks her to join the fight if not for the council, then for her... "please." Yennefer seems touched

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by this, taken aback, and retorts about if Tissaia's ever used that word before – signifying the true level of power Tissaia is giving up by asking in this way. Yet it is the first time where we see Yennefer actually appear to consider joining the fight rather than prioritizing her own desires.

By the end of season one, Fringilla and her faction are at war with Tissaia, Yennefer, and the mages. The same women who were brought together to protect and serve with magical purpose, are now in the middle of a violent reality. In the face of the chaos Tissaia lectured them on, she only begins to tap into an emotional connection with Yennefer as it is necessary for her survival and the survival of everything she stands for and was called to protect. Her Tissaia's mentees are dying all around her. In these moments of violence and death, we see Tissaia finally assume the role of a protective parent, but it is far too late. Perhaps if she led with love. Perhaps if she led with love, demonstrated understanding, and taught about forgiveness and the responsibility that comes with power, she and the mages could have had a different end to their tales.

Parenting, caregiving, and mentoring are more effective when there is less focus on punishment and adult-child power dynamics, and more attention is placed on enhancing emotional intelligence, physical and emotional safety, positive displays of love, and the ability to develop one's own voice. Parents are our first love objects. They are the first semblance of safety and security. Parents and caregivers help create our schemas for how the world sees us and how we should see the world. If our parents cannot provide us with love, attention, care, safety, and

understanding, the privilege of a mentor helps fill in the gaps and aids in the development of resilience. A stark example offered throughout *The Witcher* universe is Ciri.

Ciri is raised in Cintra with love, guidance, and stability. When her family perishes in the Nilfgaardian war, she is resilient and persevering despite relentless trauma that follows her. She displays care, concern, and empathy even in her juvenile portrayal. When she reaches the point in the story where she is under Yennefer's guidance to learn control over her Elven powers, we see Yennefer giving her encouragement and offering patience in the series. The parasocial experience of Yennefer's healing through her shifted approach at mentoring is palpable. Yet she falters in this work, as is portrayed in the books – even being scolded for taking a harsh approach with Ciri. She strives to be different from her mentor. To be gentler, kinder than Tissaia. Giving Ciri a chance to find herself, to praise her when she succeeds, and to support her in a way that she was never supported. They find hope and empowerment together through this journey, Yennefer realizing that prioritizing herself and her power is not as important to her as the chosen family she, Geralt, and Ciri create; Ciri finding comfort and self-awareness through the safety and container that Geralt and Yennefer provide. While they are, by no means, perfect parents – they provide her a modified replica of the authoritative childhood that she experienced before she lost everything and everyone she loved.

### Conclusion

Tissaia's inability to see her mages as children who needed warm guidance prevented her from truly fulfilling the role of a noble

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mentor. As a result, as they aged, her students struggled to find their true voices and were vulnerable to the allure of supernatural power. They long valued the voices of their superiors, of the courts they served and the councils to which they belonged. As a result, the sorceress and her mages fell victim to the very chaos she warned them of in their initial lesson.

In the world of *The Witcher*, a voice muffled by harsh authoritarian discipline and control is a voice lost in a magical realm irrevocably ruled by chaos.

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## PATERNALISTIC LEADERSHIP

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*The Life and Times of Vesemir*

**Hayden Jones**

The Witcher universe provides us with a host of fictional though relatable examples of leadership of all different styles. From the despotic rule of Nilfgaard by Emhyr var Emreis to the detached mentorship of Tissaia de Vries with the sorceresses of Aretuza: readers, viewers, and players are presented with a wide selection of characters who hold the responsibility of fostering other's growth and development. While these fictional depictions of leadership vary in their real-world accuracy and certainly admirability, the lessons they provide us when considering what it takes to be an effective and supportive leader are very real. Amongst the many leaders and leadership styles depicted, perhaps the most deeply explored leader in the series is none other than Vesemir, father figure to Geralt, Ciri, and in many ways the entire School of the Wolf. Vesemir presents a style of leadership that lacks the despotic severity of the tyrannical Emhyr Var Emreis and maintains a stern, but warm approach not seen at

Aretuza. Vesemir demonstrates a style of leadership that blends his role as a stand-in parent with his responsibility to maintain a dying order: Paternalistic leadership.

Paternalistic leadership is a style of hierarchical relationship that really lives by the old company adage “we’re a family here.” It’s a style of management that emphasizes closeness in the relationship between a leader and their subordinates or followers as opposed to a more discrete separation between those in authority and those under it<sup>1</sup>. Paternalistic leadership can come in many forms, but effective paternalistic leadership holds a holistic and human view of leaders and subordinates not just as methods of production but as living, breathing individuals with their own lives and interests outside of and within the organization. While paternalistic and “family style” leadership has been employed to varying success or horror, effective, ethical paternalistic leaders tend to share a few key components: adherence to an established set of norms or values, a willingness for the leader to lead through example, a willingness for a leader to emotionally engage with their subordinates, and a shared investment in the outcome of the organization.

Throughout his many appearances in *The Witcher* universe, Vesemir consistently appears as an example of these guiding components of paternalistic leadership. What is his “Witcher Code” if not an established set of organizational values? Through his personal sacrifices and acts in favor of the greater good does he not engage, if often reluctantly, with the lives and feelings of those under his tutelage? In return don’t we as readers, viewers, or players see the close commitment and shared investment in

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outcomes that this fosters not only in the other characters, but in us as outside observers? A wealth of available cosplays and Vesemir memes online would indicate that Vesemir's character and leadership style have certainly fostered at least the shared investment, in this chapter we can take a walk through the rest of Vesemir's fictional biography and observe where he has demonstrated the other components. While Vesemir doesn't always present an ideal role model of leadership, and paternalistic leadership is not without its criticisms itself, we can see that many of the core traits that make up both paternalistic leadership and the character provide us with educational examples.

### The involuntary assumption of leadership

In the animated Netflix movie *The Witcher: Nightmare of the Wolf* we see the earliest days of Vesemir's life and learn that he was not born into a position of power or leadership, but quite the opposite. We see a young Vesemir serving as a servant in a nobleman's house, dreaming of one day having the wealth and power to survive and fend for himself and those he cares for. The opportunity to achieve these dreams eventually presents itself with the appearance of Deglan, his first interaction with a real witcher, who Vesemir assists in a contract. This jumpstarts Vesemir leaving behind his life as a servant and making his way to Kaer Morhen in hopes of training to be a witcher himself<sup>2</sup>. Vesemir was subject to the trials and experimentation that happen to all witchers. He was one of the few to survive and go on to live to adulthood where he was able to take on the mantle of being a freelance witcher as he had hoped. The Vesemir that we see in *Nightmare of the Wolf* is not the older, conscientious

Vesemir that fans of the games or books may be familiar with. Instead, we meet a Vesemir who is impetuous and impulsive, seeking out ways to make a quick coin and serving his initial goals of providing only for himself. This self-serving lifestyle is ultimately reigned in when Vesemir returns to Kaer Morhen one winter and is asked to assist with the training of the next generation of witchers as a fencing instructor. This position as an instructor is one of the first examples we see of Vesemir taking on a leadership role outside of his own self-interests and highlights a theme that we will see recurring in his story: the involuntary assumption of leadership.

Vesemir does not assume leadership out of a particular keenness for bringing up the next generation of witchers. We see in Vesemir's reluctance one of the first pillars of his style of leadership: the willingness to accept responsibility, even when it goes against personal interest. Vesemir carries nothing but contempt for his students and their still remaining humanity, taking on the mantle of teacher not out of a desire for power or authority, but out of a necessity to keep the School of the Wolf alive. Just as Vesemir's sacrifice and willingness to forego his own self-interest in the name of serving his community started him on the path to developing as a character, in real life the necessity of self-sacrifice and a leader's commitment to ideals and needs outside of themselves is vital in promoting the cohesion of the community as a whole<sup>3</sup>. In this way, Vesemir presents an example of leadership grounded in doing what is right for those around you, even if done reluctantly. We can see this echoed in real world studies that have found that a leader's willingness to lead by example, taking on tasks to help others even outside of their usual

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scope of responsibility foster commitment, and even feelings of safety amongst those they oversee<sup>4, 5, 6, 7</sup>.

Vesemir's position as fencing instructor served not only as the starting point of his journey towards his eventual role as a father figure to the School of the Wolf, but also an introduction to Geralt, marking the beginning of the more literal paternal role he would later assume. Vesemir would remain an instructor until the eventual (first) sacking of Kaer Morhen. While the beginning of the end for the witchers overall, the events we see surrounding the destruction of Kaer Morhen cement Vesemir's values and worth as a character overall. While on a contract, Vesemir discovers that his own leader, Deglan, has been breeding monsters to maintain the witchers as a necessity as native monster populations decline. This provides us with a stark contrast between the sacrificial aspects of Vesemir's leadership style compared to Deglan. While Vesemir is willing to sacrifice of himself to help the order, Deglan's plan would sacrifice much more, including the school's ethics, in a bid for keeping in business. Vesemir is put in a position of having to challenge leadership to stand up for his own code, ultimately to be proven right when the locals move to sack Kaer Morhen when Deglan's monster breeding program comes to light.

Following the collapse of Kaer Morhen and the scattering of the School of the Wolf, we begin to see Vesemir take on more of the traits that will make up his eventual paternal and leadership style. With the witchers displaced, Deglan dead, and Kaer Morhen destroyed, Vesemir is responsible for gathering the remaining trainees and continuing the task of raising and training them as witchers. In addition to this similar involuntary assumption of

a position of leadership, this is also where we start to see the development of Vesemir as something more: a father figure.

Putting the “Pa” in paternalistic leadership

As instructor and stand-in parent for the trainees, to call Vesemir’s parenting style “harsh” would be an understatement. Having no personal examples of how to serve as either a father figure or instructor; this combined with the witcher’s already muted emotional expression, Vesemir took a fair bit of time to demonstrate anything that could be considered affectionate towards the young trainees. Despite this, he did serve to instill in them the values and skills that would later serve to make up their “Witcher Code” as we see Geralt refer to throughout the works (for more on this, see Chapter 4 in this volume).

One key component of paternalistic leadership is the adherence to an agreed upon ethical values code, in this case the “Witcher code” that Geralt so often references throughout his own adventures. Additionally, a paternal leader must demonstrate a willingness for self-sacrifice and inspiration of these values in those who are following them. This is a leadership style that is centered not just in a utilitarian need to survive but features a level of parent-like emotional reciprocity where those who are leading want what is best for those who are being led and vice versa. While the power dynamics of a leader/follower role are certainly still present in cases of paternalistic leadership, the social distance between those in charge and those learning is reduced to allow for a more human interaction between the two<sup>8</sup>. Vesemir adopts the necessary components of paternalistic leadership by his promotion of a code of conduct, closeness with

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his students, and willingness to promote a more equal standing and instilled responsibility as those under his instruction grow and develop.

Throughout his life, Vesemir and many of the witchers he trained would return to Kaer Morhen to spend their winters together. This provides another example of Vesemir's unique leadership style, at no point did he serve exclusively as a leader or operate in a position wholly independent from the goals and code of the witchers altogether. Vesemir continued to practice the methods and values that he worked to instill in others, in addition to his responsibilities as teacher, reconstructor, and leader. This willingness to engage in the tasks that help support the school overall serves as another prime example of Vesemir's paternalistic leadership style, painting him as someone who would rather provide direct involvement and intervention as opposed to maintaining a distance and resting in or abusing his authority. In tandem with this education, Vesemir also emphasized the role of each individual in The School of the Wolf as a part of the community outside of the physical school, an important distinction given the frequency of the physical destruction of Kaer Morhen.

In addition to seeing Vesemir frequently taking on responsibilities that are thrust upon him, we can also see a recurring theme in Vesemir's life of taking on these responsibilities alone. Even after the betrayal of trust from Deglan, many further attempts by Vesemir throughout his life to ally with others, even for the good of the School of the Wolf, ended in tragedy. During the rebuilding of Kaer Morhen, Vesemir



attempted to ally with the leaders of the School of the Cat, ultimately resulting in his getting caught up in a conspiracy by the Cats to assassinate the King of Kaedwen. King Radovid II, who happened to also be the benefactor for the reconstruction of Kaer Morhen at the time, did not take this well, massacring many of the remaining students at Kaer Morhen<sup>9</sup>. While Vesemir survived and was permitted to rebuild the school from the remains, he was left in a position to do so without any support and therefore watch the flow of new witchers through the school slowly dwindle. Following the eventual death of the mages responsible for the witcher's mutagens, Vesemir was left as the leader of a School of the Wolf that was a shadow of its former self. Despite this, he still retained the loyalty of those witchers who survived and remained in the School of the Wolf while on The Path, seeking their independent witcher contracts.

As the trainees under his tutelage grew and began taking contracts themselves, Vesemir's role became less one of direct instruction as he was more concentrated on providing support to the witchers he had already raised. Vesemir would continue to inhabit the concepts of self-sacrifice and adherence to a moral code that contributed to his paternal leadership style. However, with no more children to train, Vesemir would move into another aspect of his paternal relationship: being able to navigate the change from direct instructor to supporting the growth of others.

#### Trusting in shared investment

After establishing a clearly defined and freestanding shared set of values and morals, the next crucial element of leadership is providing independence and having the willingness to step back

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and allow others to function on their own, trusting in the values that have been instilled through direct instruction and modeling by the leader<sup>10</sup>. As the witcher's he trained aged and headed out into the world, Vesemir was placed in the position to trust that those he had trained had the skills and knowledge necessary to survive in a dangerous world, while still providing some support and scaffolding upon their return in the winters.

Though the number of witchers continued to decline during this period of Vesemir's life, this change also presented an opportunity for his proteges to set out on their own adventures and develop themselves. This is the time when we as readers and fans follow the adventures of Geralt of Rivia as he sets out on The Path, utilizing the skills and morals instilled from his time at Kaer Morhen. This, of course, was upended with the arrival of Ciri, Geralt's child surprise and one of the first new additions to the School of the Wolf in years. Now, in addition to Vesemir's development as a paternal figure for both the order and Geralt himself, Vesemir is thrust into a new grandparental role supporting someone he has brought up in navigating these same roles. This also provides us with a chance to see the ways in which Vesemir breaks from the cycle of upbringing he had been subject to himself. While Vesemir continues to be far from an affectionate paternal figure, he can demonstrate a new level of support and understanding for the struggles that Geralt goes through in taking on the princess as his ward due to having experienced these difficulties himself.

While a code of morals and willingness to demonstrate adherence to this code are both vital aspects of leadership, the introduction

of Ciri to Kaer Morhen introduced a new but equally essential aspect: flexibility. Vesemir may have had knowledge gained from his own time with Deglan as well as his trial by fire upbringing of Geralt, but Ciri was not a witcher, and for that matter, a man. In *Blood of Elves* we see just how disruptive the introduction of a new student after so much time is to the school and their usual routines<sup>11</sup>. We additionally get some insight into the blind spots of the witchers who, despite all their training in biology and anatomy, neglect to recognize some very important distinctions between bringing up a girl compared to a school full of boys until told better by Triss Merrigold. Ciri presents further unique challenges due to her impulsive, outspoken, and sometimes reckless nature, a rather stark contrast to the downtrodden students who more traditionally were brought into the witcher order. Vesemir continues to accept these involuntary responsibilities, bringing in assistance from Triss Merrigold to make up for the areas where he may be lacking in knowledge or expertise. Vesemir's willingness to ask for assistance in an area he lacks experience also further demonstrates his willingness to put the needs of those in his care above his own ego.

#### **An Emphasis on Emotional Investment**

With Geralt assuming the more authoritative paternal role and taking charge of Ciri's martial training, Vesemir can settle into a more academic role seeing to Ciri's formal education on the knowledge that goes into being a witcher. This is another area where we can see a shift, as Vesemir ages and those under his tutelage are able to take on more of the responsibility he once held, Vesemir continues to contribute to the School of the Wolf in the ways that he can, ensuring that his knowledge lives on

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to serve the further generations. With the movement away from the direct role as a leader, Vesemir is also able to engage more in the emotional intimacy that his paternal role has provided. The reluctant pride in seeing Geralt bringing up a child and the ability to continue educating Ciri in the skills and subjects necessary to survive in the world are made possible by the willingness of Vesemir to engage above the baseline requirements of being a leader in the school and his investment in the growth of those under his care.

The relationship between Ciri and Vesemir also begins to appear differently at this point depending on the story you are referring to. While much of Vesemir's life up to this point can be stitched together from his escapades in comics and the books, with the variations between the TV Series, games, and books, we start to see a more varied depiction of Vesemir as a character. In the Netflix series of *The Witcher*,<sup>12</sup> we see the re-emergence of the utilitarian Vesemir who holds above all the continuation and survival of the School of the Wolf. On first meeting Ciri, he warns Geralt of the mistakes he has made in bringing her into their lives. The relationship between Ciri and Vesemir in the Netflix live action series is hinged much more on Vesemir's respect for Geralt and only begins to develop directly when Vesemir finds out that Ciri is a "child of the elder blood" and that her blood may be the key to finally making more witchers.

This Vesemir is one who is wracked with guilt and the difficulty of maintaining a dying order. He is willing to bend his own morals to protect his assumed family, like the traits we had seen in Deglan that ultimately lead to his demise. We see a blending of the

emotional investment of his role as the paternal leader of the order and a movement almost towards the very utilitarian views for which he stood against Deglan, repeating the cycle of paternal betrayal. However, what set Vesemir apart from Deglan was that he still promoted Ciri's agency in this process that was so vital to continue the order. Even with Ciri's blood being the only hope of continuing the order, Vesemir was willing to respect her wishes to have the serum tested on her first, and even then, only when no other options were available. In this we can see where the self-sacrifice elements of paternal leadership can apply to the group, with Vesemir's history of self-sacrifice being demonstrated now in others who he has been able to help bring up. We see additionally in Vesemir's Netflix appearance his emotional commitment to his family in his willingness to hunt down Ciri when she is taken over by Voleth Meir. While Vesemir is subject to a direct attack by Voleth Meir, a demon who feeds on pain and has taken control of Ciri's body, Vesemir is still driven by his need to avenge and defend his family even against such a powerful foe.

With this discrepancy in Vesemir's amongst the source material, we do however also get an example of the fact that paternalistic leadership can come in many forms. While many of the underlying traits of paternalistic leadership are the same, specific styles can vary in their level of stricter authoritarianism or more benevolent support<sup>13, 14</sup>. Things like moral codes, emotional investment, and shared interest in outcomes tend to be consistent between styles of paternalistic leadership, but the emphasis on the power dynamics within the system between who is in charge and who is not can vary drastically, even from time to time within the same group. This can often be seen in instances when a leader

must take the “tough but fair” approach, compared to when more laxity and less severity may be warranted. And while these shifts can serve important functions in maintaining safety and efficacy, maintaining high levels of authoritarianism in paternalistic relationships over time can often result in a decrease in the psychological safety that the leadership thrives on, and ultimately more negative relationships between the leader and those under their supervision<sup>15, 16</sup>.

### A legacy of paternalistic leadership

In contrast to the Vesemir we see in the Netflix series, the Vesemir that appears in CD Projekt Red’s *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*<sup>17</sup> is an aged, sagacious, and steady character. This Vesemir is one who is shown to have established close relationships with both those directly under his tutelage as well as having an established deep affection for Ciri. This version of Vesemir is an exemplar of paternalistic leaderships: adhering to the code that he teaches, allowing for empathy but sternness in those he teaches, and demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice his own needs for those of the collective. Throughout the story of *The Witcher 3*, we as the player can experience Vesemir as an old friend and instructor who serves to guide the player through the tutorial, providing us a chance to see just what it is like to operate under his instruction. Additionally, the later role of the player in determining Ciri’s fate through the parental relationship between Geralt and Ciri further demonstrates the importance of paternalistic leadership as part of the narrative and Ciri’s character development. The game could easily end with Ciri’s sacrifice or defeat if the player is not able to take on the role of a paternalistic leader in providing firm but

warm guidance, independence but support, and a willingness to engage in emotional connection outside of the constant need for preparation, such as when Ciri and Geralt take a break for a snowball fight. These all serve to demonstrate the importance of providing a warmth to leadership to allow others to grow, and this warmth can be narratively traced back to Vesemir.

The ultimate sacrifice that Vesemir makes comes towards the end of *The Witcher 3* game, when the Wild Hunt has stormed into Kaer Morhen, Vesemir once again having to stand in defense of his home against invaders. With the Hunt moving to take Ciri, Vesemir serves as a distraction, stabbing the general, Imlerith, and providing a chance for the others to survive the encounter. This conclusion serves as a fitting narrative ending for Vesemir, not only in the parallels it draws between his ascent to leadership following the other destruction of Kaer Morhen but demonstrates one more time his willingness to put the needs of those in his care over his own wellbeing. This is an example of truly living the morals he had instilled in others, that sacrifice is often a key component in assuring the safety and wellbeing of others.

### Conclusion

Looking at the development of Vesemir as a character over the course of his narrative, we see him demonstrating a style of leadership that blends the value-driven motivation of a more traditional leader with the warmth and emotional investment of a parent. As has been stated previously, paternalistic leadership is generally centered around four primary components: an established set of norms and organizational values, a willingness for the leader to lead through example, a willingness for a leader

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to emotionally engage with their subordinates, and a shared investment in the outcome of the organization<sup>18</sup>. Throughout his story, we see Vesemir embody each of these aspects. He sets forth the “Witcher Code” that Geralt and the other witchers come to follow, he regularly sacrifices his own needs in favor of the School of the Wolf, he serves as a leader as well as father figure for the witchers and Ciri, and he ultimately trusts others to continue the work of the School of the Wolf after his lead. Where some leadership relies on authoritarianism and stern control, paternalistic leadership like that of Vesemir allows for a more honest, nurturing, and purposeful helping of others to grow within a personal as opposed to contractual relationship.

The potential benefits of paternalistic leadership in the real world have been studied extensively, particularly when looking at collectivist cultures that foster the success of the community over those of the individual. A good paternalistic leader considers the interplay between their subordinate’s work and personal life and the need to keep in mind the overall wellbeing over just their productivity. While it might seem that this would work counterproductively as far as organizational goals, research has shown that allowing space for emotional connection and building positive relationships within the organization actually works to increase commitment to meeting goals and adherence to community morals and standards<sup>19</sup>. Aside from this, feeling supported and connected within a community can also help reduce feelings of isolation or dehumanization, and foster commitment to the betterment of the community<sup>20, 21</sup>.

When we look at the makeup of The School of The Wolf and



its continuation under Vesemir we can draw some very real connections to the makeup of management in communities and organizations in real life. Even within paternalistic leadership groups there is some variability in what has shown to be most effective both from a community cohesion standpoint and a wider snapshot of commitment and satisfaction amongst those in the community. The School of The Wolf is one that is governed by a set of standards, a “Witcher Code,” meaning it falls closer to a pattern of moral paternalistic leadership; this is a style that emphasizes group cohesion centered predominantly around shared values and morals. Research has shown that while this can foster a high level of commitment, an even more supportive approach would be a benevolent paternalistic relationship, one that emphasizes the emotional value of each member of the community and connections to others within the group<sup>22</sup>.

Regardless of the specific subcategorization of paternalistic leadership being employed, the overall benefit to the community comes in the form of psychological safety. This is the ability for members of the community to feel security in their continued acceptance within the organization and its future values and commitments. While leadership that is more direct and authoritarian may promote bursts of higher productivity or effectiveness, they can ultimately end in burnout or group infighting. Maintaining the psychological safety of the group, on the other hand, can lead to higher levels of internal communication, a lower need for mediation, and higher satisfaction within the community<sup>23</sup>. These studies have shown that members of an organization who do not feel safe or psychologically supportive can engage in higher rates of defensive

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activities that ultimately hurt the overall development of the group.

We see that while styles of paternalistic leadership can vary based on their level of benevolence, authoritarianism, and moral adherence, they all center around appreciating the human connection and support that a leader can provide. Regardless of the specific circumstances involved, it can always be worthwhile for a leader to consider what ways they can provide clarity and human support to those within their organization not just for the benefit of the group overall, but to build confidence and safety for the good of everyone involved. Vesemir exemplifies this through his role in *The Witcher* series; he demonstrates the arduous journey that it can be to establish the qualities present in assuming a role that merges the role of the head of a family, as with Geralt, Ciri and the other witchers, and the head of an organization, as with the School of The Wolf. While Vesemir demonstrates these qualities and leadership skills within fiction, the lessons we can take away from them and apply in real life are clear: while leadership may take clarity and sacrifice, it can also be an emotionally rewarding and enriching practice for not just those leading, but also for those who learn from them as well.

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# PSYCHOLOGY OF MONSTROSITY

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*Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy*

**Amelia Herbst, PsyD**

“Men, the polite ones, at least, would call me a monster. A blood-drinking freak.” Regis (BaW<sup>1</sup>)

Who is human and who is a monster? When we traverse a world where man is as selfish, dark, and brutal as the very beasts that lurk in the shadows of the forests and fields, this question becomes harder to answer. Through The Witcher books, games, and television series, Geralt has to navigate contracts to kill many different monsters. Some of which, he has to consider the coin promised to him and the level of threat the monster holds. At times, Geralt is faced with “monster” contracts in which he finds ways to help the creature instead of killing it, or lets it go because it is not worth his time. However, during his journey to find Ciri, Geralt finds himself in the company of a creature that is significantly more powerful than he is and has to face his own assumptions and learnings about monsters.

Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy, better known as Regis, is a higher vampire that finds himself in Geralt's traveling party after they found him at his summer residence in Fen Carn. Notably, the party discussed whether or not the graveyard would be a safe place to rest, including whether or not it was the home to vampires. Geralt even checks in with his medallion and notices that it does not sense the presence of any monsters. Regis is introduced to the party and the readers as;

“...a grizzled head and then a face embellished with a nobly aquiline nose, belonging by no means to a ghoul but to a slim, middle-aged man...The man did indeed somewhat resemble a tax collector.” (BoF. p. 119<sup>2</sup>)

At the beginning, Regis did not appear to be a threat to Geralt or the rest of the traveling party. He was trusted enough that the party took part in his mandrake brew and he was able to attend to medical needs of the extended caravan, as he was a barber-surgeon by trade. He draws little attention from the party until he puts himself through a baptism of fire, by reaching his hand into hot coals and removing a horseshoe, in order to save a young woman with a noticeable mental handicap from being executed. As a witcher and fierce defender of those under his protection, it comes as little surprise to how taken off guard and defensive Geralt becomes once he realizes that Regis is not human and tries to banish him from the group.

Many of Geralt's monster interactions end in the death of the monster or him letting them flee to never be seen again. In this instance, Geralt finds himself with a being that is exceedingly intelligent, understanding, kind, and willing to put himself in

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harm's way in order to heal or protect others. Regis continues to put himself in the witcher's presence in order to make sure that Dandelion is getting the care he needs on the road and is ultimately encouraged to stay by the rest of the group, even with their own reservations. Though displeased by this decision at the start, Regis's company on the trail allows for the whole party to learn how something or someone that may meet the definition of a monster is actually significantly more humane than they themselves may be.

### What is a monster?

Monsters are one of the oldest psychological tools used in storytelling and fear mongering that humanity has had at its disposal. In its etymology, the term we now know as "monster" or monstrosity comes from the latin word *monstrum*, which was a term used to describe omens predicting misfortune or evil omens. When we look at definitions of monster, they range from plants or animals that are strange, terrifying shapes, or those with behavior that deviate from what is considered normal to "a person of unnatural or extreme ugliness, deformity, wickedness, or cruelty"<sup>3</sup>. To be a monstrosity or to act in a monstrous way is to act in ways that are cruel and selfish. No matter what definition is used, monsters are inherent threats to the safety of humanity and must be dealt with or avoided in order to survive. So, if monstrosities are a threat to those with humanity, what does it mean? Humanity can be seen as "the state of being humane" which compasses compassion, empathy, sympathy, generosity, and sometimes self-sacrifice<sup>4</sup>. Since humanity can sometimes refer to all of humans, it can be assumed that all humans are



humane which means all monsters are clearly wicked, cruel and monstrous. However, we know this is not as clear as it seems. There are many humans that act like monsters.

What purpose do monsters and monster tales serve? At their core, many monsters serve as warnings in myths and tales in order to keep children safe from harm or to stop people from traversing to dangerous places where there are real natural threats. Monster tales also serve as a way of explaining a phenomenon that could not be explained through the logic of the time. These tales served as excellent lessons that could be passed down from generation to generation and potentially kept more than one person out of danger<sup>5</sup>. What about if the monsters are human? Though it is understandable that humans that act in ways that intentionally harm others are considered monsters, it is normally people that are different from us that tend to carry the weight of that title.

From the beginning of society, groups of people intentionally cast out or rejected those that did not look, think, or act like “us.” In-groups are comprised of individuals that resemble “us.” This can encompass race, ethnicity, beliefs, or shared goals. Those that do not fit these characteristics are considered the out-group<sup>6</sup>. Individuals in the in-group are in the dominant group that makes the rules and decides how members of the out-group are treated. How people see themselves and treat others is based on which group they are in. The creation of these in and out group dynamics might have had a start in fear of safety and the need to keep resources limited to the people in the community, but it has continued to exist through prejudice. In many cases where people were described as “monsters” or beings that were unfit for the in-

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group in question, we find hatred and distrust of individuals of different races and religions, women, individuals that experienced some deformity of their body, and other “untouchables”<sup>7</sup>. The prejudice that these towns and societies experienced were rooted in the idea that having people they did not understand, trust, or who they found disgusting come into their communities spelled a soiling of their society. The potential of their “uncleanliness” or “immoral beliefs” would spread and destroy the political or social structure in place. In some cases, this in-group saw members of out-groups as inherently dangerous and felt safer keeping them at a distance instead of learning about them and accepting them for who they were<sup>8,9</sup>. It is better to keep distance for safety instead of letting in a potential danger.

### The monsters of *The Witcher*

Monsters take many forms in *The Witcher*. Perhaps, most obviously, are the various ghouls and beasts that Geralt is hired to slay throughout his adventures. However, the psychology of monstrosity throughout *The Witcher* is more than skin deep. Many may assume that monsters are creatures that have little resemblance to humans such as wyvern, drowners, and alghouls. Monsters that witchers hunt also look and act remarkably like humans and the elder races or at least, can mimic them. Vampires, dopplers, and succubi though capable of complex emotion and thought are still considered monsters. However, humans and the elder races themselves can also act monstrously.

Understanding why creatures and beings are treated like monsters is important to understanding Geralt and *The Witcher* series’s moral conflicts. Geralt, as a witcher, is a well-trained

monster hunter for hire that had to undergo mutations during the Trail of the Grasses (the initiation to becoming a witcher) in order to give him advantages over his prey<sup>10</sup>. In *The Witcher* universe, monsters are commonly identified on two criteria, they are dissimilar to humans and they either lack sentience or obvious intelligence. The criteria of being dissimilar to humans means that many sentient and intelligent races are considered monsters. Geralt has learned to decide whether he is going to keep a contract with a monster based on other criteria as well. Though famed and sought out by those of any socioeconomic statuses, many view witchers similarly to the monsters that they are hired to kill.

“Verily, there is nothing so hideous as the monsters, so contrary to nature, known as witchers for they are the offspring of foul sorcery and devilry. They are rogues without virtue, conscience or scruple, true diabolic creations, fit only for killing. There is no place amidst honest men for such as they.” -Anonymous, *Monstrum or Description of the Witcher* (BoE, p. 53<sup>11</sup>)

Though witchers are humans both before and after being put through the Trail of the Grasses, their monster and beast-like traits allow them to transform their bodies, causing them to fall into an out-group. These “men” walk across the countryside, killing anything for coin, and then return to their schools to continue to encourage each other’s monster-like behavior. Or so the populace thinks of them. In all of *The Witcher* media, Geralt will run into individuals that openly detest his presence. Cats in the game will hiss and run away from Geralt whenever he passes them because he does not smell like a human and they are afraid

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and confused. *The Witcher* plays rather soundly into the monster hunting monster trope.

Vampires are another monstrosity that live within *The Witcher* universe. Sapkowski's vampires are significantly more multi-dimensional than most other popular media's portrayal of the blood drinking creatures. In *The Witcher*, "vampires" refer to different forms of creatures that thrive off blood and feed off of their victim's life force. Less intelligent, bestial creatures, such as fleders and ekimmas, are more likely to need blood in order to survive and tend to rip their victims apart, much like any other wild animal. Middle level vampires, such as bruxas or mosferats, are more intelligent, more likely to seek out blood, and can temporarily pass themselves off as human<sup>12</sup>.

Lastly, there are higher vampires, a race that appears to be entirely on its own. Regis's race were beings that were displaced from their home after the Conjunction of Spheres, the cataclysmic event that brought many races and creatures onto this world. Higher vampires often resemble humans and reject the common stereotypes about vampires (i.e., garlic doesn't stave them off, holy water and the sun doesn't burn them, they can't be killed with a stake through the heart, etc.) Most importantly, they do not need blood in order to survive and cannot turn humans into vampires. However, this fact does not mean that vampires are not dangerous. They are an extremely powerful race which gives them superhuman strength, immortality, invisibility, telepathic powers over animals and humans, and can regenerate even when their bodies appear to no longer exist, making them nearly impossible

to kill. They even have the ability to fool a witcher's medallion<sup>13,14</sup>.

If we consider in and out group dynamics, higher vampires had to learn to adapt to fit in with the humans and the Elder races. This ability to adapt and blend in became the key to their survival as well as their ability to live in a way that was more sustainable and enjoyable. In *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt's* expansion *Blood and Wine*, Geralt briefly meets a vampire by the name of Oriana. She is known in Toussaint to be a private woman but to throw fancy and elaborate parties that are the envy of Beauclair. Oriana showed up suddenly and spent her money on her own desires and to win favor with the people she rarely saw. It is assumed that after she has been in a place long enough that her inability to age draws some suspicions, she leaves for a new location and starts over. However, this is looking away from her propensity to feed on children that she pays to be fostered, a detail that Regis appears to show shock towards and one that Geralt determines makes her a monster. Oriana is allowed in the "in-group" because she is sophisticated and dresses and acts as the upper class of Beauclair society.

However, even if many higher vampires chose to fully adapt to blend in with humans, some struggled to understand humans, their customs, and chose to remain on the outside of the "civilized" world. *Blood and Wine* focuses on Geralt's hunting of the "Beast of Beauclair", a vampire by the name of Dettlaff van der Eretein. Regis reappears for the first time in almost a decade during a fight between Dettlaff and Geralt in order to stop them

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and to ask Geralt for help. During their reunion, Regis discusses Dettlaff's personality;

“Dettlaff doesn't understand men, their world, its rules, its conventions. He's naive, in a sense. He doesn't comprehend your games, knows not what it means to lie, deceive.” -Regis (BaW<sup>15</sup>)

In this same conversation, Regis discusses how “Dettlaff is more bestial than I am” <sup>16</sup>, which opens up the notion that though higher vampires are very human-like, they sit on a similar spectrum as humans and their humanity. Dettlaff prefers the presence of lower vampires and has a herd instinct that sets him apart from Regis. However, his “bestial” nature means that he is quick to anger, will go after someone who has wronged him, and is less likely to try to investigate who or what may be threatening him and goes along with their plans to use him. Dettlaff is on the “outside” of the society of humans and it is demonstrated both in how he is treated during interactions in the game with the average citizens of Toussaint and his desire to hide from humans, if given the chance by Geralt.

*The Witcher* has a variety of monsters, some of them more obvious than others. Tales around monsters may have kept humans safe from the things that prowl at night but they have also been used to ostracize individuals that may not look like “us.” The assumptions about those that are “othered” mainly come from fear, be it fear of safety to fear of having the core beliefs of the in-group challenged and changed. However, the monsters that humans in *The Witcher* find themselves afraid of may be those helping to care for their sick, throwing lavish parties, or even hunting the monsters that scare them more.

Cognitive Dissonance: What if you are the monster?

“Not long before, Geralt would have mocked, mercilessly ridiculed and thought a complete idiot anyone who would have dared claim that he – a witcher – would feel great joy at the sight of a vampire.”  
(ToS, p. 226<sup>17</sup>)

Geralt’s initial difficulty with separating Regis from the “monster” he is supposed to be with the actual gentle, intelligent, and trustworthy barber surgeon is a common phenomenon. Cognitive Dissonance is when a discrepancy between one’s values or beliefs conflict with what one is feeling in the moment<sup>18</sup>. Though cognitive dissonance at its core can be helpful and necessary for growth, avoiding the mental discomfort and not attempting to solve the reasons for the discomfort can cause difficulties for the person. When a person is faced with cognitive dissonance, they are likely to feel stressed, anxious, or angry and react in ways that may appear stubborn or illogical in their immediate reactions to the situation, especially around others who feel differently.

How one copes with their cognitive dissonance is the beginning of their journey to grow and learn, to rewrite their belief system, or for it to continue as it is and increase the destructive behaviors that the dissonance fosters. By continuing to try and rationalize the dissonance, individuals will continue to act in ways that cause further harm to themselves or others and increase their discomfort when found in similar situations. Unchecked or unchallenged dissonance can continue to cause the individual to make impaired decisions. Unchallenged dissonance can also greatly impact a person or a group’s ability to have a constructive

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dialogue in order to solve any conflicts that arose related to the dissonance<sup>19</sup>.

Many of these features we see in Geralt shortly after realizing that Regis is a vampire. To start, Geralt becomes activated in a different way when Regis follows them to their resting spot and starts administering aid to Dandelion. Though it can be argued that the statements Regis made in reference to how Dandelion's blood "smells nice" would be enough to provoke any knowledgeable witcher into action, Regis continued to work to clean and dress the wounds. Geralt acts out in an aggressive way, pulling his sword out of the saddle and holding it against Regis's neck as soon as he finished working on Dandelion's wounds. In this moment there is great confusion and initial protest until Regis admits to what he is and the situation he finds himself in:

"I'm regarded, to put it mildly, as a monster. As a blood-sucking fiend. And now I encounter a witcher, who earns his living eliminating creatures such as I. And that's it." (BoF, p. 219<sup>20</sup>)

He leaves at the request of Geralt, even after minorly challenging him and his stance, but returns a short time later in order to attend to Dandelion and his belief in caring for him. At this point, Dandelion and the others insist on having Regis stay, even if the party ends up having some concern over their own safety at the start. Towards to beginning of his reconnection with the group, Regis makes a statement that beautifully describes where Geralt is in this stage of dissonance, even though it is related to a conversation about soup:

"Ignorance" – Regis smiled – "is no justification for ill-conceived



actions. When one doesn't know or has doubts it's best to seek advice..." (BoF, p. 231<sup>21</sup>)

Cognitive dissonance becomes a point of growth when a person challenges themselves and becomes more informed about why they are facing an internal conflict. By addressing this mismatch in values and feelings, a person is more likely to have better decision making and greater self-awareness. The initial step to working through cognitive dissonance is to identify that it exists. By acknowledging that it exists, a person is more likely to directly address the belief system and why it is being challenged. The discomfort can be addressed by changing, adding onto, or decreasing the importance of the current belief system<sup>22, 23</sup>.

Geralt's discomfort in this need to change is not only related to his current circumstances but also to his own character growth. As a witcher, he is constantly assessing risk wherever he goes. He is assessing not just the monsters in his contracts but the people who hire him, the environments he's traveling in, and the attitudes and reactions of the people in the towns and cities he finds himself in. To stop assessing risk, especially of a dangerous being like a higher vampire, is for Geralt to throw away a core part of himself and his training. To stop assessing a high-risk creature is to make himself vulnerable and to eliminate his safety. To become comrades with a dangerous monster is to directly challenge his belief system as a witcher.

When the party has decided to welcome Regis, at the chagrin of Geralt, there is still some concern over his potential desires and capability for violence as a vampire. When asked about how he felt once they agreed to have Regis take them to a druid friend

of his that may help them, Geralt himself admits; "...he behaves decently. He didn't hesitate to act during that girl's trial at the camp by the Chotla. Although he knew it would unmask him" (p. 290, BoF<sup>24</sup>). Geralt starts to consider the ways that Regis acts in humane ways and puts himself in harm's way in order to do the right thing.

Arguably the most pivotal moment for Geralt's and the party's change of mind comes shortly after this observation. After Dandelion attempts to determine if Regis has a thirst for blood, the vampire explains that he has chosen to abstain from it. Even though he asked to keep the matter personal, Regis finds himself with a cohort of anxious humans that try to assure him that he is their comrade despite not knowing much about him. Even with their assurances, Regis ultimately opens up and discusses how blood is not necessary for vampires but is more so a delicacy, similar to alcohol. He admits to his addiction to blood in his youth, one that started trying to impress his peers and to eliminate his shyness around vampire women. He opened up about how his addiction became worse after his lover left him. He swore it off after being forced to regenerate in a grave for 50 years after an incident where he flew drunk into a well and a group of townsfolk attempted to kill him. At this point he promises the group that he did the hard work of swearing off blood and does not want to find himself in a similar situation again.

What is more human than admitting one's mistakes and humbling oneself in front of new companions? Regis's honesty and vulnerability allowed his party to see that in his four centuries of life he was able to learn from his mistakes and decide to live a

life dedicated to helping people. However, in order to fully share this message, he had to admit to the times where he acted as the very monster, they were all afraid he still was.

During this same night, he answers all the questions posed to him and dispels the multiple myths about vampires as well as answering Geralt's philosophical debates about fear and how humans react to vampires. Regis answers him humbly which appears to satisfy and even impress Geralt. In the days following these conversations, Regis continues to show his humanity to the group through various acts of attentiveness and kindness. Most notably, supporting Milva through her difficult considerations about whether to keep her baby. He brewed an initial concoction at her request for when she considered aborting it and then threw it away when he noticed that she decided to keep it after her conversation with Geralt. When Milva miscarried as they attempted to run from the warring military factions, Regis was the first one to get to her side, worked to save her life despite the plea of the others to flee, and cared for her after the others joined the battle.

At this point, Geralt appears to trust Regis significantly more, and his trust and reliance on him grew over the course of the book. In *Tower of Swallows*, Geralt is written as starting to check in with Regis's thoughts and opinions about who they interact with and next steps on their journey. He trusts Milva and Dandelion in his care when they have to briefly separate. During their time in Toussaint in *Lady of the Lake*, Geralt respects Regis enough to slow down his demands to rush out and find Ciri when questioned about why there was a hurry and explain to make sure

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he was well informed and could assist. Geralt's significant change of heart becomes apparent when he notices that a figure suddenly appears at his campfire, after a lengthy separation, and feels "great joy" and relief to find his friend, the vampire, Regis.

Towards the end of their journey together in the novels, Geralt has come to rely on Regis as a friend, competent confidant, and intellectual sounding board for their quest to find Ciri. During the final battle with Vilgefortz at Stygga Castle, Regis appears in time to protect Yennefer from a deadly attack. Despite Geralt's warnings to "beware", the vampire continues to attack the sorcerer because he did not come with Geralt this far to "beware." Ultimately, the vampire was met with a spell that melted him into the column of the castle. Regis's "death" ignited a "rage and despair" in Geralt that allowed him to find the strength to fight and kill Vilgefortz. This vampire, this monster that Geralt had once wanted as far away as possible, sacrificed himself in order to protect Yennefer and ultimately gave Geralt the fuel he needed to face a sorcerer of great strength. After the battle's conclusion, Yennefer asks about Regis and Geralt relinquishes all thoughts about his monstrosity status and refers to him as the best possible example of what it means to be human;

**Yennefer:** Who was that, Geralt?

**Geralt:** A friend. I'm going to miss him.

**Yennefer:** Was he a human?

**Geralt:** The epitome of humanity. (LoL, p. 381<sup>25</sup>)

To be human: Friendship, Vulnerability and Trust after the Saga

Our steadfast witcher lived and breathed the witcher doctrine

for most of his life but found himself indebted to and finding comfort and security in a being that his teachings considered a monster. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* takes place eight years after the events at Stygga Castle and Geralt has had to battle regaining his memory, finding Ciri (again), navigating war and politics, and facing the cruelty of man towards one another and towards beings they associate as being threats or outsiders. Though it takes the course of the first game and second game for him to fully get his memories back, he finds himself revisiting his moral dilemmas about monstrosities and witcher doctrine. He has to be reminded by Dandelion about his “vampire friend” and responds in the shocked way we would expect from a witcher without memories. However, he does obtain them again and we find a witcher with more experiences and knowledge about the complexity of non-humans going into the third game.

In *Blood and Wine*, Geralt is contracted to stop “The Beast of Beauclair” from its killing spree of current and former knights of the Duchy of Toussaint. When Regis steps in to save both Dettlaff and Geralt, causing Dettlaff to flee, he takes the time to describe to Geralt both Dettlaff’s humanity and the places where he does not understand what it is like to be human in a bid to get him to help. Unlike in the past, Geralt does not hesitate to trust his old friend even though he admits to being skeptical and challenges Regis often. Even during their brief reunion in the stables, Geralt addresses Regis’s belief that Dettlaff is good and is being used by stating “Always had an overdeveloped sense of empathy” (BaW<sup>26</sup>); giving nod to Regis’s dedication to always trying to understand and help others.

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The writing for this expansion does a thorough job at capturing Geralt's utmost trust in Regis and highlights his growth as an empathic party to creatures and individuals that would be cast out or killed by humans. Additionally, both Geralt and the players experience a deepening of Regis as a character by showing his humanity, both its strengths and its fallacies. Through this journey, Geralt helps Regis in finding ways to confront and try to stop Dettlaff. Regis is vulnerable with his old friend and discusses his continued exhaustion about trying to fit in with society as Geralt listens and reflects during these moments. During one of the endings after Geralt goes to see the Unseen (Higher Vampire) Elder, he asks Regis what it is like trying to survive after the conjunction. Regis asks Geralt to imagine a situation in which he is caused "great unease". Geralt describes having to attend a formal situation where he must dress in fancy clothing and listen to Dandelion sing about him and Yennefer. Regis uses this example and asks Geralt to imagine that he has to stay there for all time and adding:

"And should you fall out of character for but a moment, should you so much as scratch yourself where the stitching chafes, all around you will scream 'Monster! Monster!' And they'll turn on you and tear you to shreds." -Regis (BaW<sup>27</sup>)

Though Geralt has had some idea of the difficulty Regis and his kind has had to face, he is provided with a deeper understanding of what it is like to live in a world where the dominant race considers you a monster. This exchange allows Regis to be as transparent as he can about how he attempts to survive and Geralt is able to sit in that discomfort with him and grow in his empathy

for the plight of his friend and other races like him. In response to this example Geralt responds, “Sounds...tiring. Damn tiring” (BaW<sup>28</sup>).

The conclusion of their time together demonstrates how the empathy and openness that Geralt has learned from Regis is also where Regis learns his own lessons. Geralt is dedicated to trusting Regis, even when Regis has moments of doubting his own personal beliefs. Despite the personal and moral challenges, they have to navigate through the end of expansion, Regis consistently shows his loyalty and humanity. Allowing Geralt and the players to experience Regis’s altruism and vulnerability through the game’s narrative created a rich experience where a “monster” is the catalyst in encouraging us to believe in the good of everyone.

Blood and Wine’s story is important for many reasons and should be considered where Geralt is at his most developed as a witcher and character. At the end of the expansion, regardless of the player’s choices in their final conversation, it is clear that this is the end of Geralt’s tale. Though this is CD Projekt Red’s hat tip to the retiring witcher, it also allows for the fan base to have more of a sense of closure than they may have felt at the end of *Lady of the Lake*. To have Geralt’s journey with Regis be his last major contract is symbolic in his growth to see the nuance in the monsters he hunts, to see “monsters” as creatures or other races that are scared, confused, hurt, and in potential danger. Though Dettlaff does not prove to be an empathic character at the end of the expansion’s story, it shows the lengths that Geralt and Regis are willing to go in order to try and save him, even if it was from himself. This ending for our favorite witcher allowed Geralt to

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shine at his brightest while giving some of the narrative space to a friendship that indefinitely defined how he saw his trade and the creatures he encountered.

**Regis:** Though you are risking your life. The question is why. This contract...it goes well beyond what witchers customarily handle. I cannot abandon the matter...but you...you could simply walk away. So why, my friend? Why stay and risk your hide?

**Geralt:** For you. You're in a heap of trouble Regis, trouble Dettlaff brought on. Seen you die once already. That one time was enough. (BaW<sup>29</sup>)

### Conclusion

So who is really a monster? This question is complex and not as obvious as we may be led to believe. Monsters were originally used as cautionary tales meant to protect us from the unknown dangers of the world. However, individuals and other beings have been labeled as monstrous because they did not fit in with the in-group. For *The Witcher*, this meant that anything, including intelligent, humanoid creatures were considered a threat and could be hunted for coin by Geralt and his witcher brethren. The introduction of the vampire Regis allowed Geralt to challenge his instincts that all creatures labeled “monster” are not as monstrous as the myths and tales make them seem. Geralt has to wrestle with his own cognitive dissonance and reconceptualize how a vampire can be an empathic, trustworthy, and loyal friend. By Geralt's own admission, Regis exemplifies what we think of as peak humanity in his willingness to help those in need, encouragement of understanding others, and becoming self-sacrificing to protect



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those that cannot protect themselves. The change that happens in Geralt is seen as he grows in the games, specifically because he chooses to believe in the potential good in all beings.

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& Bible which explores the intersection of monsters, faith, and popular culture.

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