

There Are Things with No Price: Non/Motherhood, Agency, and Identity in *The Witcher*

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Abstract. *The Witcher* (*Wiedźmin*) – a fantasy storyworld originating from Andrzej Sapkowski’s Polish literary series – is fundamentally shaped by narratives of reproduction, in/fertility, and non/motherhood, raising critical questions about women’s roles and empowerment. From fertility cults and enforced sterilization to genetic experimentation and dynastic ambitions, these themes drive character arcs and central conflicts across the saga’s transmedial universe. This article examines the interplay of non/motherhood, female agency, and bodily autonomy in Sapkowski’s books and the Netflix adaptation, exploring how *The Witcher* envisions women’s success and worth through the tensions between maternal and non-maternal identities. Grounded in fantasy, Gothic, and horror traditions, this analysis maps gynaeohorror tropes in unwanted maternity and examines how the archetypes of absent and self-sacrificing mothers speak to the constraints on culturally legible identities of women. Finally, an adaptation studies approach highlights the ideological shifts across different media. While the franchise explicitly advocates reproductive freedom, its treatment of non-maternal desires reveals a paradox: reproductive rights are championed in principle, yet character arcs privilege idealized motherhood. The Netflix adaptation further narrows the non-maternal possibilities of the source material, reimagining originally non-maternal characters through maternal lens. Ultimately, the self-sacrificing mother emerges as the defining framework for female value, reflecting the franchise’s internal contradictions and broader cultural anxieties surrounding non/motherhood.

Keywords: *The Witcher*, motherhood, childlessness, adaptation, reproductive rights.

Neįkainojami dalykai: nemotinystė, agentiškumas ir tapatumas *Raganiuje*

Santrauka. Lenkų rašytojo Andrzejaus Sapkowskio romanų serijos *Raganius* fantastinių istorijų pasaulis, formuojamas iš pasakojimų apie reprodukciją, vaisingumą ir nemotinystę, kelia kritinių klausimų apie moterų socialinius vaidmenis ir jų įgalinimą. Plėtojamų temų spektras nuo vaisingumo kultų ir priverstinės sterilizacijos iki genetinių eksperimentų ir dinastinių ambicijų pagrindžia personažų psichologiją ir pagrindinius konfliktus visoje sagos transmedialioje visatoje. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama nemotinystės, moters agentiškumo ir kūno autonomijos sąveika Sapkowskio knygose bei šių knygų *Netflix* adaptacijoje, tiriant, kaip *Raganiuje* moterų sėkmė ir vertė įsivaizduojama

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per įtampą tarp motinos ir nemotinos tapatybės. Analizė, atsiremianti į fantazijos, gotikos ir siaubo estetiką, susitelkia į nepageidaujamos motinystės ginekologinio siaubo tropus ir tiria, kaip skirtingi motinų archetipai kalba apie kultūriškai įskaitytos moterų tapatybės suvaržymus. Kritinis romanų adaptacijos perskaitymas išryškina ideologinius pokyčius medijų sankirtose. *Netflix* franšizė palaiko reprodukcinę laisvę, tačiau požiūris į nemotiniškus troškimus atskleidžia paradokso – reprodukcinės teisės ginamos, bet moterų vaizdavimas idealizuoja motinystę. Pasiaukojančios motinos figūra iškyla kaip moteriškos vertės apibrėžimas, atspindintis vidinius franšizės prieštaračius ir platesnį kultūrinį nerimą, susijusį su nemotinyste.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Raganius*, motinystė, bevaikystė, adaptacija, reprodukcinės teisės.

Introduction

The Witcher (*Wiedźmin*) – a fantasy storyworld originating from Andrzej Sapkowski’s 1990s Polish literary series – is fundamentally shaped by narratives of reproduction, in/fertility, and non/motherhood. From fertility cults and enforced sterilization to genetic experimentation and dynastic ambitions, these themes drive character arcs and central conflicts across the saga’s expansive transmedial universe. These concerns transcend human realms, revealing intricate dynamics of survival and identity across species: matriarchal dryads abduct men to ensure continuity, dragons risk their lives for offspring, and low elven birth rates propel stories of displacement and cultural erasure. Whether framed as scientific dilemma, personal longing, or political imperative, the questions of non/parenthood, reproductive in/justice, and bodily autonomy underpin the Witcherverse’s interrogation of broader systems of power, gender, disability, racial oppression, and ecological survival.

This engagement with reproductive and parental themes persists throughout *The Witcher*’s expansion from Sapkowski’s bestselling books into a global phenomenon that resonates across diverse media and cultural contexts. The internationally acclaimed *Witcher* video games by CD Projekt RED have surpassed 75 million copies in global sales as of May 2023 (Clement, 2024), while the Netflix adaptation (2019–present) by Lauren Schmidt Hissrich initially ranked among the platform’s most successful productions (Clark, 2019). With a new novel released in 2024 and a fourth TV season planned for 2025, *The Witcher* storyworld continues to thrive, sparking scholarly interest worldwide.¹ Today, research on the Witcherverse spans diverse fields and topics – from memory and history, translation challenges, or *Witcher*-themed LARP and tourism, to explorations of gender, race, monstrosity, and spirituality – cementing the saga’s relevance as both a cultural phenomenon and critical framework for examining broader societal issues.² Within this expanding scholarship, *The Witcher*’s treatment of in/fertility, non/parenthood, and reproduction attracts growing scholarly attention, as evidenced by recent contributions from Larsen (2023), Tongue (2024), and Cameron and Hoskin (2025). Essays in Cameron and Hoskin (2025) engage with these themes intermittently through theological and spiritual frameworks, while Larsen (2023) uses technoscientific and environmental lenses, addressing the ethical, political, and racial economy of reproductive interventions. Tongue (2024), in turn, reads the Netflix adaptation through gendered infertility and the re-centering of the nuclear family.

¹ For a detailed overview of *The Witcher* franchise, see Larsen, 2023, pp. 37–40.

² For more information on prior works on *The Witcher*, see Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2024, pp. 129–130.

This article contributes to these conversations by examining the complex interplay of non/motherhood, agency, and identity in *The Witcher* through four female characters: Yennefer of Vengerberg, a sorceress and lover of the eponymous hero, Witcher Geralt; Tissaia de Vries, Yennefer's mentor and arch-mistress of magic; Visenna, a healer and Geralt's biological mother; and Milva, a human warrioress raised by dryads. Their storylines offer distinct perspectives on non/maternal desires and aspirations – themes not merely acknowledged but central to their arcs – engaging with Gothic, horror and fantasy conventions surrounding non/mothers and female autonomy.

Reading across Sapkowski's literary saga and its Netflix adaptation, this article explores how *The Witcher* envisions women's success, value, and power in relation to non/motherhood and bodily autonomy, with particular attention to the negotiation of non-maternal positions. It traces the evolution of these themes from the saga's twentieth-century Polish literary origins to its globally consumed contemporary Netflix adaptation, highlighting significant shifts in representations of women. I argue that the TV series narrows the spectrum of non-maternal possibilities of the source material, emphasizing motherhood as central to female experience and elevating the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother as the primary measure of female worth. Through reimagining originally non-maternal characters and narrative moments to align with this maternal paradigm, the adaptation privileges conventional female identities rooted in idealized motherhood. As Boyle notes, adaptation entails deliberate selection, transformation, and omission of the source material; what is foregrounded or excised is intentional and carries cultural and political salience (2024, p. 137). Voluntary childlessness, non-maternal identities, and maternal ambivalence are gaining visibility in public discourse and popular culture research; yet, they are still often dismissed and/or pathologized as selfish, socially derelict or nationally suspect (see, e.g., Kaklamanidou, 2019; Greer, 2017; Džbik-Kluge, 2023; Boyle, 2024).³ In the current climate of tightening constraints on reproductive autonomy in both Poland and the U.S. – from Poland's 2020 Constitutional Tribunal ruling to the U.S. post-*Dobbs* landscape⁴ – it is especially urgent to interrogate how popular culture frames these themes and to expand narrative space for affirmative accounts of non-motherhood as a legitimate choice.

³ Debates over *childless* versus *childfree* underscore the challenge of naming non-maternal identities: the former may connote lack, while the latter risks casting motherhood as a constraint – neither term capturing the lived spectrum (Kaklamanidou, 2019; Džbik-Kluge, 2023, pp. 250-251). Further, as Monika Mynarska cautions (in Džbik-Kluge, 2023, pp. 250-251), even *childless by choice* is not unproblematic, as it may overstate voluntarism, implying a singular, definitive decision detached from contingency – whereas non/maternal identities unfold along a continuum shaped by biology, structural conditions, temporality, and personal preference. In what follows, I adopt *childless* after Kaklamanidou (2019) and reserve *childfree* for instances where non-motherhood is explicitly framed as liberating—while acknowledging the continuum Mynarska describes.

⁴ In 2020, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal severely restricted the legal grounds for abortion, effectively instituting a near-total ban; in 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court ended the federal constitutional right to abortion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*.

A Lifestyle Not Suited to a Child: Negotiating Non-Maternal Futures

Throughout *The Witcher* saga, a woman's autonomy over her reproductive choices is repeatedly portrayed as fundamental. The unfettered right to decide whether or not to have children – including pregnancy termination – is presented as “a matter beyond debate,” an “inalienable,” “holy and irrefutable right of every woman,” which could only be questioned among “savages [...] [p]rimitive tribes, obeying some sort of shamanic taboo” (Sapkowski, 2014, p. 319; 2015, pp. 345-346).

The saga reinforces this stance by depicting opponents of reproductive rights as narrow-minded and cruel. In *Season of Storms*, the King of Kerack seeks to ban contraception and abortion, arguing that women need “a swollen belly and offspring clinging to her frock” to deter “foolish ideas” and dangerous “carnal urges” (Sapkowski 2018, pp. 15-16). His crude reasoning paints him as a cynical fool, who blames birth control and abortion for his country's misfortunes, opposing reproductive rights for political gain. His views face sharp resistance from a sorceress at court, who dismisses his claims as “evidence not only of misogyny, but also imbecility,” asserting: “What a woman has a natural right to, [...] cannot – *ipso facto* – be immoral” (*ibid.*). This exchange positions reproductive rights not merely as a personal matter but as essential to challenging systemic oppression.

Other authoritative voices and the saga's worldbuilding reinforce this approach. In the Witcherverse, reproductive services – infertility treatments, pregnancy care, labour support, contraception, and abortion – are provided by trained mages and priestesses, who combine magical and medical expertise (see, e.g., Sapkowski, 2010, p. 210; 2018, pp. 15-17). This suggests a fantasy world where reproductive healthcare is professionally managed, accessible (at least to those with means), and largely destigmatized. However, this seemingly unambiguous framework warrants closer scrutiny within the saga's complex and often contradictory treatment of reproductive issues.

In *The Witcher* books, many female characters opt for non-maternal futures – an apparent departure from popular culture's tendency to sideline voluntarily childless women (Kaklamanidou, 2019). While their paths appear distinct, they share underlying themes of agency, identity, and power. For Yennefer, the decision is initially framed as a stark dichotomy between the roles of mage and mother. This binary is codified in *The Poisoned Source*, a treatise by the arch-mistress Tissaia de Vries that mandates sterilization for female mages who retain fertility after magical training. In uncompromising terms, Tissaia condemns sorceresses who desire motherhood, citing the risk of congenital defects in their offspring and insisting that every aspiring mage “must decide what she wants to be – a wizard or a mother” (Sapkowski, 2012, p. 329).

While the books subtly note that “Yennefer has paid for certain gifts by losing others” (Sapkowski, 2010, p. 211), the Netflix adaptation dramatizes this implicit sacrifice through her transformation scene in “Betrayal Moon” (2019). This ritual, marking Yennefer's graduation from magical academy Aretuza, grants her beauty and power but renders her infertile. Although this scene could be interpreted as coercive – problematizing the heroine's surrender of reproductive capabilities as forced by systemic injustice, external

pressures, and a perceived lack of alternatives (Tongue, 2024, pp. 85-86) – it also leaves room for a reading that discerns moments of agency for Yennefer.

Despite making her final decision hastily – a critique raised both by Tongue (2024, p. 85) and Larsen (2023, p. 245) – Yennefer (Anya Chalotra) has long anticipated and planned for her transformation. When her lover Istredd (Royce Pierreson) offers an alternative path – “We can travel the Continent together [...] forge a whole new destiny” – she dismisses his vision as “some romantic adventure,” comparing a simple life by his side to “slow suicide.” Her unequivocal statement, “I want to be powerful,” reveals her focus on magical and political influence over conventional ideals of feminine happiness (‘Betrayal Moon’, 2019).

Yennefer actively pursues her transformation, overriding both institutional protocols and the enchanter’s (Julian Rhind-Tutt) concerns. As the enchanter is unable to prepare sedative herbs in time, the sorceress must endure excruciating pain – a point cited as evidence of coercion (Larsen, 2023, p. 246). Yet it is Yennefer who refuses to wait, asserting her resolve with a simple “I can.” Her determination is further underscored by auditory elements – the cadence of her purposeful footsteps and fast-paced music heightening the scene’s urgency. The enchanter solemnly presents the terms of transformation, his gaze shifting from Yennefer’s face to her womb: “There is a cost to all creation. A sacrifice that is always made. To be reborn... you will bear no more. Do you understand?” (‘Betrayal Moon’, 2019). While this interaction can be interpreted as reflecting institutional power dynamics and Yennefer’s vulnerability to the magical establishment (Tongue, 2024, p. 86), it also demonstrates her agency. The enchanter’s initial hesitation is countered by Yennefer’s insistence, and only after she nods in consent does the procedure begin.

The transformation sequence employs unsettling Gothic imagery, blending magical and gynecological elements with body horror. As Yennefer lies bound to a hybrid of medical chair and torture instrument, the enchanter removes her reproductive organs with a ceremonial knife. Her screams merge with the roaring flames in the background as her disabled body undergoes a magical and surgical reconstruction, emerging as a perfected yet irrevocably sterilized form. In this pivotal moment, Yennefer views this sacrifice as a worthy exchange for power, beauty, and self-realization as a mage, choosing to establish her legacy through political impact rather than motherhood (‘Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials’, 2019).⁵

Unlike Yennefer, who never becomes pregnant, Milva accidentally conceives after a fleeting encounter with strangers (Sapkowski, 2014, p. 322). Her experience maps onto Barbara Creed’s (2024) theorization of the monstrous-feminine, in which horror routes monstrosity through the reproductive body – the abject womb that “houses an alien life form” and effects grotesque bodily change ([1993] 2024, p. 49). Erin Harrington’s account of gynaeohorror develops this lineage, identifying “a strong oppositional relationship between the pregnant woman and the foetus” in which the foetal-other is cast as an encroaching presence that threatens to efface the maternal subject (2018, pp. 15, 116). This

⁵ Both Larsen (2023) and Tongue (2024) underscore the problematic nature of Yennefer’s sterilization noting its intersection with her multiracial identity as a quarter-elf and her history of physical disability, which adds layered complexity to this thematic thread.

framework informs Milva's perception of pregnancy as invasion. Steeped in body-horror imagery, she likens the foetus to parasitic wasp larvae devouring their host from within: "The young wasps hatch and eat the caterpillar alive... from the inside... Something like that's in me now" (Sapkowski, 2014, p. 321). Her dread of the voracious "it" colonizing her body – "[i]n me, inside me, in my own belly. It's growing, it keeps growing and it's going to eat me alive..." (Sapkowski, 2014, p. 321) – echoes Creed's monstrous-feminine reading of *Alien* where "woman is betrayed by her body, unable [...] to preserve her own flesh from contamination by the abject, alien other" (2024, p. 52).⁶

In her conversation with Geralt, Milva paints a grim picture of what Sorcha Ní Fhlainn describes as "the Gothic horrors of pregnancy"—a source of terror and "harbingers of physical annihilation" (2019, p. 143). For Milva, pregnancy extends beyond physical harm, threatening not just her body but her core identity. She takes pride in being a renowned huntress, archeress, warrioress, and pathfinder, viewed by herself and others as a predator – a wolf and a bird of prey (see, e.g., Sapkowski, 2014, pp. 12, 20; 'The Cost of Chaos', 2023). "[B]orn an archer and lov[ing] a good weapon," Milva readily trades feminine trappings for the "rare beauty" of a finely crafted bow (Sapkowski, 2014, pp. 1-2, 8-9). Her warrior-identity manifests through violent imagery – bloodied hands, bow against her cheek, flying arrows, and scenes of carnage (see, e.g. pp. 19, 22-23, 55-56). She values being "a healthy, sturdy lass" who "shoots a straight arrow, [...] won't get a sore arse from the saddle, and [...] won't shit her britches" in danger, centring her self-worth on physical ability and her self-perception as "useful" in difficult missions (see, e.g., p. 320). For this warrior-heroine, pregnancy connotes a perilous identity transformation, threatening to bar her from her chosen life and jeopardize her future.

Milva's experience mirrors the struggles of many real-life women who grapple with feelings of alienation and ambivalence toward motherhood. As Kit Myers observes, women who choose to delay or forgo having children often view motherhood as entailing "fundamental losses of identity" (2017, pp. 786, 791, 800). Desires for freedom, mobility, and personal growth, alongside concerns about disrupted professional opportunities, frequently inform these decisions (Myers, 2017; Dźbik-Kluge, 2023). Similarly, Milva fears that pregnancy diminishes her value within Geralt's team, shifting her position from "useful" to "hindrance" (Sapkowski, 2014, pp. 320-321). Struggling with a sense of failure, she feels unworthy of her dryad-given name, Milva – meaning Red Kite – seeing herself as a "mother hen with an egg" rather than a fierce bird of prey (*ibid.*, p. 322). This dissonance leads her to insist that Geralt address her by her human name, Maria:

Maria. I'm Maria, not Milva. What kind of Red Kite am I? [...] Milva laughed with the dryads on the battleground, pulled arrows from bloodied corpses. [...] Now their blood calls. That blood, like a wasp's venom, is devouring Maria from the inside. Maria is paying for Milva. (ibid., p. 322)

⁶ This gynahorrific imagery is not confined to Gothic/horror. For instance, Greer (2017, p. 337) observes the articulation of ambivalent pregnancy through parasitic metaphors in contemporary crime television. Milva's dread thus belongs to a wider cultural grammar of monstrous pregnancy.

The heroine perceives her human name as tethering her to an “ordinary,” domestic womanhood, which she associates with menial chores, disempowerment, and exploitation (*ibid.*, p. 69). Her pregnancy signifies an unwelcome regression into a “typical bloody woman!” (*ibid.*, p. 320), which Milva sees as punishment for defying conventional femininity as a warrioress. This threat to her chosen identity solidifies within the narrative: once her pregnancy is revealed, the text shifts focus from her skills to gender. Language that previously stressed her martial prowess and wilderness expertise now yields to expressions evoking stereotypically feminine traits, such as “softness,” vulnerability, and reliance on male support:

Geralt embraced her. And he knew at once it was the gesture she had been waiting for, which she needed more than anything else. The roughness and hardness of the Brokilon archer disappeared just like that, and what remained was the trembling, gentle softness of a frightened girl. (ibid., p. 321; emphasis mine)

The narrative’s treatment of both Milva and Yennefer’s reproductive storylines ultimately reinforces traditional gender roles. While initially Milva explicitly voices her desire to remain childfree and seeks abortion (*ibid.*, p. 323), the intervention of her male companions – particularly Geralt and Regis – reframes her decision. Convening to discuss Milva’s future without her consent, the men assume “the role of husbands and fathers,” claiming “collective responsibility” for their pregnant friend and effectively usurping her autonomy (*ibid.*, pp. 317-318). While eventually they agree to provide the abortifacient if Milva insists, they believe she should be dissuaded from that choice – a conclusion they assert reflects her own unacknowledged desires. “You sense perfectly well what ought to be done,” Regis tells Geralt. “And no, it’s not me that’s expecting it” (*ibid.*, pp. 317-319).

Once Milva confides her anxieties to Geralt, he eclipses her voice as he steps in to clarify her feelings. Geralt presumes that Milva understands abortion as a debt she hopes to repay by aiding in the rescue of his foster daughter Ciri: “That’s why you rode after me [...] You wanted to pay [...] Someone else’s child for your own, a life for a life” (*ibid.*, p. 323). Milva remains silent as Geralt declares such a debt unpayable, framing her decision as an irretrievable loss: “There are things with no price, things that are priceless. [...] when you lose them, you lose them forever and nothing can get them back for you” (*ibid.*, p. 323).

Geralt’s intervention prompts Milva to rapidly resolve her conflicted feelings about motherhood (*ibid.*, pp. 323-324).⁷ Her view of the foetus shifts from a depersonalized “it” – aligned with her desire for abortion – to a “child,” redefined as a subject deserving protection. Geralt consolidates this turn by equating the unborn child’s safety with that of his foster daughter: “I want to rescue Ciri [...]. Until recently I thought I’d do it at any price. But no. I won’t pay that price, I won’t consent to taking that risk” (*ibid.*, p. 325). The scene concludes with Milva at peace with her new situation, as Regis joyfully disposes of

⁷ This resolution is not entirely unexpected. Throughout their quest, Milva’s suppressed maternal instincts surface in small acts of care, like tending to a refugee girl or silencing drunken men to protect sleeping children. These gestures suggest a deeper connection to her refuted human-maternal identity, Maria (Sapkowski, 2014, pp. 14, 30, 113, 137).

the abortive elixir (*ibid.*, p. 324). Milva's ambivalence is thus brief and easily resolved. The rhetoric of "pricelessness" elevates continued pregnancy as the sole legitimate course, shrinking the space for imaginable non-maternal choices and cuing readers to expect regret from any deviation. These scenes enact a thinly veiled paternalistic regime of control: non-maternal decisions are nominally acknowledged yet swiftly redirected into pronatalist order (cf. Kaklamanidou, 2019). As of September 2025, with *The Witcher*'s fourth season pending, it remains an open question how the Netflix adaptation will handle Milva's storyline and whether her pregnancy arc will retain Sapkowski's Gothic-inflected ambivalence or be conventionalized into overt maternal desire.

The culturally endorsed trajectory – from forsaking to yearning for motherhood – finds its strongest expression in Yennefer's arc. Yennefer comes to regret the loss of her fertility long before realizing it was not an unavoidable trade-off. In the Netflix show, her mentor Tissaia (MyAnna Buring) reveals the sterilization policy as a strategic façade, designed to secure women's professional standing in the male-dominated mage community rather than to enhance female magic – a decision the arch-mistress ultimately regrets: "When I came to Aretuza, if a sorceress fell pregnant, she was kicked out. 'Divided loyalties,' said the men. So I made them take us seriously. [...] they called me bold. I was just desperate" ('The Cost of Chaos', 2023). This revelation recontextualizes Tissaia's actions, highlighting the systemic obstacles women – and especially mothers – face within patriarchal power structures and professional environments.

Across Sapkowski's novels and the Netflix adaptation, Yennefer's struggles with infertility and maternal longing are central to her character development (cf. Larsen 2023; Tongue 2024). Jonathan A. Allan describes the experience of infertility as "an affective, emotional rollercoaster that has the potential to [...] shatter our sense of self" (2022, p. 3) – a turmoil Yennefer embodies as awakened maternal desire collides with her inability to conceive. Across supernatural narratives and broader popular culture, fertility is often constructed as a defining human trait—its absence cast as a sign of the abnormal and monstrous (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2019; de Boer et al., 2022). In their study of infertility-focused reality television, de Boer et al. (2022) expose the stigmatizing logic that codes female infertility as "tainted," predicating "normal" womanhood on "natural" conception (2022, pp. 23-24). For Yennefer, infertility represents exclusion from both the natural order and "normal" humanity. As Belle Boggs notes, widespread perception of fertility as "normal, natural, and healthy" and infertility as "rare and unnatural" is a significant source of emotional strain for women struggling to conceive (2016, p. 10). This stigma resonates with Yennefer, who counts herself among "relicts, doomed to obliteration"—whose presence at celebrations of nature's renewal "is a wicked, blasphemous mockery" (Sapkowski, 2015, p. 330). Paradoxically, her magical longevity intensifies her sense of finitude; unable to reproduce, she feels bereft of what she sees as "most natural and simple in nature" (*ibid.*, p. 330; cf. Larsen, 2023, p. 211).

With "no legacy to leave behind. No family," Yennefer concludes that "life has no more to give" ('Much More', 2019) – reflecting her view of motherhood as "the core purpose of her life" (Tongue, 2024, p. 86). She dismisses her other achievements as inconsequen-

tial, believing only a child can provide lasting meaning. This maternal aspiration faces continual obstacles: prophecies and diagnoses confirm that Yennefer “will never regain her womb” (‘Rare Species’, 2019; Sapkowski, 2010, p. 210). Even her lover questions her maternal desires as he points out that her “lifestyle isn’t suited to a child”: “What? You were going to summon Chaos on kings’ orders in between feeding and naps?” Undeterred, Yennefer believes that regaining fertility “will solve everything!” (‘Rare Species’, 2019). She abandons her once-coveted career – now dismissed as that of “a glorified royal arse wiper” (‘Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials’, 2019) – to pursue an elusive infertility cure, resolving to adapt her lifestyle rather than relinquish her maternal dreams.

Scholars have often critiqued the stereotypical envisioning of motherhood as “a biological and emotional necessity,” universally desired by women (Harrington, 2018, p. 17; Tongue, 2024, p. 86). While Milva and Yennefer’s initial positions briefly foreground non-maternal possibilities, traditional narratives ultimately prevail. The heroines’ reproductive agencies prove neither unrestricted nor truly empowering. Yennefer feels manipulated, believing her choice was compromised (‘Rare Species’, 2019). Confronted by Tissaia’s harsh reminder – “This is on you! You knew the cost of enchantment” – Yennefer argues she could not have understood the full implications (‘Bottled Appetites’, 2019). Milva’s autonomy, in turn, is mediated through male approval, with her companions assuming authority over her “true” feelings and the “right” choice. Despite the saga’s ostensible commitment to reproductive autonomy, both storylines ultimately reinstall motherhood as intrinsic to female identity. Women who initially refuse this path are portrayed as misguided, unaware of latent maternal desire, or unable to fully comprehend the stakes – and ultimately as willing to embrace motherhood. Thus the familiar reassurance “You will change your mind yet” (“Jeszcze ci się zmieni”) – routinely directed at childless women and often experienced as condescending (Dźbik-Kluge, 2023, pp. 12, 62, 154) – finds narrative validation in *The Witcher*. The pronatalist reversal pattern resembles those charted by Kaklamanidou (2019) in U.S. mainstream television, inscribing the saga into a broader cultural trend, where articulated childfree positions are often short-lived and ultimately undone.

Only (Good) Mothers Left Alive: Embracing Idealized Motherhood

Milva never becomes a mother. The tension surrounding her pregnancy resolves through a battlefield miscarriage, where she reclaims her warrior identity but loses the possibility of motherhood – not by choice but by circumstances beyond her control. Once again, her experience is filtered through a male perspective as the bard Jaskier reflects on his limitations in understanding her loss:

[...] I am aware that being a man I cannot imagine what such a loss means for a woman. Though I am a poet [...], even my educated and trained imagination betrays me here and I can do nothing. (Sapkowski, 2016, p. 87)

Milva marks “the end of mourning” by severing her plait with a hunting knife – symbolically casting aside a maiden identity. Both the act and the tool signal her return to “her old

self” – a warrioress and huntress (*ibid.*, p. 87). This reclamation, however, foreshadows her brutal demise: in the final battle, Milva dies from an arrow shattering her pelvis – an area associated with fertility and childbirth (Sapkowski, 2017, p. 335) – an end aligned with her non-maternal warrior path. Read alongside Sisson and Kimport’s (2014) work on abortion storylines in U.S. film and television, Milva’s arc resonates with wider screen-narrative conventions that associate the mere consideration of abortion with peril and the heroine’s death, thereby reinforcing abortion stigma.

The arch-mistress Tissaia also meets a tragic end. In the books, her role is mostly confined to mage politics, with little connection to motherhood. As the former rectoress of Aretuza, she embodies power, discipline, and a strong sense of justice, often exuding dignified yet cold authority. Driven by an obsession with order and symmetry, she maintains a stern and solitary demeanour (see e.g., Sapkowski, 2012, pp. 307-316; Sapkowski, 2013, pp. 82-89). At her death, Tissaia is alone, composing a farewell letter to “ordinary people,” whom she believes she has failed as a leader unable to prevent war. Aware that few will read her words, she seeks neither redemption nor connection. Instead, she spends her final moments meticulously arranging her room and attire before opening her arteries (Sapkowski, 2013, p. 235-236). This detached, unsentimental end reflects Tissaia’s lifelong dedication to order and responsibility – commitments she believes she ultimately betrayed.

The Netflix adaptation reimagines Tissaia as a maternal figure for younger sorceresses, particularly Yennefer. Their connection culminates in the third season, where Yennefer passionately acknowledges the arch-mistress’s maternal role and affirms their bond: “Everything I’ve done, everything that’s been done to me, I’ve survived because of your faith. [...] you are our mother, and we need you. I need you!” (‘The Cost of Chaos’, 2023).

Tissaia’s last scene presents a striking visual transformation – her immaculate appearance replaced by disheveled hair and a washed-out robe, signaling inner turmoil and the dissolution of her “strict headmistress” persona. While the books depict her final moments as driven by her obsession with order and control, the series reimagines this scene through the lens of motherhood. The arch-mistress devotes her remaining time to Yennefer, her chosen daughter, offering explanations and emotional farewell. By directing her final words to Yennefer rather than to anonymous “ordinary people” (‘The Cost of Chaos’, 2023), the adaptation recasts Tissaia as a mother rather than the novels’ solitary leader.

Yet Tissaia’s motherhood is ultimately portrayed as tragically flawed. She fails to protect her young charges, prioritizing her romantic attachment and trusting a man later revealed as their killer (‘Voleth Meir’, 2021). This failure is underscored through Gothic visual aesthetics, as the funeral scenes of the murdered girls are intercut with Tissaia’s final moments – unified through darkened hues, solemn music, wilting plants, and flickering candles. Tissaia sees no path to redemption other than suicide. “I would love to see you through the next leg of your journey [...], my daughter. But I’m afraid I cannot. There is a cost I must pay,” she writes to Yennefer (‘The Cost of Chaos’, 2023). While Tissaia views suicide as an act of atonement – “the best thing” she can offer to those she holds dear – her death is a personal tragedy for Yennefer. The show captures her grief in a haunting image: the younger sorceress collapses beside Tissaia’s lifeless form, their raven and snow-white hair mingling in stark contrast

as a sorrowful cello drowns Yennefer's wails ('The Cost of Chaos', 2023). This portrayal diverges sharply from the books, where Tissaia's solitary death evokes little visible mourning. Reframed as a mother's departure, the Netflix adaptation largely converts leadership accountability into kinship melodrama, privileging maternal affection over non-maternal authority and sidelining non-maternal modes of closure.

Tissaia is not the only female character recast through a maternal lens; Geralt's biological mother, Visenna (Frida Gustavsson), undergoes a similar transformation. In the books, Visenna abandons Geralt as a baby, exemplifying the broader pattern of absent mothers in Western fantasy and Gothic tradition where maternal figures are often erased to advance the narrative (Anolik, 2003, p. 28-29; Schwabe, 2024, p. 17). "I'm a commonplace foundling [...]. The unwanted bastard of a woman I don't remember," Geralt reflects, uncertain why his mother – a sorceress and healer – did not terminate her undesired pregnancy (Sapkowski, 2015, pp. 344-345). Visenna's choice situates Geralt within the well-established fantasy trope of the forsaken child raised by surrogate figures and destined for greatness, where maternal abandonment serves as the catalyst for the hero's journey and their transformation into their true warrior-self (Bernardo, 2005, p. 406; Anolik, 2003). Both the literary and screen iterations use maternal abandonment to initiate Geralt's warrior path; however, they diverge significantly in their portrayal of Visenna's decision.

The Netflix adaptation reimagines Visenna as a nurturing figure who raises Geralt through boyhood, softening the absent mother trope through a visual language of light and nourishment. Geralt's childhood memories glow with the warmth of his mother's affection, cast in golden hues and radiant light. A rare recollection from his early years shows young Geralt (Tristan Ruggeri) playing knight in a gloomy shed, the scene transforming when his mother appears, bringing light and colour. "Do not fear, Princess!" the boy cries, promising Visenna protection and a necklace of dragon teeth – a token of his filial devotion. Visenna guides him from darkness into a luminous dining room where, silhouetted against a sunlit window, she presents her son with abundant food ('Much More', 2019).

Scholars have long explored the link between food and maternal care, discussing food as central to the cultural archetype of the "good" mother (Rowe Fraustino, 2009, p. 71; Daniel, 2006).⁸ Carolyn Daniel underscores the symbolic significance of the kitchen as "a maternalized space, a place where warmth, the promise of food, bodily contact, and security conflate to produce feelings of comfort" (2006, p. 92) – a metonym for home that Geralt yearns for years later ('Much More', 2019; 'Reunion', 2023). Visenna's maternal identity is established through acts of feeding. The camera lingers on her hands – tangible emblems of maternal care – as she sets the table, conjures an apple, or pours healing elixirs past Geralt's parched lips ('Much More', 2019) – the iconography that domesticates the unaccountable sorceress of Sapkowski's books. The severing of the mother-son bond is illustrated in a cruel reversal of these feeding moments: Visenna needs water and sends Geralt to fetch it – tasking him with tending to her nourishment – only to disappear in his

⁸ Within patriarchal cultures, food can also signal maternal deficiency, violence, and control (Rowe Fraustino, 2009; Daniel, 2006).

absence. The camera focuses on the dropped bucket, water spilling across the ground, as the boy screams for his mother who has abandoned him to the witchers ('Much More', 2019).

In the literary Witcherverse, Geralt's childhood memories are confined to the witchers' stronghold of Kaer Morhen. His sole encounter with his biological mother occurs years later, when Visenna is summoned as a healer to tend to his wounds. This reunion, portrayed both on page and screen, provides little emotional resolution; although the sorceress is visibly affected by their meeting, she neither offers explanation nor expresses regret (Sapkowski, 2015, pp. 348-353; 'Much More', 2019). If guilt lingers beneath Visenna's silence, it remains unvoiced. With no forgiveness or hope for renewed contact, the scene resists the familiar trope of mother-child reconciliation and withholds the comfort of maternal atonement.

In the books, Visenna remains an elusive figure who departs from conventional ideals of motherhood by abandoning her son for unfathomable reasons. The Netflix adaptation, however, seeks to redeem her by offering glimpses of her motivations. Geralt recalls Visenna conjuring illusions of elaborate meals they could not afford, portraying her as a struggling mother who sacrificed her own comfort for his wellbeing: "I remember my hunger. And her stomach growling twice as loud as mine" ('Reunion', 2023). As sorceresses were forbidden to bear children, Visenna's choice to keep her son would have broken a powerful taboo, likely alienating her from the mage community and leaving her without support. The show implies that Visenna entrusted Geralt to the witchers only when she could no longer provide for him.

As Lisa Rowe Fraustino notes in *Abandoning Mothers*, cultural frameworks for reconciling maternal abandonment are scarce, typically limited to narratives of madness (2016, p. 221). An alternative legible script reconfigures abandonment as an act of love – the ultimate maternal sacrifice. This is the narrative the show assigns to Visenna. As her friend tells Geralt, "[l]ove for a child forces parents to make the hardest choices of their lives. [...] She loved you the best she could. To save you, she had to let you go" ('Reunion', 2023). Visenna's departure is thus reframed as a desperate necessity – a mother surrendering her role for her child's wellbeing. By recoding the unsettling enigma of maternal abandonment as a reassuring tale of maternal affection, the adaptation entrenches the cultural expectation of boundless maternal self-sacrifice and forecloses the possibility of maternal agency beyond care and devotion. Visenna's redemptive backstory exemplifies an adaptation logic that "fixes" the absent mother for mainstream legibility, while deflecting attention from the structural constraints (such as poverty or stigma) onto a woman's capacity for self-denial. Still, ultimately, Visenna emerges as a failed mother. Like her illusory food, her mothering is insubstantial, unable to satisfy either the physical or emotional hunger of her son. In this light, she is yet another tragic figure of maternal inadequacy whose storyline – like Tissaia's – concludes with violent death.⁹

⁹ Maternalization is not limited to human characters. In Sapkowski's short story, "The Bounds of Reason," an injured dragoness offers her child to another dragon in exchange for her own safety (2015, p. 79). The Netflix adaptation, however, features a dragoness who dies safeguarding her egg ('Rare Species', 2019). Extending the self-sacrificing motherhood to non-human realms, *The Witcher* naturalizes this trope across species.

Read together, Visenna and Tissaia's arcs reveal the series' strategy of recoding its female characters through maternal framing. Where Sapkowski's novels allow – if cautiously – for non-maternal identities, the Netflix series domesticates such figures via maternal tropes while simultaneously punishing perceived maternal inadequacy. This ideological transformation is not isolated. As Boyle argues for Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale*, screen adaptation can constrict the range of female subjectivities available in the source material by reversing critiques of rigid gender roles and re-centering motherhood – even as it foregrounds other resistant tropes absent from the book (2024, pp. 136-137).

In contrast to Tissaia and Visenna, Yennefer attains idealized motherhood through her bond with Ciri, Geralt's chosen daughter, challenging the cultural privileging of biological kinship and affirming nonbiological parenthood as equally transformative. Yet this recognition remains tethered to a paradigm of ultimate maternal self-sacrifice. As Harrington notes, infertile women are often situated against a “reproductive imperative that positions self-sacrificing motherhood as the ideal form of ideologically complicit female subjectivity” (2018, p. 225). The Netflix series charts Yennefer's progression toward this model: initially willing to trade Ciri for power ('Voleth Meir', 2021), eventually, she chooses to die for her.

Yennefer's motherhood stands in stark contrast to Tissaia's. The sorceress prioritizes her maternal role over romance, rejecting Tissaia's advice to abandon her search for Ciri and reunite with Geralt (Henry Cavill). “My focus is here, on Ciri,” she declares, refusing to return to Geralt as a failed mother ('The Cost of Chaos', 2023). While the arch-mistress opens her veins in defeat, Yennefer performs the same gesture as an offering, giving her blood – and life – to save Ciri ('Family', 2021).

Yennefer's maternal devotion is rewarded threefold: her bond with Ciri is restored, her lost magic returns, and her romance with Geralt finds renewed hope. In the aptly titled episode “Family” (2021), Geralt declares that even destiny cannot salvage their strained relationship. However, their bond gains a new foundation through Yennefer's embrace of an idealized maternal role – implying that her worthiness as Geralt's romantic partner is contingent on her becoming a “good-enough” mother. She is also no longer compelled to choose between motherhood and magic, but attains both. In contrast, misguided mothers and non-maternal women are erased from the narrative, highlighting the series' valorization of maternal virtue as the sole path to happiness.

Conclusion

The Witcher universe abounds with complex female figures and radical narrative moments that enhance women's agency. However, its treatment of non/motherhood complicates its message of female empowerment, revealing a paradoxical approach. The saga explicitly affirms reproductive justice and freedom while revealing the penalties attached to childlessness in patriarchal cultures. Simultaneously, it positions female protagonists within maternal scripts, producing a telling dissonance: reproductive agency is championed in principle, but the emotional weight of individual arcs tilts against non-maternal identities.

This tension becomes particularly pronounced in the Netflix adaptation, which conventionalizes Sapkowski's non-maternal characters by recasting them as maternal figures, measured against an unforgiving standard of self-sacrificing motherhood. Female success is bound to this ideal; those who resist or fall short are denied fulfilment or even survival. "Missed" motherhood is often coded as a tragic loss, attributed to deception, youthful shortsightedness, or external constraints rather than recognized as an informed and durable choice. This approach risks infantilizing women, undermines their agency in making responsible non-reproductive decisions, and perpetuates the patriarchal assumption that all women inherently desire motherhood.

These dynamics sit uneasily with Netflix's self-presentation as a "global curator of progressive and culturally diverse content" (Asmar et al., 2023, p. 26; cf. Jenner, 2024). While the platform emphasizes its commitment to plural and inclusive representation of women, *The Witcher*'s treatment of non/motherhood signals the limits of that project. Following Stuart Hall's reminder – cited by Asmar et al. – that representation is never neutral but "an exercise of power determining what kinds of knowledge will be allowed to exist" (2023, p. 31), the platform's cultural reach amplifies the stakes of such storytelling choices (Asmar et al., 2023; Jenner, 2024). As Greer (2017) argues, more nuanced depictions could ease viewers' anxieties by legitimizing the complexity of non/maternal experience—a promise *The Witcher*'s adaptation largely withholds. In this respect, streaming television hews closer to network TV than its branding implies, reasserting traditional maternal ideas and conservative reproductive politics, while consolidating the cultural marginality of non-maternal femininities (cf. Kaklamanidou, 2019; Boyle, 2024; Greer 2017).

While this article focuses on women, it is worth noting that *The Witcher* partially unsettles traditional reproductive discourses by exploring, albeit less extensively, men's infertility and parental desire. Research indicates that infertility is conventionally framed as a "woman's issue," with societal discourse rarely envisioning "men's bodies as infertile bodies" (Allan, 2022, pp. 4-5, 8, 11, 129-130). *The Witcher* engages with this rare theme by placing Geralt, an infertile hero, at the heart of the story. As Tongue observes, Geralt's infertility lacks the affective weight tied to Yennefer's struggles and does not define his identity, underscoring asymmetrical cultural pressures attached to male and female infertility (2024, pp. 88-90).

These themes extend the conversation on reproduction beyond women – a welcome development that merits further scholarly attention. Yet the overarching message remains unchanged. *The Witcher* frames having children as life's ultimate and near-universal purpose. This sentiment is encapsulated in Yennefer's resigned remark that, without a family, life holds no satisfaction; and reinforced by the wise Golden Dragon (Ron Cook), who proclaims both on page and screen: "A child. This treasure, this legacy must endure. There is no other reason to go on" ('Rare Species', 2019; cf. Sapkowski, 2015, p. 79).

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Episodes of *The Witcher*

- ‘Betrayal Moon’ (2019). Directed by Alex Garcia López, written by Beau DeMayo. *The Witcher*, season 1, episode 3. Netflix, 20 December.
- ‘Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials’ (2019). Directed by Alex Garcia López, written by Declan de Barra. *The Witcher*, season 1, episode 4. Netflix, 20 December.
- ‘Bottled Appetites’ (2019). Directed by Charlotte Brändström, written by Sneha Koorse. *The Witcher*, season 1, episode 5. Netflix, 20 December.
- ‘Rare Species’ (2019). Directed by Charlotte Brändström, written by Haily Hall. *The Witcher*, season 1, episode 6. Netflix, 20 December.
- ‘Much More’ (2019). Directed by Marc Jobst, written by Lauren Schmidt Hissrich. *The Witcher*, season 1, episode 8. Netflix, 20 December.
- ‘Voleth Meir’ (2021). Directed by Louise Hooper, written by Mike Ostrowski. *The Witcher*, season 2, episode 7. Netflix, 17 December.
- ‘Family’ (2021). Directed by Ed Bazalgette, written by Lauren Schmidt Hissrich. *The Witcher*, season 2, episode 8. Netflix, 17 December.
- ‘Reunion’ (2023). Directed by Gandja Monteiro, written by Haily Hall. *The Witcher*, season 3, episode 3. Netflix, 29 June.
- ‘The Cost of Chaos’ (2023). Directed by Bola Ogun, written by Mike Ostrowski and Troy Dangerfield. *The Witcher*, season 3, episode 8. Netflix, 27 July.