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FOLKLORE AND FORETHOUGHT – NARRATIVE DUALITY IN THE WITCHER

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Abstract: In the ongoing article I attempt to accentuate the contrast and the duality of the source material behind Netflix's *The Witcher*, all the while acknowledging, as well as opposing, the masterful work of Andrzej Sapkowski – the Polish fantasy writer and mastermind of *The Witcher* world. To be precise, I will investigate the folkloric origins and history of the show, as well as its richly philosophical universe, comparing the two techniques head-to-head in the two main chapters of the article. Namely, I will tackle the main plot device of the show – The Law of Surprise – as being both a vessel of destiny, and that of a philosophical omnipotence. Furthermore, I undertake the strenuous and analytical task of painting the portrait of the show's main character – Geralt of Rivia – as both a deeply, morally-entrenched protagonist, and a product of an unforgiving and seemingly dysfunctional medieval society. I will interpret the ways in which his encounters with destiny, the characters of the show, and morality itself manage to shape up one of the most complex characters of modern television and pop-culture alike.

Keywords: television, popular culture, folklore, destiny, determinism, plot device, skepticism, morality, analysis, duality.

FOLCLOR ȘI JUDECATĂ – DUALITATE NARATIVĂ ÎN THE WITCHER

Rezumat: În articolul de față îmi propun să accentuez dualitatea și contrastul materialelor sursă ce stau la baza seriei televizate *The Witcher* (Netflix), aducând atât merite cât și opuneri remarcabilei literaturi poloneze a lui Andrzej Sapkowski – scriitorul din spatele întregului univers *Witcher*. Concret, voi investiga originea folclorică și istoria premergătoare seriei, precum și imensul potențial filosofic al

acesteia, comparând cele două tehnici analitice în cele două capitole cheie ale lucrării. Anume, voi aborda principalul instrument al intrigii – Dreptul la Surpriză – atât ca simplă veselă a destinului, cât și a unei filosofii a omnipotenței. În continuare, voi explora exigența sarcinii de a studia în detaliu portretul personajului principal și eponim al seriei – Geralt of Rivia – atât ca protagonist moralmente complex, dar și ca produs al unei societăți necruțătoare și disfuncționale din tenebra secolelor XII-XIII. Voi interpreta maniera în care ciocnirile acestuia cu destinul, întâlnirile cu personajele seriei, și cu morala în sine, reușesc să clădească unul dintre cele mai complexe personaje din televiziunea și cultura populară modernă.

Cuvinte-cheie: televiziune, cultură populară, folclor, destin, determinism, intrigă, scepticism, moralitate, analiză, dualitate.

1. Something Ends, Something Begins

Va'esse deireádh aep eigeán, va'esse eigh faidh'ar¹.

One could argue that, without the critical acclaim and the cult-like following of the game series, the novels of Andrzej Sapkowski, and consequently, the entire universe of *The Witcher*, would not be as far intertwined into modern culture as it is today. And while Geralt's story may have ended with *Blood and Wine*², the narrative of *The Continent* has by no means reached its pinnacle. It is then sensible to assume that the online streaming services, the television networks, as well as the filming industry, would not only try to capitalize on CD Projekt Red's³ wide public unveiling of *The Witcher's* potential, but also further explore and exploit this bountiful saga of Polish ancestry.

As the storyline of the games concluded in 2016, the *Witcher* fandom would yearn for more readily-available content featuring Geralt at its narrative core. Admittedly, we should have looked no further than Sapkowski's magnum opus – the literary apparatus that parented the success and recognition of the Polish game developer. I am of course referring to the eight-part series of novels and short stories dating back to 1986⁴. And although they are fantastic and self-standing literary works, we must admit that, in the context of modern-day, inherently consumeristic society, novels simply do not match the entertainment value of an on-screen production; the sort of unapologetic and boisterous, yet equally thought-provoking fantasy series that would remodel television as we know it. Plainly put, the fandom demanded the next *Game of Thrones*. On paper, *The Witcher* could rival the freneticism of what was arguably the most beloved and lauded television production of the last decade. Its previously mentioned virtual renditions had done a wonderful job at honoring their source materials, thus breathing further life and anticipation into the notion of a televised series. And when Henry Cavill, a self-entitled fan of the games had been cast as the lead role, the prospect of a wondrous show was increasingly more palpable. Two long-lasting

years after *Blood and Wine* had been released, and over two hundred main auditions, Netflix had finally found their Geralt. At long last, the dark fantasy chronicle was rapidly approaching. Set to release its first season in December 2019, the show would undoubtedly indulge its fans in one, of hopefully many, medieval-themed winter holidays.

2. Created by fear

As he took off his coat those around him noticed that he carried a sword – not something unusual in itself, nearly every man in Wyzim carried a weapon – but no one carried a sword strapped to his back as if it were a bow or a quiver.⁵

Long before Geralt would roam *The Four Kingdoms*, a cataclysm befell the populace of *The Continent*: one of the very few examples of worldly content devoid of folkloric background – *The Conjunction of the Spheres*. The only thing we learn about it comes from the eponymous book found in *The Witcher* (2007) and *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (2011): *A cataclysm which occurred 1,500 years ago, trapping in our dimension many unnatural creatures, including ghouls, graveirs and vampires. These beasts have no ecological niches of their own and are merely relics of bygone times.* A seemingly natural and inexplicable occurrence, *The Conjunction* gave birth to *rifts* which altered reality itself. Created by the collision of many different realms, they populated the world with the *Elder Races*⁶, as well as ungainly, monstrous creatures. *The Conjunction* brought magic to *The Continent* – an innately dangerous ripple and conduit which, as we learn from Tissaia, concerns *organizing chaos*, requiring *balance and control*⁷. Hence, there arose the necessity of those who could not only harness magic, but keep its unpredictable temper at bay. As humans – one of the newer races of *The Continent* – began to settle in the northern part of *The Four Kingdoms*, they were compelled to adapt to the post-conjunction world, as vast arrays of monsters would systematically threaten the populace. Consequently, the first human rulers tasked the

wielders of magic (the sorcerers) to intervene. After many trials and tribulations, the mages genetically engineered the first *witcher*⁸. Thus came the mutants *created by fear*⁹: they are highly-trained, ruthless monster hunters for hire, possessing skills far beyond those of mere humans. They age considerably slower, they are sterile, and – as is widely regarded – they are emotionally void. Or so we are led to believe. As previously stated, Geralt of Rivia is a distinctively intricate character. If destiny predetermined that his mutations strip him of emotional perception, then his voluntary choices of moral growth and epistemic disobedience are fundamentally opposing the main driving force of the plot. As such, these philosophical traits are what make *The White Wolf* not only unique, but narratively strong.

3. *The Law of Surprise*

Despite the chronological uncertainty between the creation of the first witcher and the subsequent establishment of *The Schools* as well as the trials¹⁰, the professional monster slayers eventually undertook the responsibility of expanding their order into their own hands. One such tactic was *The Law of Surprise*, which dictates that upon being rescued by someone unknown, you owe your saviour *that which you already have but do not know*¹¹. As Geralt himself articulates, the boon in question is unbeknownst to both parties of the deal. However, in most cases the *windfall*¹² takes the form of the saved man's firstborn child, conceived or born without the father's knowledge. Thusly, Cirilla becomes the ward of the witcher, following the subsequent saving of her father Urcheon of Erlenwald by none other than Geralt.

There exists a multitude of styles in which the main plot device of the show can be interpreted. On the one hand, there is the all-encompassing concept of destiny, prevalent in the storytelling economy of the show, and which commences the primary narrative of the debut season – the first encounter of Geralt and Ciri. However, before further inquiring into (arguably) the most philosophical topic

of the article, allow me to pinpoint the folkloric descend of the law in question.

The *prawo niespodzianki* – literally *Right of the Unexpected* (from Polish) – is a popular children’s myth deriving from fairy tales all throughout Europe. Notwithstanding the imprecise origin of the story, the mythos behind it can be traced to a number of tales, each unique to European folklore: *The King of the Sea and Vassilissa the Wise*¹³ (Russian), *Idomeneus of Crete*¹⁴ (Greek) and *Hans-My-Hedgehog*¹⁵ (Germany), to name but a few. While each of these three tales have their own virtues and moralistic learnings, there exists a unifying thematic of reciprocity within them; the type of creed which instinctually brings to mind the ideologies of South-East Asia. Namely the spiritual principle of cause and effect, closely associated with the idea of rebirth in many an Indian religious schools – a concept more commonly referred to as *Karma*¹⁶. As Yajnavalkya – a sage, teacher, and a student of Uddalaka (*the person I would like to dramatize as the first philosopher*¹⁷) – articulates in the Upanishads¹⁸: *A man turns into something good by good action and into something bad by bad action.*

Building on karma, one could attempt to explain this, in the context of *The Witcher*, as both poetic justice channeled by means of destiny, or as philosophical omnipotence. The former recognizes destiny as an inescapable, inherently holistic governing force, and which essentially nullifies the concept of choice. It deceives those taut in its grip (especially the naive) into believing that free will not only exists, but that it is indeed freeing – *your destiny is in your own hands and no one else’s*¹⁹; whilst the more experienced characters recognize its charlatanry: *you can’t outrun destiny just because you’re terrified of it. It’s coming, Geralt. Not believing won’t change that*²⁰. This initiates an indirect ideological conflict between the characters of the show.

On the one hand, there are the aforementioned acceptors of destiny as supreme authority, and who, in deeming so, caution against the tragic repercussions of attempting to interfere with it: *you will surely unleash true calamity upon us all*²¹. These characters are somewhat stoic – they, albeit unspokenly – argue for accepting the moment as it presents itself, as opposed to blatantly attempting to

control it. In the context of *The Witcher*, these considerations of inescapable destiny oppose that of unpredictable storytelling – they act as immutable physical laws, as every action is a mere development of its unforgiving, holistic structure. Thus, if we accept this as true in the narrative economy of the series, the choices the characters make have a negligible impact on the plot, if any at all. All evidence seems to suggest that the efforts made in attempt to trick or avoid destiny only guarantees it. This is a historically entrenched example of cautionary tale dating back to Ancient Greece, and perhaps best exemplified by Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex: there is no Freedom, only Necessity*²². In the play, Oedipus unwillingly fulfills the prophecy of his ulterior patricide and incest. Upon realizing that the search for his father Laius's murderer (and through a series of unfortunate events), unwittingly leads him to none other than himself, he gouges out his eyes in despair. Sophocles mocks his character by presenting him as self-confident, intelligent and strong-willed, only to, by the end of the play, have him meet his inevitable demise within these very traits. Oedipus goes to great lengths to uncover the identity of his father's killer: he publicly announces, as king of his people, that he has cast a curse upon the killer. Unbeknownst to him, he curses himself, fulfills the prophecy, and breathes further truth into the common Greek maxim which paints the horrid culmination of agnosticism: no man should be considered fortunate until he is dead – *Therefore wait to see life's ending ere thou count one mortal blest; Wait till free from pain and sorrow he has gained his final rest*²³.

If Sophocles is to be given any literary credit, it is that of foreshadowing. Through his tragedy, mainly by means of ironic character creation, he envisages the narrative archetype of the contrarian. In doing so, he organizes the plot participants into devotees and agnostics – into inherently stoic, or fundamentally skeptical. As does *The Witcher*.

“Destiny helps people believe there's an order to this, but there isn't”²⁴. Unlike the first category of roles, there exist those who would deny destiny its seemingly inescapable clutch. As Eithne tells Ciri, she is in control of not only her actions, but their result as well. In doing so, dissimilar to the aforementioned outlook on destiny, which would

indicate that choices are ultimately powerless, she is told that there subsides a driving force of free will commanding enough to shape destiny itself. Therefore, the emphasis of this approach lies on that which sets forth the course of action, rather than the outcome itself. This attitude of defiance can be seen as two distinct philosophies: skepticism – a putative, albeit passive, questioning attitude towards knowledge, and causal determinism – a more innately practical stance than the former.

In philosophy, arbitrary choices mediated by free will are closely attributed to causal determinism – a principle of cause and effect, as an apparatus for events, processes, objects (and so on) which contribute to that of another, where the effect is partly dependent on the cause. A three-quarter truth, wherein, if depicted as a Venn diagram, said truth lies at the conjunction (wordplay intended) of two circles representing, in turn, causation and correlation. Ergo, causal determinism demands that every event be necessitated by antecedent events, consequently affecting the outcome by means of the domino effect. This then indicates a less fatalistic, less impedingly cataclysmic view of the world, while still maintaining an admonishing view over one's actions. Ciri and Geralt, although bound by all-powerful worldly arrangements, are still being given the liberty of choice and free will. This however, is not a narrative vessel without its cracks, as it establishes yet another ideological conflict. Contrasted by the archaic, folklore rich content of the first understanding of destiny, and the more methodical construction of causal determinism prevalent in the second, the characters of the show undergo inner moral dilemmas. They are therefore condemned by this intermittent duality of the storyline to an ever-growing existential conflict.

4. The Lesser Evil

*Evil is evil... Lesser, greater, middling, it's all the same... I haven't only done good in my life either. But now, if I have to choose between one evil and another, then I prefer not to choose at all.*²⁵

At the core of this morally-rooted struggle of *The Witcher* lies none other than Geralt. He, more so than any other character, is constantly burdened by choice. Notwithstanding the apparent omnipotence of destiny, Geralt has to choose, from the very onset of the series, between instances of seemingly quantifiable immorality. This begs the question: how can choice matter in a world controlled by destiny? And how can a mutated, emotionally void non-human be just in his assessment?

Geralt falls into the above-mentioned category of skepticism. While he is evidently mistrustful of destiny's seemingly omnipotent nature, he scarcely ever gets involved willingly; as he himself articulates: *I prefer not to choose at all*. This fixates him on an intermediary level between actively and passively demonstrating free will. He stands at the precipice of skepticism and causal determinism. This then demonstrates the existence of a semantic blur concerning the meanings of preference and choice. Preferring innately demonstrates intentionality: it considers between two or several value judgements in a more practically-devoid manner than that of choosing, as is oftenly articulated within spoken or written language – *I would prefer*. Whilst it undoubtedly exercises assessment over the quality of objects, situations or reasoning, it inadvertently withholds from active participation. When formulated thusly, free will is visibly reduced to mere reactivity. This then gives free will the possibility of permitted outside interference; when said permission is no longer granted, preference becomes choice, as Jean-Paul Sartre emphasizes: *In one sense, choice is possible; what is impossible is not to choose. I can always choose, but I must also realize that, if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes a choice*²⁶. Ergo, preferring is a less imperative, less finite cognitive bias, unlike choice which exercises free will in a manner

unpermissive to the will of others. Therefore, my choice is a choice and not a preference, only when I proactively know that it is my own. Choosing, therefore, is an arbitrary and intrinsically active process of the intellect. In the world of *The Witcher*, choice often takes the form of the red pill-blue pill duo as seen in movie *The Matrix*.

While freedom of choice is ostensibly cherished, more often than not, it tricks and leads Geralt to one of two possible sides of the same coin. Consequently, choice sets about the unfolding of events which contribute to that of another, and eventually culminating in palpable narrative outcome. This painstakingly leads us back to causal determinism, and its hitherto unknown power over the plot.

As one character says: „Destiny has many faces”²⁷. The show itself seems to be telling us that the main driving force of the plot is not all-powerful. For Geralt, destiny exists as an archetypal mentor he has yet to meet. Seemingly indifferent to its authority at first, he vainly rejects destiny’s epistemic value, only to gradually become more mindful of its many faces. The series cunningly accomplishes this through its lore and adjutant characters, building on Geralt’s intellectual maturity with utmost opportunism, as Stregobor himself leads us to believe: *I’m grateful destiny brought you to me*. Typically though, Geralt does not yield easily: *Marilka brought me to you*²⁸. His disobedience does not go unpunished; Geralt learns, oftentimes the hard way, that destiny is not inconsequential.

In the debut episode of the first season, the white-haired witcher is weighed down by the heavy toll of decision making. On the eve of the market day, Geralt rides to Blaviken with a kikkimora carcass strapped to the saddle of his horse. This beast of Slavic folklore (the female counterparts of the *domovoi*), is a human-like creature with spider-like legs, whose organs are believed to possess healing abilities – if one knows how to manipulate them. The beast he had slain, he is told, would surely be of interest to the town’s mage: Master Irion (Stregobor). As it later turns out, this was but a ploy devised by the sorcerer in order to ask for Geralt’s help in killing an allegedly cursed girl named Renfri. She, in turn, also asks for the witcher’s aid in her equally vengeful plot. Geralt refuses them both, invoking the lesser evil

argument as his motif, and suggests instead that Renfri leave Blaviken. She reluctantly agrees (though a lie), bewitches Geralt, and subsequently forces him to intervene. Although he attempts to stop Renfri from killing Stregobor, he is forced to repost upon being attacked by her band of mercenaries, and, later on, Renfri herself.

“Why men throw their lives away attacking an armed witcher... I’ll never know. Something about my face?”²⁹. Thereafter, Geralt came to be known as *The Butcher of Blaviken*. Much like in *Oedipus Rex*, Geralt’s attempt to trick destiny, only guaranteed it. And although disguised as choice, the inevitable came to pass, setting up Geralt’s moral code in accordance to those of the books. His witcherly neutrality is contested at every step by characters, politics and destiny itself, ultimately forcing Geralt to accept that which is outside his reach, and thus paving the way for his compliance with the overarching intrigue: *The lesser evil... No matter what you chose, you’ll come out bloody and hating yourself*³⁰. If Geralt’s complexity is foreshadowed by his various encounters with transcendency, then the show could be criticised for how conveniently the characters clash with it for the sole sake of plot development. Hence the two final outlines of the show: lackluster narrative or unorthodox philosophy? Whichever the case, the series shines in its unassailable depiction of moral tenet; when watching *The Witcher*, one has to choose – much like Geralt – which side of the coin to bet on. Neutrality is not an option.

5. To make ends meet

The aim of this article was one of exploration. Through it, I attempted to introduce the reader into the world of *The Witcher* by sketching a brief genealogical portrait of *The Continent*, as well as its main philosophical assets. In keeping with the all-encompassing thematic of historical and cultural inquiry, I first highlighted the scope, scale and frenzy of the video game trilogy. Ever since 2015, when the third installment of the franchise was released – *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, the popularity of Sapkowski’s universe has been soaring. This

led me to argue that the subsequent popularity of the novels, as well as that of the newly-released television series, is owed in part to the success of CDPR's franchise. As one ended, the others took its place. What followed was a brief introduction into the mythology of the first season, as it closely resembled that of Sapkowski's 1993 novel – *The Last Wish*. Once the background had been drawn, I delved deep into the folklore-philosophy duality of the series, as I investigated the main plot device of the show and its impact on the protagonist.

In the end, I concluded that, much like Geralt, the choices we make are the crosses we bear, and only by acknowledging them, can we begin to deny destiny its due. However, I may be wrong. After all, *it doesn't rhyme, and all good predictions rhyme*³¹.

Notes:

¹ Literally “Something ends, something begins”. Translated from the *Hen Llinge* – the language of the *Aen Seidhe*: the native speech of Sapkowski's elven race. One of the oldest languages still in use in *The Witcher* universe, commonly referred to as *Old* or *Elder Speech*; the title of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*'s Epilogue quest; as well as a non-canon, humorous story of the same name, written by Andrzej Sapkowski (yet unofficially translated into English), and depicting the wedding of Geralt and Yennefer. Its original title in Polish is *Coś się kończy, coś się zaczyna*.

² The second and final expansion pack for *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (May 2016).

³ The Polish-based video game developer, publisher and distributor behind the video game series.

⁴ *Wiedźmin* – What we now know as *The Hexer*. A 1986 short story, originally written for a contest held by the magazine *Fantastyka*, and which earned Sapkowski the third prize.

⁵ Andrzej Sapkowski, 2012, *The Voice of Reason 1, The Last Wish* (London: Gollancz), 2.

⁶ A collective name used by *humans* to describe the races who preceded them on *The Continent*. Namely: gnomes, dwarves, elves and halflings.

⁷ Tissaia de Vries in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E2 Four Marks*.

⁸ Also known as *wiedźmin*, *hexer*, *wiccan*, *vedymin*, *vatt'ghernm*; or the more colloquial *mutant*, *non-human* or *freak*.

⁹ As the 2019 Netflix poster promoting the launch of the show (and featuring Geralt) would write.

¹⁰ A series of tests ranging from grueling physical training to spell casting, mutations through alchemy, and herbalism.

¹¹ Geralt of Rivia in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E4 Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials*.

¹² *Whatever windfall he came home to find would be mine* – Urcheon of Erlenwald in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E4 Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials*.

¹³ Alexander Afanasiev, 1985, *The King of the Sea and Vassilissa the Wise, Russian Folk Tales The Three Kingdoms* (Moscow: Raduga Publishers).

¹⁴ Homer, 2007, *The Iliad* (Arlington: Richer Resources Publications).

¹⁵ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 2014, *Hans-My-Hedgehog, The Original Fold and Fairy Tales of The Brothers Grimm* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press).

¹⁶ From the Sanskrit word *karman* and the Pali word *kamma* – meaning *action*, *deed* or *work*; an inherently philosophical idea, particularly in Hinduism, Buddhism, as well as Taoism.

¹⁷ Ben-Ami Scharfstein, 1998, *A comparative history of world philosophy: from the Upanishads to Kant* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 57.

¹⁸ Sanskrit texts of religious teachings.

¹⁹ Eithne (to Cirilla) in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E5 Bottled Appetites*.

²⁰ Mousesack (to Geralt) in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E4 Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials*.

²¹ Idem, *Ibidem*.

²² Sophocles, 1982, *Introduction, Oedipus Rex* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 6.

²³ Sophocles, 2006, *Oedipus the King, Sophocles' Oedipus Trilogy* (San Diego: ICON Group International), 72.

²⁴ Geralt of Rivia in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E4 Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials*.

²⁵ Geralt of Rivia (to Stregobor) in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E1 The End's Beginning*.

²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, 2007, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), 44.

²⁷ Stregobor (to Geralt) in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E1 The End's Beginning*.

²⁸ Idem, *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Geralt of Rivia in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015.

³⁰ Geralt of Rivia (to Filavandrel) in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E2 Four Marks*.

³¹ Geralt's wisdom epitomized. Geralt of Rivia (to Stregobor) in *The Witcher*, 2019, *S1: E1 The End's Beginning*.

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