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Bakalářská práce

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**Diversity and backlash against contemporary TV
adaptations of classic sci-fi and fantasy novels**

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Čestné prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně pod vedením Mgr. Ivana Čipkára, Ph.D. s využitím pramenů, které jsou uvedeny v bibliografii.

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Anotace

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Název práce:	Diversity and backlash against contemporary TV adaptations of classic fantasy and sci-fi novels <i>The Witcher</i> , <i>Rings of Power</i> , and <i>Foundation</i>
Název v angličtině:	Diversity and backlash against contemporary TV adaptations of classic fantasy and sci-fi novels <i>The Witcher</i> , <i>Rings of Power</i> , and <i>Foundation</i>
Zvolený typ práce:	Výzkumná práce
Anotace práce:	Tato práce se zabývá diverzitou a její důležitostí, rasismem a negativní odezvou vůči moderním TV adaptacím klasických fantasy a sci-fi románů <i>Zaklínač</i> , <i>Prsteny moci</i> a <i>Nadace</i> , způsobenou deviacemi od původního materiálu, které zahrnují změny vzhledu postav, osobnosti postav a příběhu. Práce projednává vhodnost, důvody a následky daných změn, a co nám negativní odezva vůči těmto změnám říká o naší současné kulturní situaci.
Klíčová slova:	Diverzita, Zaklínač, rasismus, negativní odezva, adaptace, deviace
Anotace v angličtině:	This thesis deals with the topic of diversity and its importance, racism, and backlash against contemporary TV adaptations of classic fantasy and sci-fi novels <i>The Witcher</i> , <i>Rings of Power</i> , and <i>Foundation</i> , caused by perceived deviations from the source material, which includes visual character changes, characters' personality changes, and storyline changes. The thesis discusses the appropriateness, reasons for, and consequences of changes done to the source material and what the backlash to these changes tells us about our current cultural moment.
Klíčová slova v angličtině:	Diversity, The Witcher, racism, backlash, adaptation, deviation
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1 Introduction

This bachelor thesis deals with the topic of diversity and backlash in contemporary TV adaptations. The thesis mainly focuses on the Netflix's *The Witcher* adaptation, and further marginally considers *The Rings of Power* and *Foundation* adaptations. All three adaptations have been inspired by influential fantasy and sci-fi novels, written by renowned authors, Andrzej Sapkowski, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Isaac Asimov. While they all differ in various aspects, including style and genre, their contemporary adaptation counterparts have received similar backlash, regarding deviations from the source material and visual representation of characters.

The thesis initially introduces the adaptation theory, topic of diversity and its importance in modern media, and subsequently explains the term medievalism. The next chapter introduces the book saga, *The Witcher*, written by Andrzej Sapkowski, which includes the main information regarding the literature, including the setting, plot, and themes. It continues by introducing the Netflix adaptation of the same name and proceeds to compare the original material and the adaptation, further exploring specific examples of Netflix's deviations from the source material and considering the reasons and consequences of the changes done to the original literature. The following chapters introduce *The Rings of Power* and *Foundation* in similar way, firstly introducing the main information regarding their respective literature and additionally consider the individual adaptations and their respective backlash and deviations from the original material.

The aim of the thesis is to analyse and compare the adaptations and their respective original material to discuss the deviations from the original material. The objectives are to consider the reasons and consequences of making changes to the original material, and to identify the reason(s) behind the backlash of the adaptations. The research methodology for this thesis involves critical analysis of the primary literary sources and engagement of secondary sources to support the theorems. The thesis hopes to give a modest insight into the creative decisions made by the producers during the adaptation process, the challenges of the adaptation process, and the audience's response to said creative decisions.

2 Adaptation theory

Over time, TV adaptations have become a common way to bring an existing story in a new form onto TV screens, whether it is literature adapted into a TV series (for example *The Witcher [2019-]*) or animated series recreated with live actors (for example Netflix's *One Piece [2023-]*). In general, producers of such shows face a series of potential adaptation pitfalls, which are quite easily “fallen into”.

Adaptation pitfalls can develop for different reasons, such as lack of understanding of the original material, or the absence of appreciation for it. Writer-director Gina Prince-Bythewood stated in an interview (Sollosi, 2014) the importance of not underestimating the original material. The existence of structure and storyline does not mean less work to produce an adaptation. She further agreed that the most important part of a successful adaptation is understanding the essence of the original work. When creators do not manage to grasp the essence of the literary work they are adapting, it can result in a shallow interpretation that fails to capture the depth of the original story (Wells-Lassagne, 2017). The producers may forget to prioritize the story over the visual aspect, resulting in a visual spectacle missing the essence of the original work.

Additional potential pitfall is a disconnection between new and original material. The producers may struggle with creating new sub-plots and characters and incorporating it within the original material, or running out of original material all together, which forces them to create new content for the adaptation. This may happen to adaptations based on an unfinished saga (for example *Game of Thrones [2011 – 2019]*, where the last two seasons are HBO's original script), or to ones which end up outlasting the literature (Wells-Lassagne, 2017). Other potential pitfalls include oversimplifying complex storylines, omitting important details, or altering characters in a way that deviates from the original work or contradicts it completely.

2.1 Diversity in modern media

There has been a visible increase in diverse casting in media in recent years, for example Netflix is one of the leaders of diverse representation in the media industry in the US in different dimensions, such as ethnic, gender, age, linguistic, and sexual diversity, both in front of and behind the camera. Netflix expresses the hope that other streaming services are going to follow their lead, and that the newly set level of diversity in streaming services will

become the new mainstream (Asmar et al., 2022). Diversity in media (in this case, in streaming services) allows minorities to see themselves reflected on screen and helps in creating more inclusive and empathetic environment, which allows dispersion of stereotypes, broaden perspectives, contributes to richer storytelling, and further reflects the world we live in today (UNESCO, n. d.). On the other hand, underrepresentation in media can have negative effects on self-esteem of underrepresented minorities, and possibly results in internalized negative views of different minority groups (Nadal, 2021).

The underrepresentation and sidelining of certain groups in the media (Nadal, 2021) has led to increase in activism and advocating for more diverse casting. As a result, production companies and casting directors are working towards more representation and diversity, both in front of and behind the camera (UCLA, 2023), including diversity training and the founding of diversity and inclusion departments within media, gaming, and other major organizations.

Overall, the positives of diversity in modern media seem to outweigh the negatives, it begs the question, why diverse products of modern media receive backlash regarding the casting choices.

Audience's dislike of diversity in media can be a product of personal bias, more specifically racist, discriminatory, or xenophobic views towards other ethnic minorities. While some display their negative views out loud, others may hide it behind disingenuous arguments, as a form of covert racism. Essentially, covert racism plays a role of a separator, expressing what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. The discrimination is mostly done subconsciously and is typically expressed as a false protective statement (Coates, 2011).

Additionally, the resentment towards diversity may be a result of forced diversity, which is a controversial term, that also carries a certain level of potential discriminatory subconscious, similarly to covert racism. It stands for superficially created diversity, or a false diversity. In media, for example, diversity may be perceived as forced if people of colour are casted in roles which historically consist of white characters (Diversity for social impact, 2022).

Another cause of audience viewing diverse casting as forced can also be the general lack of exposure to diversity. If an audience member is not used to seeing people of different backgrounds, ethnicities, etc., on screen and in real life, they can find it difficult to relate to or connect with these characters. Therefore, the diversity displayed in adaptations can be

perceived as forced by the audience, resulting in resentment, instead of being recognized as a reflection of the world we live in today.

2.2 Medievalism

Kevin Harty (2015, pg. 3) describes medievalism as “*a continuing process of creating and recreating the ideas of the medieval that began almost as soon as Middle Ages had come to an end.*” For years, medieval times have been romanticized and idealized by society in different aspects and medias, such as literature, movies, TV shows, etc. Trilling (2011) believes that people feel nostalgic towards the medieval times, going as far as organizing or attending medieval inspired events, such as renaissance fairs, medieval markets, visiting medieval themed restaurants, etc., to fulfil their feelings of nostalgia by mentally returning to the Middle Ages, and are further using it as a form of escape from the reality (Trilling, 2011, pg. 216, 217). Movies and TV shows situated in Middle Ages include reoccurring themes, such as stone castles, wooden taverns, knights, etc (Hughes-Warrington et al., 2023)

Medievalism can be perceived both positively and negatively. The positive focuses on the fact that by including general medieval themes in a visual media, the audience is effectively and easily transported into the medieval setting (Hughes-Warrington et al., 2023), which not only sets the worldbuilding aspect of the story, but further creates a level of anticipation from the audience.

Negative aspects of medievalism may be perceived in the case of non-historical fiction, as the appearance of a historical setting may prompt the audience to start applying historical context to said non-historical setting. It is closely followed by a misguided belief, that the Middle Ages were prominently white, which seems to be a common cause of critique regarding the appearance – or in the opposite case, absence – of coloured people in contemporary adaptations or other forms of modern media (Young, Albin et al., 2019).

Sapkowski and Tolkien have included medieval elements in their work, which are reflected in their respective adaptations as well. There are countless examples of medieval aspects, starting with already mentioned wooden taverns, castles, appearances of knights, all the way to the colour scheme palettes of the TV shows.

3 The Witcher

The Witcher fantasy books, written by the Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski, have been used as an inspiration for different adaptations such as computer games, comics, and animated movies, which became popular and gained their respective fanbases. In 2017, Netflix acquired the rights to make *The Witcher* adaptation, which however, has received backlash and hate from numerous fans of the original material. It begs the question, whether the show is hated for deviating from the source material by making visual character changes, characters' personality changes, and storyline changes, or if the differences do not play such an important role and if there happens to be a more superficial reason for the backlash. This part of the thesis is going to look at the changes made to the original material of *The Witcher* saga and consider their appropriateness, reasoning, and consequences.

3.1 Literature

The Witcher saga consists of seven story books and one standalone book, *The Last Wish* (1993), *Sword of Destiny* (1992), *Blood of Elves* (1994), *Time of Contempt* (1995), *Baptism of Fire* (1996), *The Tower of the Swallow* (1997), *The Lady of The Lake* (1999), and *Season of Storms* (2013). The story follows the main protagonist Geralt of Rivia, a witcher, throughout his adventures. The first two books and the standalone book, *The Last Wish*, *Sword of Destiny*, and *Season of Storms*, are composed as collections of short stories. *The Last Wish* contains the fragmented main story divided into seven parts and intertwined with other side stories together. The third book ties the fragments of a storyline together, marking a changing point, as from there, the books continue as novels.

The Witcher started as a literature piece released exclusively in Poland in the 80's and 90's before it got translated and spread across the world. Sapkowski stated in an interview (Maher, 2020) that he takes inspiration in Slavic mythology due to its abundance and richness, but in no way does he prefer this mythology over other mythologies, as he uses what he feels the story needs. Creatures he includes in his literature are either already known (for example dragons) or he adopts them from Slavic mythologies (for example noonwraiths). Sapkowski distances himself from adaptations of his work, as he believes they are completely different and should not be compared. Due to the author's nationality and connections to Slavic character and mythology, it is most popular in Poland, where it is seen as a national classic. Today, *The Witcher* is one of the most known fantasy series and millions of copies of books, comics, and games based on it have been sold across the globe.

3.1.1 Setting

The story is set in a place similar to the Earth, divided into a northern and a southern hemisphere. The northern hemisphere is mostly consisted of land, while the southern hemisphere is comprised mainly of sea. The most known part of the world is called the Continent and comprises of Northern and Eastern Lands, the Nilfgaardian Empire, and the Far North. Connected to it from the west are the Skellige Isles and from the south the lands of Barsa, Hannu, Ofir, and Zangvebar which could be partially located on the southern hemisphere. (Batylda, 2015; Puysegur and Sapkowski, 2023)

The political conflicts of the universe are centred around Nilfgaardian Empire and Northern Kingdoms, more specifically Redania. The leader of the Empire is the emperor Emhyr var Emreis (also known as Duny), who's personal main goal is to capture his daughter, Cirilla. Redania was led by Vizimir II, until he got assassinated during the night of Thanedd Coup. Interestingly, the Elder Races of the world (elves, dwarves, etc.) prefer the Empire over Northern Kingdoms, as they are treated more respectfully by the Nilfgaardians.

Several war conflicts happened before the story and other conflicts occur during the story, the most prominent conflict taking place before the story is known as the first elven-human war. The first elven-human war was a conflict fought around the 10th century to the 11th century, during which the elves were massacred by humans on several occasions, forcing elves to surrender. This has caused a great decrease in the elven population from which the elves have never recovered.

The most prominent wars happening in the story are known as the Northern Wars, which where several conflicts between Nilfgaardian Empire and Northern Kingdoms, among which were two major wars, both displaying the Empire's desire to subjugate the expand across the Continent. (Batylda, 2015; Sapkowski, 2011, IV.; Sapkowski, 2012)

An important event preceding the books is the Conjunction of Spheres, which took place about 1500 years before the events of the books. During this time, different dimensions collided, resulting in an opening, from where Chaos, various unnatural monsters, and other races, including humans, ended up on the Continent, which had previously been occupied solely by the Elder Races (for example elves and dwarves). Humans came to grasp the power of Chaos, creating the first wizards and since they wanted to settle in the new world, they started attacking Elder Races, who were unable to defend themselves and surrendered, which

resulted in humans ruling the world and the start of an unending hatred between humans and non-humans. (Batylda, 2015; Puysegur and Sapkowski, 2023)

To fight the monsters, kings tasked mages to create warriors, who would be able to kill these monsters - they succeeded and the first witcher was born. Witchers were quite successful in their monster hunts and monster numbers grew increasingly low, causing the growth of fear in the common populace of what would the witchers do when the monsters all die. Together with the propaganda from the churches of the North and the growing distrust of the rulers, witchers became feared and perceived as monsters by the common folk. Each of the witcher schools came under attack from mobs of people and by the time the last school fell, the number of witchers had diminished greatly.

Currently, there are only a couple of witchers left who still wander the Path, living their lives as witchers, accepting various contracts for money. They travel the world full of political, pre-war, and post-war tensions, and non-human hatred, being treated as outcasts, seen as freaks, and hated by most of society, which ironically still need them, as there are still monsters left in the world. (Sapkowski; Batylda, 2015)

3.1.2 Plot

The books follow the story of a witcher Geralt of Rivia and his adventures and relationships with various characters he meets on the Path. The most important relationship he has is with Cirilla, who he sees as his adopted daughter. Ciri becomes his destiny, after he asks for a Law of Surprise as a reward from Duny, whom he saved during Pavetta's 15th birthday party in Cintra. Cirilla is a descendant of Lara Dorren, an elven sorceress, and as a result, carries Elder Blood, granting her mysterious powers and making her a potentially powerful individual. During the books she is constantly chased by various characters, who want to use her potential for their own plans, while Geralt tries his best to protect her.

3.1.3 Style

Sapkowski portrays all the darker sides of humanity in a realistic and engaging way. Characters and creatures' personalities do not necessarily correspond with stereotypical characteristics, for example the vampire Regis is caring, intelligent, and talented healer, who becomes one of Geralt's closest friends, instead of being the evil character audience might expect him to be. Geralt himself, who is considered a freak and a monster by society, reveals his much more open-minded and accepting nature. Part of his character is that he only kills

monsters if necessary, and, if possible, solves conflicts with different measures (for example when in *The Last Wish* Geralt removed the curse from princess Adda, rather than outright killing her) which is a great contrast to his seemingly emotionless, heartless nature of a monster slayer.

His stories tend to be left with an open ending and unclear explanation, for example the short story “The Lesser Evil” in *The Last Wish*. The world and its characters cannot be considered simply good or bad, as all his characters have positive and negative attributes, making his work morally ambiguous, open to interpretation, and closer to historical fiction than traditional fantasy.

3.1.4 Themes of *The Witcher*

Racism and discrimination are common themes in the universe, together with prejudice and xenophobia. Magical creatures, non-humans, and witchers, as previously mentioned, are seen, and treated as outcasts by society.

The saga further explores the theme of destiny, both as a gift and a burden. As much as some characters try to change their destiny, it is unavoidable. For example, at first, Geralt rejects his supposed destiny, Cirilla, as he does not believe that destiny can bring anything positive, but in the end accepts it and Cirilla as his adoptive daughter.

Additional theme is morality. Throughout the series, characters are faced with complex dilemmas, which challenge their beliefs and values. Similarly to the work itself, the main protagonist Geralt is a morally ambiguous character, who is forced to make difficult decisions, which end up having far-reaching consequences (for example his actions in “The Lesser Evil”, which alter his views on neutrality and choosing the lesser evil).

Lastly, identity and monstrosity versus personhood are fundamental themes of *The Witcher*. Characters struggle with their identity and are constantly challenged by the perception of others, which forces them to face their insecurities, beliefs, and internal battles. These themes can be, again, demonstrated on the character of Geralt, who is a monster slayer who further struggles with his identity, both as a monster slayer and as an emotional living being. The books delve into what it means to be human and how true monstrosity lies beyond one’s physical appearance. (Sapkowski)

3.2 Netflix adaptation

The Netflix show *The Witcher* was created by Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, and it is based on the book series *The Witcher* written by Andrzej Sapkowski. First episode premiered on 20th of December 2019. Show's production was slowed down by Covid, and therefore there are only three seasons so far, with the fourth season planned for 2025. Originally, seven seasons were planned in total, covering the seven books (minus the standalone book), however Netflix recently stated that there will be only five seasons, with both the fourth and fifth season filmed simultaneously (Moreau, 2024). The reviews of the Netflix adaptation suggest that the adaptation seems to meet the expectations of fans who do not mind watching a loose adaptation of the original or people who are not acquainted with the books or game adaptations, and partially for fans who expected a more faithful representation of the original. (IMDb, 2019-)

When the show was announced, the show's producer, Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, stated that they will stay true to the original material, while simultaneously not wanting to hire people, who were familiar with the books (Wilding, 2022). Furthermore, the executive producer of the show, Tomek Baginski, claimed the criticised changes done to the story were necessary to appeal to the mass audience, as the wider and younger audience would have a hard time understanding the original story as the sole focus the audience has is towards emotion (Dawe, 2023). Overall, he is denying any blame towards the show, shifting it back at the audience.

The show supposedly follows the original material, which would mean that the three seasons follow the story of the first three books; however, the information presented in the show is gathered from the entire saga, good example of this is the story of Yennefer of Vengerberg.

The following parts of the thesis are going to look at the three seasons, compare the Netflix adaptation to the original material, and consider the changes made to it.

3.2.1 Season 1

The first season of the show is based on the first two books of the saga, *The Last Wish* and *Sword of Destiny*. The beginning of the show follows three different timelines at the same time, Geralt's, Ciri's, and Yennefer's. This, however, proves to be difficult to follow for the audience, especially if the audience is not acquainted with the original material. The

way the show is composed makes it seem like all their stories are happening at the same time; however, it is quite the opposite. The most noticeable hint of this happens during the fourth episode of the first season, where Geralt speaks with King Foltest about striga, while just a moments later during Yennefer's storyline Adda and Foltest appear at a party as children (Season 1, Episode 4). The first season remains to have the highest viewership and rating of the three seasons (IMDb, 2019-).

3.2.2 Season 2

The second season of the show is based on a short story from the first book, "A Grain of Truth", and the third and fourth books of the saga, *Blood of Elves*, and *Time of Contempt*. This is the season which includes more original characters and sub-plots, which were created solely for the show. New material includes the new antagonist Voleth Meir, and the added appearance of Chernobog, as well as it explores new storylines, such as Yennefer's struggle of losing her Chaos. The season ends with Emhyr's revelation of his previous identity and his connection to Ciri. (Season 2, Episodes 1-8)

3.2.3 Season 3

The third season wraps up the story of the third and fourth books of the saga, *Blood of Elves*, and *Time of Contempt*, and includes extra details added from the fifth book, *Baptism of Fire*. This season focuses on the main characters protecting Ciri, but also on Geralt's internal struggle with neutrality. The season ends with the battle of Thanedd Coup and Ciri embarking on her personal journey during the last episodes of the season. (Season 3, Episode 1 – 8)

During the release, this season had been split into two parts, with the intention to up the interest in the audience, however it is unclear whether this made any difference in the viewership, as this season has been rated the worst of all the seasons so far. It was criticized for the absence of Geralt throughout the season, with speculations connecting the absence to the disagreements between the actor Henry Cavill, who portrayed Geralt of Rivia in the three seasons, and the producers of the show regarding deviations from the original material. The announcement that Cavill would be leaving the show has resulted in more backlash from fans, which appeared to be carrying over into the overall criticism of the third season. This, and the strong disapproval of the series diverging from its source material, seems to be an important factor driving the decline in the viewership. (IMDb, 2019-)

3.3 Deviations from the source material

The creators of *The Witcher* adaptation have made changes to the original material which include changes in characters' storylines, personalities, and inclusion of completely new characters (for example previously mentioned Voleth Meir), visual changes to various characters, and absence of other characters all together (for example Queen of the Fields from *The Last Wish*). Furthermore, short stories and considerably major moments are omitted from the show completely, seemingly in favour of exploring new sub-plots or turning previously minor characters into reoccurring or major characters (for example Fringilla Vigo). The next parts of the thesis consider the short stories, which were not included in the adaptation, and the possible reasons for their absence.

3.3.1 Omitted short stories

As previously mentioned, the first two books of the saga, *The Last Wish* and *The Sword of Destiny*, are composed as a series of short stories. A few short stories from the first two books were excluded from the TV series adaptation, which includes "The Voice of Reason" from *The Last Wish* and "A Shard of Ice", "Eternal Flame", and "A Little Sacrifice" from *The Sword of Destiny*.

"The Voice of Reason" is a fragmented main story of the first book, *The Last Wish*, which is divided into seven parts. It follows Geralt's experience in the Temple of Melitele and his discussions with Nenneke, who seems to portray a role of a motherly figure to Geralt.

The first part serves as an introduction, revealing a wounded Geralt resting in the temple, after his battle with a striga, which is followed by the short story "The Witcher".

In the second part, Geralt and Nenneke lead a discussion regarding faith and religion, during which Geralt states he does not believe in any gods. Nenneke senses something is wrong with Geralt and tries to persuade him into doing a séance with her, to figure out what is wrong. He, however, declines several times, stating that as he does not have faith, the séance would have no effect. Nenneke comments that for the first time the lack of faith would have any power at all. This is followed by the short story "A Grain of Truth".

In the third part, two knights and a count arrive at the temple, demanding that Geralt leave the town. Nenneke counters by stating that the Temple does not fall under royalty's jurisdiction, which upsets one of the knights, Tailles, who throws his gauntlet on the ground, challenging Geralt to a duel. Nenneke, unphased by his gesture, tells them to leave. Before

the knights and count leave the temple, they promise they will return and call Geralt by his nickname, Butcher of Blaviken, which is an introduction to the next short story, “The Lesser Evil”.

In the fourth part, Geralt leaves his room and sits next to a priestess in the Temple’s gardens and proceeds to talk about witchers, how they came to be, his upbringing in Kaer Morhen, and his mentor, Vesemir. He continues to discuss destiny and how he should have stayed away from it, which cues the short story “A Question of Price”.

In the fifth part, Geralt’s good friend and bard, Dandelion, visits the Temple. Nenneke expresses her dislike of the bard, but allows him to stay, as Geralt and Dandelion are good friends. Geralt feels depressed, pondering the current state of the witchers, stating that there are not many left on the Continent, and that numbers of monsters are gradually dropping and therefore people post less contracts, which makes living as a witcher gradually more difficult. Dandelion tries to cheer him up, asking whether he remembers the events of the next short story, “The Edge of The World”.

In the sixth part, Nenneke tends the garden in a cave situated on the Temple grounds. While she takes care of the herbs and plants, she and Geralt discuss Yennefer. Geralt asks Nenneke to forward a couple of gems, part of a reward for the defeated striga, to fund Yennefer’s search for a cure for her infertility. Nenneke explains to Geralt that Yennefer’s situation regarding infertility is unique and incurable. Geralt decides it is time to depart from the Temple, to which Nenneke pleads Geralt to stay longer, so he can heal. Geralt refuses, to which Nenneke asks, how did the relationship between him and Yennefer even began, which introduces the short story “The Last Wish”.

In the seventh part, Geralt and Dandelion leave the Temple and follow a road, when they suddenly get surrounded by the knights and the count from before, but this time they are accompanied by the captain of guards, a dwarf, Dennis Cramer. This time, Geralt is forced to accept the duel, or face gallows. The rules state that the duel is over with the first sign of blood, however, if Geralt hurts Tailles with his sword, he is to suffer a slow, painful death. Geralt gets upset, as the rules are clearly favouring the young knight. Dennis pleads with Geralt to accept defeat and let the knight win, as it is the best option. During the duel, Geralt dodges Tailles’ attacks with ease due to him being aggressive and inexperienced, but the duel suddenly ends, when Geralt blocks Tailles’ attack, which causes the knight’s sword to bounce back, and Tailles cuts his face with his own blade. The count, seeing Tailles hurt, wants to kill Geralt, however, Dennis stops him, as the rules were fulfilled to the letter. Count

stops but comments that Dennis will live to regret it. Geralt and Dandelion say their goodbyes and briefly return to the temple, where, in the meantime, Nenneke restocked Geralt's elixirs, again pleading for Geralt to do a séance with her or to at least stay longer, which Geralt refuses and both he and Dandelion leave the Temple.

“A Shard of Ice” short story focuses on the relationship between Geralt and Yennefer and explores the beginning of their respective character development. The main plot of the story revolves around Yennefer choosing between Geralt and a newly introduced character, Istredd, who is a sorcerer and Yennefer's long-time friend. It is also the only time Istredd appears in the saga, compared to the Netflix adaptation, where he became a regularly reoccurring character. During an argument, regarding who deserves Yennefer more, Istredd tells Geralt that he is a witcher, unable to express human emotions and therefore is just a toy for Yennefer (*Sapkowski, 2011, II., pg. 106*). The comment upsets Geralt, causing him to lose hope of continuing his relationship with Yennefer. He proceeds to wallow in self-pity and becomes depressed, later attempting suicide. Near the end, Yennefer sends two letters, one to Istredd and one to Geralt. After Geralt receives his letter, he heads out to meet Istredd for a duel, where Istredd, a sorcerer, intends to fight with a sword rather than magic, stating there is no reason to live anymore, as Yennefer broke up with him in the letter he received (*Sapkowski, 2011, II., 123,124*). Hearing this, Geralt turns around and walks away from the duel, leaving Istredd behind.

The story of “Eternal Flame” is noticeably different compared to the rest of the short stories, due to its comedic aspect, which is largely absent from the rest of the book. It takes place in the city of Novigrad, where Geralt and Dandelion visit a tavern and make acquaintance with Dainty Biberveldt, a halfling and a merchant. During their conversation, the door opens, and an identical copy of Dainty enters the tavern. Chaos ensues in the room; however Geralt manages to catch the copy of Dainty, who proceeds to deform on the ground, begging for mercy. The creature introduces himself as a doppler, Dudu, revealing that he, regrettably, robbed the real Dainty earlier in the forest and stole his horses. Hearing this, Dainty wants Geralt to kill Dudu, however Geralt refuses, stating he does not kill intelligent creatures (*Sapkowski, 2011, II., pg. 141*). As it turns out, Dudu sold the horses for a big profit, investing the money into various items, which makes Dainty upset, considering the items are pointless. In the bank, Dainty finds out that the items Dudu purchased were suddenly in demand and he made a huge profit. The trio, Geralt, Dandelion, and Dainty, separate to find the doppler. Geralt eventually finds him and, not wanting to kill him, tells

him to leave the city. Dudu disagrees with that proposal and transforms into Geralt, stating he cannot be defeated, as he created the exact copy. However, Geralt knows that Dudu does not possess the courage and understanding to do evil things (for example murder) or mimic bad attributes, as dopplers are good in nature (*Sapkowski, 2011, II., pg. 172*). The doppler being able to read his thoughts, says that he only wanted to live a peaceful life, comparing himself to other non-humans in the city, questioning, why he is not accepted like them (*Sapkowski, 2011, II., pg. 173*). Hearing this, Geralt lets him go, however Dudu does not get far, as he transforms into Dandelion and gets hit by one of Dandelion's ex-lovers. Dudu falls into a tent and starts deforming. Geralt tries to protect him and hide him from the crowd of observers, when suddenly Chappelle, the head of the church of Eternal Fire, appears, telling Dudu to transform into Dainty again. As it turns out, Chappelle is also a doppler, as the real one died recently, and he made a business deal with Dudu, asking him to buy the strange items he did, as they are needed to build new altars, which are planned to be built in Novigrad. Dainty decides to accept Dudu as his business partner, posing as his cousin, Dudu Biberveldt.

Similarly to "A Shard of Ice", the short story "A Little Sacrifice" also focuses on Geralt's internal conflict regarding his feelings towards Yennefer. The story starts with Geralt playing the role of a translator between an arrogant prince Agloval and a mermaid, Sh'eenaz, who speaks the elder tongue. Agloval is in love with Sh'eenaz and wants her to change her fin into legs and live with him on land. Sheenaz, on the other hand, wants Agloval to leave his life as a prince and join her underwater. They are unable to come to a compromise and Sh'eenaz, tired of Agloval's unwillingness to sacrifice a little, swims away. Unhappy with the outcome, Agloval blames Geralt's translation for it and refuses to pay him (*Sapkowski, 2011, I., pg. 184*). Later, Geralt and Dandelion attend a banquet, where Dandelion introduces Essi, a young bard he has known since childhood, who develops feelings for Geralt. Anglov arrives at the party, offering Geralt another job, this time to solve mysterious disappearances, that happened at the sea. Geralt and Dandelion travel to the place, where they get attacked by strange race of fish people. Geralt tells Dandelion to run, while he holds them off. It seems Geralt might lose, when suddenly he gets saved by Sh'eenaz, who stalls the fish people for long enough so Geralt and Dandelion may escape. After the attack, Essi, while tending to Geralt's wounds, proceeds to express her feelings to Geralt, which makes him feel uneasy and prompts him to wonder, whether Yennefer feels like this when she is with him (*Sapkowski, 2011, II., pg. 225-227*). He is unable to reciprocate Essi's feelings, stating "*Essi*

is not Yennefer” (Sapkowski, 2011, II., pg. 228). Geralt, Dandelion, and Essi return to Agloval who is, yet again, disappointed with Geralt, as he did not take care of the monsters and only advised to stay away from the dangerous place. Essi and Agloval have an altercation regarding the underwater inhabitants, when suddenly a door opens, and Sh’eenaz enters. She decided to make a little sacrifice, as she gave up her fin for legs, and gained the ability to speak and understand the common tongue. Geralt, Dandelion, and Essi proceed to leave together. Before separating, Geralt tells Essi the truth, that he is unable to reciprocate her feelings and they part ways (Sapkowski, 2011, II., pg. 239). The story ends with Essi succumbing to smallpox four years later, during an outbreak in Vizima.

3.3.2 Analysis of the omitted short stories

As previously mentioned, the first season of the Netflix adaptation follows the three different timelines of the main characters, Geralt, Yennefer, and Ciri, simultaneously. Considering this factor, there is a possibility that the first short story “The Voice of Reason” might have proved to be difficult to recreate. Moreover so, as in *The Last Wish* the character of Yennefer appears only in the short story “The Last Wish”, which is between the sixth and the seventh part of the “The Voice of Reason”, and the character of Ciri does not appear at all. If the producers had decided to go through with the short story and kept the choice of displaying all three timelines simultaneously, the story could have proved to be even more difficult to follow, as it would not only complicate the timelines, but also the coherence of the said short story.

However, in the books, the story itself serves as an introduction to the saga, as it discusses the history of witchers, Geralt’s past and present, and demonstrates the judgemental and discriminatory behaviour towards non-humans in *The Witcher* universe. Had the show included the story and followed the scenario set by the books, it could have proved to be a well-rounded introduction to both the plot and the world of *The Witcher*, which could have added more value to the worldbuilding aspect of the adaptation.

As previously mentioned, “Eternal Flame” is different from the rest. The comedic and diverting aspects of the short story elevate the heavier emotional aspects of the rest of the book, as in contrast to *The Last Wish*, *The Sword of Destiny* delves more into the heavily emotional path, which can be seen in “A Shard of Ice” and “A Little Sacrifice”. It further explores society’s views towards non-humans, the concept of dopplers, and displays Geralt’s more “human side” – sense of morality, light-heartedness, loyalty, and general sense of

helpfulness – which is expressed less in the adaptation. Now, other than Geralt and Dandelion, other characters from this short story do not appear in the adaptation. Producers have created a new doppler for a new sub-plot, whose actions in the adaptation (the murder of Mousesack) seemingly contrast the good-natured description of dopplers mentioned earlier, as the new doppler is a killer (Season 1, Episode 5).

The short stories “A Shard of Ice” and “A Little Sacrifice” are fundamentally similar. Both stories are an example of how *The Sword of Destiny*’s stories are emotionally heavier, compared to the stories from the first book. Both are centred around Geralt and Yennefer’s relationship, and both explore Geralt’s internal conflicts and his emotional side. As mentioned, compared to the adaptation, where Istredd became a reoccurring character, in the books, Istredd is a minor character who only appears in “A Shard of Ice”. Furthermore, if the producers decided to adapt Geralt’s attempted suicide, they would have to carefully follow recommended guidelines in covering suicides, which include providing context, and more. Due to this, the story might have proved to be challenging to recreate.

On the other hand, the story highlights Geralt’s complex identity struggles and hints at Yennefer’s vulnerabilities as well. The show managed to express her vulnerabilities in the first season of the show, during her time in Aretuza (Season 1, Episodes 1-8), however, the same could not be said about Geralt. The way he is displayed in the story greatly contrasts the society’s assumptions regarding witchers (further highlighted by Istredd’s comment regarding witchers’ lack of emotions) and forces him to face his emotions and insecurities.

There is a possibility that “A Little Sacrifice” did not get included due to its story already being adapted for an upcoming animated Netflix movie *The Witcher: Sirens of the Deep*, which is set to release later in 2024.

Overall, the TV adaptation seems to have omitted short stories which add more depth and complexity to the character of Geralt of Rivia. The stories explore the struggles with his identity and expose his vulnerabilities, highlighting his internal battles between giving in to other people’s assumptions and being something more, than what he was created to be. The adaptation seems to favour the newly created sub-plots and stories of other characters over Geralt’s personality and emotionality, character development, and personhood, which makes it seem that he became more of a side character in, essentially, his own story.

Mentioned stories further include Slavic elements and references to classic fairytales (for example *Little Mermaid*), which were seemingly stripped from the adaptation. While, for example, the names of monsters can still hint of the origin of the work, the lack of other

similar elements and references makes it seem as if Netflix desires the adaptation to be nationally ambiguous (Gawroński and Bajorek, 2020).

While it is understandable that it is not possible to adapt all the material, especially considering the character shift in the adaptation, Netflix producers did not manage to express similar content with their own material, effectively falling into one of the pitfalls of the adaptation theory, as they did not manage to fully express the essence of the original material. (Wells-Lassagne, 2017)

3.3.3 Character deviations

Changes regarding the characters' personalities seem to disregard their previous traits or amplify their negative personality traits, resulting in morally neutral or good characters becoming more sinister, which is also one of common adaptation pitfalls. Good example of a character made theoretically irredeemable during seasons one and two would be Cahir, whose actions in the show are more vicious and selfish with no visible progress towards his original character development and with minimal chance of potential redemption.

In the books, Cahir is presented as a mysterious knight with an intimidating helmet which covers his face. He serves under the Nilfgaardian empire and as such, his actions are mostly driven by his sense of duty and loyalty to the emperor. At one point in the story, Ciri removes Cahir's helmet and sees his face for the first time, realising that he is just an ordinary person like her. Eventually, Cahir realizes the wrongs of his ways, and proceeds to join Geralt and others in search of Ciri, and ultimately ends up sacrificing himself so Ciri could escape from immediate danger.

The adaptation fails to express his internal battle between loyalty and morality. His actions throughout the show present him as an unhinged villain, whose only goal is to capture Ciri at all costs, taking lives along the way. His story in third season ends with his sudden and unexpected turnaround (Season 3, Episode 6), which is loosely inspired by the original.

The writers presented Cahir's character in a different way than the books, creating a villain from the originally misunderstood character, and then added his original redemption arc (= character development, where the villain realizes their wrongdoings and redeems their bad actions, usually by heroic sacrifice). Due to this, his sudden turn of character feels rushed and dishonest, creating a disconnection in his character development.

The showrunner, Lauren Schmidt-Hissrich, stated in an interview (Bolen, 2022) that Yenifer is her favourite character from *The Witcher* saga, and wanted her to appear more

compared to the books. This could explain the shift in the main character dynamic, especially during the first season, where the main focus seems to be on her, rather than on Geralt. Compared to the books, the show expands massively on Yennefer's story and her life experiences in Aretuza, the magical academy, which adds more depth to the character, but at the same time displays potentially controversial behaviour through the seasons which goes against her personality and behaviour previously presented in the books.

In the books, Yennefer's backstory is told in fragments through flashbacks, or hinted through Geralt's observations. During the fight with a djinn in the *The Last Wish*, Geralt looks at Yennefer and makes a comment, guessing that she used to be a hunchback (Sapkowski, 2011, I., pg. 297) which was later corrected with magic.

During a flashback in *Tower of The Swallow* a dialogue between her and her parents reveal that her mother was a half-elf, thus meaning that Yennefer is quarter-elf, and that her father abused her because of her deformity and because she was not his biological child (Sapkowski, 2011, VI., pg. 337,338). In the books, she despises her infertility and is obsessed with finding a cure. In the last book, it is briefly mentioned that Yennefer tried to commit suicide, unsuccessfully (Sapkowski, 2012, pg. 545-547). This is all the information that can be gathered about Yennefer's backstory from the entire book saga.

Sorceresses are mostly infertile in the universe, with some exceptions, for example Geralt's mother Visenna. Infertility in sorceresses in the books is caused by prolonged use of magic which negatively affects the reproductive system as mentioned in the first book, but that's not specific to Yennefer, in whose case her ovaries atrophied, as stated by an expert healer, Nenneke (Sapkowski, 2011, I., pg. 269). There is no mention of anyone ripping out sorceresses' internal organs as a trade-off for being beautiful as seen in the show.

This way it portrays Yennefer's infertility as her own choice, as she insisted on going through with the procedure to achieve her full potential (Season 1, Episode 3). However, just three episodes later (Season 1, Episode 6) the show struggles to stay consistent, as it includes a story taken straight from the book, where Yennefer, now looking to mend her ability to have children, claims that her choice was taken away, despite agreeing to the terms herself.

Following the aftermath of Battle of Sodden, during the end of the first season and during the entire second season, Yennefer loses her Chaos due to the usage of the forbidden fire magic and later on kidnaps and almost sacrifices Ciri to get her Chaos back (Season 2, Episode 7). Both the kidnapping and considering a sacrifice of a child, especially Ciri, goes against Yennefer's personality and the overall themes of *The Witcher*, as in the books she

has a strong mother and daughter bond with Ciri and would never put her in danger. These controversial season two changes made her actions in season three hard to believe, also creating a disconnection between the two seasons.

These changes were criticized by the fans of the original, as they highlight the inconsistencies within the adaptation, which are perceivable to both original fans and other viewers of the series (IMDb, 2019-), and difficulties when trying to intertwine new content and the source material, while keeping the character storylines consistent. This is another common adaptation pitfall, regarding disconnection between new and original material (Wells-Lassagne, 2017).

3.3.4 Storyline changes

A necessary part of creating contemporary adaptations is making changes to parts of the original source to fit the subjective needs of specific adaptations. It is important to know which parts of the original material do need adjustments, which parts may be omitted completely, and which parts it is better to leave untouched (Wells-Lassagne, 2017).

Creating a TV show adaptation has its limitations and challenges. The bigger issue, as mentioned previously, is maintaining the essence of the original, while also overcoming the common pitfalls of creating an adaptation (Wells-Lassagne, 2017). This can prove especially problematic while working with novels and their complex character developments, internal conflicts, and complex storylines, which can be difficult to portray on a TV screen. Considering the previous examples of Cahir and Yennefer, *The Witcher* is no exception.

Deviations from the original material include additions of new sub-plots and characters, including the story of Voleth Meir, Ciri's possession, Yennefer's loss of Chaos, etc. Most of these additional sub-plots seem questionable, with a few exceptions (for example the expanded backstory for Yennefer), seemingly added only for the visual effect, as they do not play a role in exploring the main themes of the story.

As previously mentioned, it is common for adaptations to display new storylines, especially if the showrunners have run out of original material, which can be seen in *Game of Thrones*, where the last two seasons were HBO's original writing, as the author of the literature, G. R. R. Martin, has not finished the series yet. This however cannot be said about *The Witcher*, as it has fully explored only three out of eight books so far, and therefore it cannot be said that the sub-plots were created because the producers have run out of original

material, instead it seems the producers wanted to simply adapt the material in their own way, which ended up being detrimental to the storylines in the adaptation.

The disconnection in the series raises questions regarding the future of the show, more specifically the next (and last) two seasons of the Netflix adaptations. With the amount of new sub-plots, new characters created for the show, and only 16 episodes remaining, the producers may not have enough time to express the full potential of the newly added characters and sub-plots, which may end up similarly to Cahir's character development – rushed and dishonest – which would further prove to be detrimental to the overall success of the adaptation.

3.4 Diversity and backlash against *The Witcher* adaptation

Characters' descriptions in the books and in the early adaptations gave people a certain mental image about the visual outlook of the characters, including the polish movie *The Hexer* (2001) and the polish show *The Hexer* (2002). The polish game saga *The Witcher* (2007, 2011, 2015), which popularized Sapkowski's work, brought the mental images to life, which were and still are used in comparisons with Netflix's casting choices. The adaptation has received a great deal of backlash regarding the visual representation of characters, with apparent focus on ethnic diversity rather than the focus on the storytelling and characterization changes to the source material.

As previously mentioned, during the creation of the world of *The Witcher*, Sapkowski took inspiration from Slavic mythology and further added medieval aspects to the narrative, which seems to have prompted the audience to expect historical accuracy from a non-historical fantasy fiction (Young, Albin et al., 2019; Hughes-Warrington et al., 2023). As stated, the negative medievalist perception of the audience is closely tied to the misguided idea that the Middle Ages were prominently white, which is false, as there are documented appearances of coloured people in history in Europe (for example Moors in Spain and Portugal). Considering this factor, it seems that the "historical accuracy" argument is disregarding the existence of people of colour throughout history.

Furthermore, adding historical aspects to a non-historical setting ultimately does not make it historical, and therefore the "historical accuracy" argument cannot be applied in this scenario. Combined with the misguided ideas regarding the Middle Ages (Young, Albin et al., 2019), and the expectations about visual representation of Middle Ages in modern media,

it can be assumed that people use these arguments to hide their displeasure with diversity in contemporary adaptations.

Much of the backlash regarding visual representation is aimed at the sorceresses of the universe, whose appearances clash with the descriptions in the books. In an interview with *Variety*, the casting director Sophie Holland was asked questions regarding the casting of the character Yennefer, to which she answered: *“In the book, she’s described as the most beautiful woman in the world. This was a few years ago and I’d like to think things have changed. But when you think about people’s unconscious bias – especially in the fantasy world, it felt like these worlds were predominantly white. And I remember saying, “I feel like we need to challenge what people think of as the standard of beauty. And having a woman of color in this role does incredibly powerful things to the people watching.” (Riley, 2023).*

She defends her casting choices on the matter, stating that the idea of beauty should be challenged, and including people of colour in TV adaptations makes such challenge possible. However, the way it is worded suggests that her casting choices manifested as a form of superficial inclusivity, seemingly focusing solely on hiring a woman of colour for the role of Yennefer.

While the sorceresses are described in a certain way, the description itself does not play a bigger role other than creating a mental image for the audience. The only character from the sorceresses, whose visual representation might clash with the original sub-plot of the books, may be Fringilla Vigo. However, her character has been completely redefined in the adaptation, as she is not a minor character anymore but rather became one of the commonly reoccurring characters, similarly to Istredd. Therefore, at this point of the show, it is unclear whether the story is going to follow in this direction, therefore, at this moment, the argument is invalid.

The invalidity of the arguments regarding *The Witcher* suggests a more superficial reason for the backlash from the audience regarding visual representation of characters in the show, as they seem to hide their discriminatory views behind deflective or empty arguments, which could be perceived as a form of covert racism, as in a form of expressing discriminatory views, which are hidden behind, for example, deflective arguments (Coates, 2011).

4 The Rings of Power

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was an American writer and linguist, who created one of the most famous fantasy universes around the world, writing numerous literature pieces depicting stories situated in the setting of Middle-earth. Similarly to *The Witcher*, Tolkien's creation has been used as an inspiration for many different works, including movies, games, and more recently an Amazon Prime TV show adaptation. Said adaptation has received backlash regarding the storyline deviations, weak writing, and visual character changes (IMDb, 2022-).

4.1 Literature

Tolkien released a significant number of literature work during his life, not limited to fantasy and fiction. The work he is universally most known for are *The Hobbit* (1937), and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954 – 1955). He did not manage to complete *The Silmarillion* (1977), instead it was edited and published after his death by his son, Christopher Tolkien. Further study of his father's drafts resulted in releases of *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (1980), *The History of Middle-earth* (1983–96), *The Children of Húrin* (2007), and many more (Hammond, 1999).

Tolkien did not create a single narrative covering the period of the Second Age, instead, the information about it is told in fragments throughout his work. Major events are covered in the Appendix B *The Tale of Years*, which includes information about Númenor, the kingdom of Men, and Rings of Power. Today, editors have composed numerous books considering specific events and periods from Tolkien's universe, for example Brian Sibley edited Tolkien's information regarding Second Age into one comprehensible book, *The Fall of Númenor: and Other Tales from the Second Age of Middle-earth* (2023).

4.1.1 Setting

The story is set in a place known as Middle-earth, which is a large continent that occupies the central region of Arda (Earth). It is situated between two continents – Aman in the west and The Land of Sun in the east. The most known regions of Middle-earth are The Westlands or Eriador. It consists of huge regions of land, such as Lindon, Eriador, Rhovanion, Gondor, and Mordor. The most extreme regions of the Westlands, which are mostly unknown, are Rhûn, Harad, and Khand. (Fonstad, 2002)

Middle-earth has been depicted in a variety of adaptations of Tolkien's work, the most prominent of which have been the *Lord of the Rings* (2001 – 2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012 – 2014) film trilogies directed by Peter Jackson. It has also appeared in television series *The Rings of Power* by Amazon, in numerous video games such as *The Lord of the Rings Online* (2007), and tabletop role-playing games. Each adaptation has made changes to the world, often adding new characters, creatures, and locations. For the most part, however, the overall geography and style of Tolkien's Middle-earth have stayed the same.

4.1.2 Second Age

The Second Age began after the destruction of Beleriand, region in northwestern part of Middle-Earth, during the War of Wrath, and the execution and successful removal of Morgoth, the primary antagonist of Arda, from Eä into the Void. It takes place thousands of years before the *Lord of The Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit*. Despite the Downfall of Númenor, it was not the end of the Second Age; the remaining Númenóreans, led by Elendil the Tall, escaped its wreck and founded two kingdoms in Middle-earth, Arnor and Gondor. They formed an alliance with Gil-Galad, the Last Alliance of Elves and Men, and marched on Sauron, attacking the Dark Tower of Barad-dûr. The Second Age ended with the first defeat of Sauron by the Last Alliance of Elves and Men (Tolkien, Sibley, 2023).

4.1.3 Style

Tolkien created his work with passion and creativity, mainly focusing on engaging storytelling and world building, taking inspiration from his knowledge of mythology and linguistics. He is known for his descriptive writing style, detailing the image of the world and characters. Despite the vast number of conflicts happening in his universe, they are structured as more of a post-analysis in his writing and compose shorter chapters of the books. Throughout his life he added more background to his universe, leaving letters for his son, Christopher, with more ideas, which further expand his world and its characters (Hammond, 1999).

4.2 Amazon adaptation

The Amazon show *The Rings of Power* was created by J. D. Payne and Patrick McKay, and it is based on the fantasy world created by J. R. R. Tolkien. Filming took place in New Zealand, where Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* film trilogies were

made. First episode of the show aired on 1st of September 2022, and, so far, there is only one season of the show, with the second season's release planned for 2024.

It should be mentioned that Amazon has acquired rights solely for the Second Age, as described in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, *The Return of the King*, the appendices, and *The Hobbit*. Rights for the First Age are held by The Tolkien Estate, but showrunners are allowed to use information from the First Age if the purpose is explanation of an event taking place during the Second Age (Robinson, 2022). In an interview with Vanity Fair (Robinson, 2022), one of the creators of the adaptation, Patrick McKay said: “*As long as we’re painting within those lines and not egregiously contradicting something we don’t have the rights to, there’s a lot of leeway and room to dramatize and tell some of the best stories that [Tolkien] ever came up with.*”

As not much is known about the Second Age, creators of the adaptation had a relatively free hand with the story's direction, however, possibly due to Amazon's limited rights, the producers may have had to be more creative, resulting in changes to characters and chronology of various events, which resulted in the adaptation being criticised for its deviations from the original material, which is an unfortunate contrast to McKay's comments in the interview.

4.2.1 Season 1

The story of *The Rings of Power* takes place in the Second Age, thousands of years before *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy, following the story of young Galadriel on her quest to defeat Sauron. She meets a survivor on a raft, who introduces himself to be Halbrand, and together they travel to Númenor. In the last episode, he reveals himself to be Sauron and tries to persuade Galadriel to join him, seeing her as a potentially powerful ally. She refuses, and the season ends with Sauron's return to Mordor, and the forging of Three Rings of Power. (Season 1, Episode 1-8)

4.3 Deviations from the source material

Comparably to *The Witcher*, the creators of *The Rings of Power* adaptation have made changes to the original material which include changes in characters' storylines, personalities, creation and inclusion of completely new characters, as well as visual changes to various characters.

4.3.1 Character deviations

Similarly to *The Witcher*, changes regarding the characters' personalities seem to disregard their previous traits or amplify their negative personality traits, resulting in morally good characters becoming more sinister. This is especially visible with Galadriel, as she can be considered the main protagonist of the show.

Galadriel is possibly one of the strongest and most known female figures across the entire lore. In *The Silmarillion*, Galadriel is described as “*the mightiest and fairest of all the Elves that remained in Middle-earth*” (Tolkien, 2008, pg. 291). She is tall with golden hair and almost ethereal in her appearance. In her younger years, she could be described as proud and free-spirited, later in life becoming wise and gentle (Tolkien, 2008).

The adaptation portrays Galadriel in her younger years, but seemed to have over-emphasized her free-spirited nature. She is portrayed as selfish, bitter, and impatient, seemingly completely disregarding other people, as can be seen in the first episode, during the snowstorm, where she endangers lives of others to reach her goal (Season 1, Episode 1). When she arrives in Númenor, she displays hostile behaviour towards the queen (Season 1, Episode 3), and in other interactions she becomes manipulative and uses threats to get what she desires, which further adds to her negative attributes. Overall, her character does not possess any redeeming qualities, except for her main goal, destroying Sauron, and throughout the season she does not go through any character development, but this may change in the future seasons.

The creators wanted to portray a strong female character, but instead, her character writing feels shallow, rushed, and poorly thought out, and caused a considerable disconnection between how the audiences feels about her and what the writers intended, further resulting in the audience actively disliking her character (IMDb, 2022-).

4.3.2 Storyline changes

As already mentioned, the producers created new stories for the characters, some of which contradict already existing lore by Tolkien, much to the dismay of the fans of Tolkien's work (IMDb, 2022-). Good example would be the story of Finrod.

In the adaptation, Finrod, Galadriel's brother, appears in the prologue and later in flashbacks. After Morgoth's defeat, he went after Sauron, unfortunately getting killed by his servants, which led to Galadriel acquiring his dagger and continuing his mission to hunt

down Sauron (Season 1, Episode 1). At the end of the season, Galadriel sacrifices Finrod's dagger in order to create the Three Rings of Power (Season 1, Episode 8).

This narrative contradicts the *Tale of Beren and Luthien*, in which Finrod dies fulfilling an oath of Friendship to a human, Beren, on his quest to retrieve a Silmaril from Morgoth's crown. Finrod, barehanded, kills a werewolf in defence of Beren, and is mortally wounded in the battle, fulfilling his debt. He was the first elf to be reincarnated in the Undying Lands (Tolkien, 2008).

4.4 Diversity and backlash in Rings of Power

As previously mentioned, the show has received backlash from the audience regarding the diversity in the show. Backlash regarding diversity is centred around the visual representation of non-human races, such as elves, dwarfs, etc. Equally to *The Witcher*, the character descriptions in the books do not play a bigger role other than providing the audience with a mental image of the characters, which, again, suggests that backlash regarding visual representation of different characters is superficial, as the audience criticising the visual representation appears to hide their discriminatory views behind deflection or empty arguments as a form of covert racism (Coates, 2011).

5 Foundation

Foundation is a series of sci-fi books written by a russian-born american author Isaac Asimov. He was a well-educated individual with a strong interest in science, earning a doctorate in biochemistry. He was a professor of biochemistry at Boston University and had a deep understanding of many scientific concepts. He is the creator of one of the most famous sci-fi works in the history, and is considered to be one of the fathers of sci-fi literature.

5.1 Literature

The *Foundation* series consists of seven books, *Prelude to Foundation* (1988), *Forward the Foundation* (1993), *Foundation* (1951), *Foundation and Empire* (1952), *Second Foundation* (1953), *Foundation's Edge* (1982), and *Foundation and Earth* (1986). Asimov first published his stories in a science fiction magazines like *Astounding Science Fiction* and *Amazing Stories* (Gregersen, 1998), before compiling them and later releasing as a novel, *Foundation*, in 1951. He continued writing and created the Foundation trilogy, consisting of *Foundation*, *Foundation and Empire*, and *Second Foundation*, with new prequels and sequels released years later. Despite the considerable year gap between the works, the series are cohesive, with later released prequels foreshadowing events from the sequels.

His writing is characterized by its strong scientific base, direct writing, and attention to detail. Asimov took inspiration from history, for example the fall of Roman Empire inspired him during the creation of Galactic Empire (Gregersen, 1998). He further utilizes his knowledge of biochemistry and other sciences in his work, especially in explanations of complex terms (for example psychohistory). To this day, *Foundation* is one of the most notable and revolutionary pieces of science fiction literature in the world.

5.1.1 Setting

An important character in the story is a talented mathematician Hari Seldon, who has invented a new science called psychohistory, which uses statistics and mathematics to predict the future of large populations. Seldon uses it to predict the inevitable fall of Galactic Empire and the following dark ages, which are supposed to last 30,000 years. In an attempt to shorten the span from 30,000 to 1,000 years, Seldon started working with a wide range of scientists on preserving the human knowledge, by creating Encyclopaedia Galactica (Asimov, 2016, pg. 30). The encyclopaedia was made to withstand, and shrink, the length of the dark age and to become the core of new Galactic Empire (Asimov, 2016). Through a

series of events, Seldon and his fellow scientists were exiled by the Galactic Empire to a deserted planet, Terminus, situated at the very edge of the Galactic spiral. The colony of scientists on Terminus becomes a sanctuary called Foundation, where most of the story takes place.

5.1.2 Style

Asimov managed to explain complex ideas in a way, which allowed the series to be accessible to a wider audience. The *Foundation* novels lack action and individual character development, instead, it is more focused on the ideas and concepts rather than on individual characters and specific events.

5.2 Apple TV+ adaptation

The Apple show *Foundation* was created by Josh Friedman and David S. Goyer, and it is inspired by the sci-fi series *Foundation* created by Isaac Asimov. First episode aired on 24th of September 2021. So far there are two seasons of the show, while the future of the third season remains unknown.

Show's production of the third season was halted due to the writers' strike in early 2023, and therefore there are only two seasons so far. The show received reviews criticizing the pace, weak writing, deviations from the original material, and visual representation of the characters. Overall, the show has received mostly positive reviews, apart from negative reviews from fans of the literature, who expected a closer adaptation of the original and expressed dissatisfaction with the changes portrayed in the adaptation. (IMDb, 2021-).

It is important to note that the show deviates heavily from the original material to a point, where, at times, the only common things are the names of characters, places, and similarity of the main plot. Therefore, we cannot look at it as an adaptation of the books, instead the next parts of the thesis are going to look at it as a story inspired by the books and consider, whether it carries the essence and themes of the original series.

5.2.1 Season 1

The first season of the show has received some criticism regarding its slower pace (IMDb, 2021-), but it is apparent that the goal of this season is to introduce the story, setting, and characters, which explains the slower pace. This season follows the story after Hari Seldon predicts the approaching fall of the Galactic Empire. He, together with a group of

loyal disciples, journey to the far reaches of the galaxy to establish The Foundation in an attempt to rebuild and preserve the future of civilization. (Season 1, Episodes 1-10)

5.2.2 Season 2

The second season focuses more on the plot of the story and on character developments, which compensates for the criticised slow pace of the first season. This season of the show the second season loosely adapt Isaac Asimov's short stories *The Traders*, *The Merchant Princes*, and *The General*. (Season 2, Episodes 1-10)

5.3 Deviations from the source material

As previously mentioned, the *Foundation* novels lack action and individual character development. The original trilogy spans the length of centuries, so the audience does not follow a single character, but instead follows societies and their gradual changes. It is more focused on the ideas and concepts, rather than on individual characters and specific events, and therefore it would be difficult to adapt into an engaging TV show by staying true to the original material, as the visual aspect would suffer (Wells-Lassagne, 2017).

Asimov's literature released in the 50's and so the ideas considered to be revolutionary back then are not as revolutionary over 70 years later. Therefore, it is understandable that the adaptation had to make changes to the original, for the adaptation to be relevant and engaging. Unfortunately, the creators made changes which disregard the main themes of the original novels, which influences the essence of the original story.

For example, in the adaptation, psychohistory is not used to consider the fate of masses, on the contrary, it is used to express powers of an individual. In the books, Hari has left holograms to reassure the group after each crisis. Once said crisis was resolved, Hari's hologram would appear, telling the group what he had predicted to happen, which allowed them to confirm they were still on the right path (Asimov, 2016, pg. 74).

It appears that the way they are handling it in the show, though, is that Hari will appear in the middle of the crisis to show them the way to resolving it, which goes against the original plan and psychohistory in particular, as it now seemingly relies on an individual showing them the way, as opposed to the premise of large groups being predictable with a certain degree of accuracy (Goyer and Friedman, 2021-).

5.3.1 Character deviations

Similarly to *The Witcher* and *The Rings of Power*, this adaptation has made changes to the characters' personalities, which seem to disregard their previous traits or amplify their negative personality traits. Good example of a completely redefined character is Salvor Hardin, whose portrayal almost contrasts his original portrayal in the books.

In the books, Salvor Hardin was a mayor in Terminus, whose role was undermined by the Board of Trustees. He learns the true intentions of Hari Seldon and eventually becomes the head of state of the Foundation. Salvor could be considered a knowledgeable, peace-loving, and decisive character, who creates a new religion, Scientism, and later uses this religion to conquer nearby interplanetary kingdoms and to increase the reach of Foundation. (Asimov, 2016).

The adaptation portrays Salvor Hardin as a warden of Terminus, who is not afraid to use violence to protect the colony (Season 1, Episode 6). She is the only character able to withstand the null field emitted by the Vault, an artefact on the planet Terminus, which proves to be dangerous to anyone else. Therefore, she is the only character, who can safely approach the Vault (Season 1, Episode 1). The presence of a null field near the Vault is a newly created aspect by the producers of the adaptation.

5.4 Diversity and backlash in Foundation

Asimov rarely included female characters in his literature, for example *Foundation* (1951) contains only one minor female character. Furthermore, character descriptions are scarce or absent completely, the only thing that is apparent are the genders of the characters, which are predominantly male. Compared to the other two adaptations, *The Witcher* and *The Rings of Power*, regarding the diverse cast, the production went a step further, as now the adaptation presents previously male characters, Salvor Hardin, Gaal Gornick, and Demerzel, as female characters. While this may seem like an unusual choice, overall, the visual representation of characters in the literature is modest or absent and does not play a bigger role in the original. The only exception to this might be the character of Demerzel, but, similarly to Fringilla in *The Witcher*, this character has also been redefined and is portrayed differently in the adaptation, further proving the argument invalid.

6 Conclusion

This bachelor thesis dealt with the topic of diversity and backlash in contemporary TV adaptations. The thesis mainly focused on the Netflix's *The Witcher* adaptation, and further marginally considered *The Rings of Power* and *Foundation* adaptations. All three adaptations have been inspired by influential fantasy and sci-fi novels, written by renowned authors, Andrzej Sapkowski, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Isaac Asimov. While they all differ in various aspects, including style and genre, their contemporary adaptation counterparts have received similar backlash, regarding deviations from the source material and visual representation of characters.

The thesis initially introduced the adaptation theory, topic of diversity and its importance in modern media, and subsequently explained the term medievalism. The next chapter introduced the book saga, *The Witcher*, written by Andrzej Sapkowski, which included the main information regarding the literature, including the setting, plot, and themes. It continued by introducing the Netflix adaptation of the same name and proceeded to compare the original material and the adaptation, further exploring specific examples of Netflix's deviations from the source material and considered the reasons and consequences of the changes done to the original literature. The following chapters introduced *The Rings of Power* and *Foundation* in similar way, firstly introducing the main information regarding their respective literature, and additionally considered the individual adaptations and their respective backlash and deviations from the original material.

The thesis analysed and compared the adaptations and their respective original material and discussed the deviations from the original material, which included character visual changes, personality changes, and storyline changes.

In *The Witcher*, the changes regarding the story are partially connected to the adaptation's focus on the character of Yennefer, and the new sub-plots revolving around her. This seems to be connected to the creator, Lauren Schmidt Hissrich, and her favouritism towards this character, as mentioned during her interview with Vanity (Riley, 2023). The other changes regarding storylines seem to be a result of the producers' aspiration to express their own creative ideas within the adaptation, which resulted in the adaptation missing major moments or sub-plots from the original material.

Despite the creator's initial promise about staying true to Sapkowski's work (Wilding, 2022), the new storylines added to the adaptation appear to be detrimental to the existing

storylines, but more importantly to the character of Geralt of Rivia, previously the main protagonist, who is being rather pushed to the side in favour of different characters, mostly Yennefer, but also Istredd, Fringilla, and more. The producers pursued new content throughout the first and second season, which they later tried to connect to the original plot of the literature in the third season, resulting in a perceivable disconnection between the characters and storylines themselves. The disconnection between the new and original material is one of the common adaptation pitfalls (Wells-Lassagne, 2017), and ultimately the main reason for the backlash regarding the storyline deviations of *The Witcher* adaptation.

The backlash regarding *The Rings of Power* is associated with the changes made to the original material, including character deviations, storyline changes, and generally weak writing. The changes made to the storyline affect the already existing lore, as highlighted on the example of the character Finrod. The changes result in disconnections within the lore, combined with the weak writing, and the audience's dislike towards the portrayal of the main character, Galadriel, seem to be the main reasons for backlash from the fans of Tolkien's work.

The *Foundation* adaptation deviates heavily from Asimov's original work, introducing changes altering the main themes and influencing the essence of the books, mainly in character portrayals and the application of psychohistory, which appear to be the main reasons for the backlash of the adaptation from the fans of Asimov's work.

The backlash regarding visual representation of all three adaptations seems to be purely superficial, driven by the discriminatory views of the audience, as the visual representations in the respective literature pieces do not play a bigger role than to create a mental image for the audience. Said discriminatory views tend to be concealed behind empty or irrelevant arguments, as a form of covert racism (Coates, 2011), such as incorrectly applying historical context to non-historical fantasy fiction, which was notable in the backlash regarding *The Witcher* and *The Rings of Power* adaptations (IMDb, 2019-; IMDb, 2022-).

Hopefully, the thesis provided a modest insight into the creative decisions made by the producers during the adaptation process and highlighted some of the challenges of the adaptation process.

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