

**69. Female sorcerers resisting patriarchy in the Netflix series *The Witcher*<sup>1</sup>****Büşra DOĞRU<sup>2</sup>****Esra ÇÖKER<sup>3</sup>**

**APA:** Doğru, B. & Çöker, E. (2024). Female sorcerers resisting patriarchy in the Netflix series *The Witcher*. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Arařtırmaları Dergisi*, (Ö14), 1199-1214. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1455176.

**Abstract**

Lauren Schmidt's Netflix series, *The Witcher* (2019), centers around the witcher, Geralt of Rivia, a professional monster hunter and his adventures in a fantasy world known as the Continent. While Geralt is the central character, the series also delves into the lives of female sorcerers who are trained by Brotherhood; an organization of skilled magic practioners who are determined to restore stability and order by governing and regulating the use of magic between kingdoms. This paper will analyze four sorcerers, Yennefer, Fringilla, Cirilla, and Tissaia, by focusing on the power of womanhood, especially the female power coming from what Silvia Federici in her book *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) underlines as women's "sexuality," "control over reproduction" and "ability to heal." This paper argues that these three innate female traits push these four sorcerers to exert their own agency and code of ethics and, thus, dismantle the patriarchal control of Brotherhood. Drawing upon feminist literary theory, especially Silvia Federici's book *Caliban and the Witch*, this article aims to analyze the power dynamics and resistance between the sorcerers and Brotherhood, the motives driving the sorcerers' rebellion, and how these sorcerers emerge as symbols of resistance throughout the series.

**Keywords:** *The Witcher*, Female power, Magic, Patriarchy, Resistance.

<sup>1</sup> **Statement (Thesis / Paper):** It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation process of this study and all the studies utilised are indicated in the bibliography.

**Conflict of Interest:** No conflict of interest is declared.

**Funding:** No external funding was used to support this research.

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**Source:** It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation of this study and all the studies used are stated in the bibliography.

**Similarity Report:** Received - /Ithenticate, Rate: 9

**Ethics Complaint:** editor@rumelide.com

**Article Type:** Research article, Article Registration Date: 21.01.2024-Acceptance Date: 20.03.2024-Publication Date: 21.03.2024; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1455176

**Peer Review:** Two External Referees / Double Blind

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## Netflix dizisi *The Witcher*'da ataerkiye direnen kadın büyücüler<sup>4</sup>

### Öz

Lauren Schmidt'in Netflix dizisi *The Witcher* (2019), profesyonel bir canavar avcısı olan cadı Geralt of Rivia ve onun Kıta olarak bilinen bir fantezi dünyasındaki maceraları etrafında dönüyor. Geralt ana karakter olsa da dizi, krallıklar arasında sihir kullanımını yöneterek ve düzenleyerek istikrarı ve düzeni sağlamaya kararlı, yetenekli sihir uygulayıcılarından oluşan bir organizasyon olan "Brotherhood" tarafından eğitilen kadın büyücülerin hayatlarını da araştırıyor. Bu makale, kadınlığın gücüne, özellikle Silvia Federici'nin *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) adlı kitabında kadınların "cinselliği", "üremedeki kontrolü" ve "iyileştirme gücü" olarak altını çizdiği kadın gücüne odaklanarak Yennefer, Fringilla, Cirilla ve Tissaia adlı dört büyücüyü analiz etmektedir. Bu makale, üç doğuştan kadın özelliğinin bu dört büyücüyü kendi eylemlerini ve etik kurallarını uygulamaya ittiğini ve böylece Brotherhood'un ataerki kontrolünü ortadan kaldırdığını tartışmaktadır. Feminist edebiyat kuramından, özellikle de Silvia Federici'nin *Caliban and the Witch* kitabından yararlanan bu makale, büyücüler ile "Brotherhood" arasındaki güç dinamiklerini ve direnişi, büyücülerin isyanını yönlendiren güdeleri ve bu büyücülerin dizi boyunca nasıl direniş sembolleri olarak ortaya çıktıklarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *The Witcher*, Kadın gücü, Büyü, Ataerkillik, Direnç.

### Introduction

The Netflix series *The Witcher* (2019) establishes a fantasy world in which different creatures exist: witchers, sorcerers, elves, and monsters. The series centers around the witcher, Geralt of Rivia, a professional monster hunter, and his adventures. While Geralt is the central character, the series also delves into the lives of female sorcerers who are trained by Brotherhood; an organization of skilled magic practitioners who are determined to restore stability and order by governing and regulating the use of magic between kingdoms. This paper analyzes four sorcerers, Yennefer, Fringilla, Cirilla, and Tissaia, by focusing on how three important traits - the ability to heal, sexuality and control over reproduction- of women make sorcerers stronger and how Brotherhood uses these powers of women for the benefit of the Council itself by making them vessels of its power. Brotherhood of Sorcerers is a Council that operates a magical academy in Aretuza to educate and train sorcerers, especially female sorcerers. Choosing specifically women to educate in the academy can be viewed from two different perspectives: First, they target powerful women who are perceived as potential threats to the patriarchal order and prevent possible upheavals by educating them according to the patriarchal conventions of academy in the beginning; second, the Council uses these female sorcerers as vessels to maintain its established order leveraging their counsel to aid kingdoms of the Continent and advance the Council's interests

<sup>4</sup> **Beyan (Tez/ Bildiri):** Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur  
**Çıkar Çatışması:** Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.  
**Finansman:** Bu araştırmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.  
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**Benzerlik Raporu:** Alındı – Turnitin, Oran: %9  
**Etik Şikayeti:** editor@rumelide.com  
**Makale Türü:** Araştırma makalesi, **Makale Kayıt Tarihi:** 21.01.2024-**Kabul Tarihi:** 20.03.2024-**Yayın Tarihi:** 21.03.2024; **DOI:** 10.29000/rumelide.1455176  
**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme

among these kingdoms. Furthermore, the Council controls and monitors the use of magic by the sorcerers by setting certain rules, such as forbidding fire magic and mixing “dangerous” herbs.

In *The Witcher* universe, there are many different kingdoms the female sorcerers are sent to: Nilfgaard, Cintra, Temeria, Redania, Aerdir, Rivia, Sodden, and Brokilon are just some of the places took place in the series. These kingdoms often have conflicts of interest over land and power with each other. In these conflicts, Brotherhood locates itself as a negotiator and stands by the kingdoms according to the benefit of its own institution rather than as a peacemaker. It sends the sorcerers that are trained in Aretuza to the kingdoms to control their plans. Each kingdom, secretly or explicitly, strives to be a dominating power and leading figure on the continent. While doing so, they all uphold masculine values and norms such as wealth, power, and dominance. All the kingdoms, except Cintra, are governed by male emperors. Even though Queen Calanthe, ruler of Cintra, is a female emperor, she has internalized patriarchal norms since she embraces masculine traits in her leadership role so as to be known and accepted as a powerful emperor, because as Amy Allen explains in *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*, “[w]hat it means to be a woman is to be powerless, and what it means to be a man is to be powerful” (1999, p. 12). That is the reason why the Queen of Cintra chooses to undertake male characteristics of a ruler.

By sending the sorcerers to kingdoms and pretending to appoint them to important positions, Brotherhood manages to hide its main purpose, which is keeping both kingdoms and sorcerers under surveillance. Besides the sorcerers, Brotherhood dissembles in such a way that it pretends to help the kingdoms with sorcerers’ counsel so that it can also control the kingdoms. Unlike the feminist concept of “sisterhood”, in which the notions of equality, community and nurture are emphasized (Hooks, 1986), the Council of Brotherhood maintains its livelihood through domination and control. In the name of peace, order and stability, Brotherhood tries to exert its authority over kingdoms by sending sorcerers to each and every one of them. It can be claimed that the most essential source of its power is to control. However, Yennefer, Fringilla, Tissia de Vries, and Cirilla realize the dominating practices of Brotherhood; they adopt a stance of resistance and subvert established hierarchies and power structures and they establish a Council of sorcerers in which they cooperate, empower, and support each other, contrary to Brotherhood of Sorcerers. This paper argues the motives driving the sorcerers’ rebellion and aims to show how they emerge as symbols of resistance throughout the series by establishing their own non-institutional Council, which is based on equality and support. First, the historical demonization of women will be explained throughout the series; secondly, according to Federici’s three innate powers of womanhood, each power will be analyzed; lastly, the portrayal of resistant women characters and how they establish their own council will be depicted.

### Historical demonization of women

In retrospect, the patriarchal system has employed various methods to subjugate women because it aimed to prevent women from empowerment, organizing, and “power-with”, which is the ability of a group to act together in order to achieve collective outcomes or goals (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021). The reason why men historically applied *power to* women is that they are potential threats to patriarchy and male authority, which can be regarded as domination (Pansardi, 2012, p. 73). One particular terrible method of oppression was the witch-hunts in the Middle Ages. These witch-hunts are crucial to understand the origins of the power structures between men and women in the mid-1400s. Silvia Federici provides insight into the witch-hunts, stating that they “[were] also instrumental to the construction of a new patriarchal order where women’s bodies, their labor, their sexual and reproductive

powers were placed under the control of the state and transformed into economic resources” (2004, p. 170). During witch-hunt, women, who were labelled as witches for using herbs to heal and take care of others, were ostracized and/or exterminated by the male power of the Middle Ages, which decided their destiny. Women who used herbs effectively as a cure could be respected or could gather people and would establish a community that would empower them. Therefore, this ability is considered dangerous, and those owning it are eradicated (Barstow, 1994; Behringer, 2004).

In parallel with history, the sorcerers are labelled as dangerous by male authority in *The Witcher*, as well. However, contrary to the witch-hunt, these women are raised to be better healers and trained to know herbs and how to use them. Whereas women’s innate tendency to heal is the same, the approach to control this ability is changed. As a disciplinary power, Brotherhood exploits women’s power, ability, and knowledge for the benefit of its Council: through institutions, it enables women to exist in the system. First, it defines women, chooses those who tend to heal, then, classifies them and gathers in Aretuza to educate. Secondly, it controls and regulates their power by using them as a means of its Council serving in kingdoms as part of Brotherhood. As opposed to witch-hunt, Brotherhood does not make women powerless; instead, it provides them with power so that it can exploit this power in the long run as long as they serve the purpose. The sorcerers who cannot succeed in controlling their chaos, which is the essence of the education given in Aretuza, are turned into eels. The education is based on controlling: Brotherhood aims to control the sorcerers who are also required to control their power. Thus, the common goal of both is to prevent chaos. Brotherhood enables women to participate as powerful sorcerers if they contribute to the Council’s power. Likewise, if these sorcerers refuse to serve in kingdoms or to be vessels of Brotherhood, it ostracizes them, as in the example of Yennefer. She is isolated from Brotherhood. Women were specifically chosen to be vessels because they innately had power that emerged with womanhood, which Federici describes as “the ability to heal, control over reproduction, and sexuality” (2004, p. 170).

In *The Witcher*, women are not labelled as witches and punished; since it is a supernatural series, they are actually witches. They have magical power, which they might use either for the advantage of society or quite the opposite. However, in *The Witcher* too, women were accused of being corrupted and hungry to power. According to the claim of a senior member and chair of Brotherhood, Stregobor, female heirs were cursed in the past, and Lilith's spirit lived within them. Stregobor claims that the heirs would follow Lilith's path. In a scene where Stregobor and Geralt of Rivia discuss the old story of Black Sun, Stregobor explains it to Geralt:

There was First full eclipse in 1,200 years. It marked the imminent return of Lilith, demon goddess of the night sent to exterminate the human race. According to the wise mage Eltibald, Lilith's path was to be prepared by 60 women wearing gold crowns who'd fill the river valleys with blood. I studied the girls born around the Black Sun, and I found horrendous internal mutations among them, I tried to cure them, locked them in towers for safekeeping, but the girls always died...They were autopsied, of course, to confirm my suspicions. But eliminating these women was the lesser evil. They could've drowned entire kingdoms in blood. (“The End’s Beginning”, 2019, 14:52)

Based on an unfounded rumor, Brotherhood oppressed 60 women in various ways, including imprisoning them in towers and attempting to “cure” them before ultimately massacring them. Within the patriarchal system, women are often categorized as either potential threats or obedient subjects. Those women who are perceived as threats to the system are eliminated, while those who comply are exploited. In contrast to the other male characters in *The Witcher*, Geralt is honest when he responds to Stregobor by stating that “innocent women were dead” (“The End’s Beginning”, 2019, 15:55). The massacre of these women was also linked to Falka, who was previously considered “rebellious.”

Falka was a princess and heir to a kingdom, yet her father overthrew her, prompting her to fight to reclaim her rightful place on the throne. Although her efforts are deemed as aggressive, Falka remained steadfast in her pursuit of justice. As recounted by Istredd, a historian and witch, “[s]he was trying to rightly recover her throne” (“What Is Lost”, 2021, 20:15). Falka's struggle was not only to protect herself, but also to safeguard her kingdom, an act that would have been viewed as normative and heroic had it been undertaken by a man. Perhaps, one should ask the same old question: “What is the role of a woman?” (Boehnke, 2011, p. 58). Within the framework of patriarchy, women are relegated to a subordinate role, and the domain of power is reserved for men; they are expected to acquiesce, while men are associated with action. As in the story of Black Sun, Falka's narrative is once again being told by Stregobor:

She was a power-hungry mutt of a girl...who cried, ‘Death to all kings!’ when Vridank spurned her elven mother...Bent on revenge, she slaughtered nobility...priests...even civilians, with her bare hands...It wasn't enough, though. She preyed on foolish followers, incited a rebellion...Together, they burned cities to the ground and sent rivers of innocent blood down the streets of Redania and Temeria. Anything to reclaim power! (“What Is Lost”, 2021, 19:20)

Falka's efforts to defend her rightful heirship, which was her birthright, were met with disdain, as she was labeled a “power-hungry mutt of a girl.” Stregobor played a significant role in tarnishing her reputation by highlighting her violent tendencies and instilling fear in people by reminding them of the destruction she wrought in Mirthe by stating, “[h]istory does have a way of repeating itself, doesn't it? And I was there. I was there when Falka destroyed Mirthe and all the mages in it. Her violence etched here forever” (“What Is Lost”, 2021, 20:34). Stregobor's efforts to spread horror stories about Falka were aimed at manipulating other women and discouraging any potential rebellion against the ruling powers. Following Falka's downfall, witches in the series were subjected to systematic oppression by Brotherhood, who considered their powers, including healing, control over reproduction, and sexuality, to be too dangerous. Firstly, Brotherhood imparts education aligned with patriarchal values; secondly, the Council grapples with maintaining control over Yennefer by resorting to her removal following her insurrection; thirdly, Tissia endeavors to alter the Council's stance towards Yennefer, consequently finding herself estranged from her standing within Brotherhood.

### Ability to heal

Women and nature are inseparable in certain ways and the roots of this association date back to ancient times, when women were primarily related to nature, possessing knowledge of herbs and their healing properties, while men were tasked with hunting animals for food. According to Federici (1975), women were essentially health care practitioners, healers. Yet, this close association between women and nature eventually was perceived as a threat to men's power as the use of herbs was viewed as a form of magic that could be misused against them. As Jane Meyerding puts forward in *Reweaving the Web of Life*, “[m]en consistently have invaded and taken over with their technology those areas where the traditional powers of [women] have been seen as threatening to male/patriarchal control” (1982, p. 12). Therefore, to prevent women's empowerment through nature, medieval women were often accused of using herbs for their supposed magical and poisonous properties and were sentenced. Moreover, as Michael Ostling notes in his study on the representation of witches, “accused witches were rarely herbalists” (2014, p. 179). Rather, they were labeled as herbalists who curse men with their herbs. However, in *The Witcher*, the sorcerers can use herbs; although Brotherhood knows and approves usage of herbs for the benefit of the Council, it limits the use of herbs with some unique spells as controlling power.

Men have historically viewed women's contributions to society, such as their efforts to help and heal others, as potentially dangerous, even if these actions are carried out for the greater good. Healing does not always have to be related to health or herbs; taking care of each other is also a kind of healing (Minkowski, 1992). During the series, the sorcerers establish a union in which they support and empower each other. Yet, it was difficult in the beginning. As Bell Hooks claims, "solidarity strengthens resistance struggle" (1986, p. 127). They create a sense of sisterhood which leads to their spirit of resistance and helps them to cope with the dominance, oppression, and power of Brotherhood. With solidarity, they unite and support one another during the series on some occasions, which is seen as a threat to the continuity of Brotherhood's power, for they may be dangerous when they unite. It can be claimed that they are appointed to different kingdoms because Brotherhood aims to keep them separate. Furthermore, while being educated in Aretuza, the sorcerers are forced to compete with others, and this causes them not to have close ties with each other: they are prevented from coming together and creating a sisterhood.

With the fear of unknown women power, In *The Witcher*, the Council has tendency to view the sorcerers' power as supernatural and unsettling; thus, the biggest purpose of Brotherhood is to regulate and control the power of sorcerers and others. This perspective is summarized in Ritta and Richard Horsley's article as follows: "[T]he persecution of alleged witches...[is] a violent manifestation of Western male culture's fear and hatred of women, as an extension of its need to suppress women's traditional powers, rites and knowledge" (1987, p. 1). Even if a woman chooses to pursue a career in healing and helping others, persecution often finds her because "the Counter-Reformation took a strong position against popular healers, fearing their power and deep roots in the culture of their communities" (Federici, 2004, p. 201). The possibility of building a women's community and creating a unified female organization is recognized a groundbreaking activity threatening male authority; therefore, Brotherhood monitors the sorcerers and establishes a competitive rivalry beginning with the school environment.

As a well-established solidarity, the women living in the Brokilon forest can be analyzed. They are deeply connected to nature, living according to its rules and isolating themselves from others in the forest. They possess magical abilities and spiritual knowledge that are rooted in the trees and plants of their forest. These Amazon-like women are fearless warriors who do not hesitate to fight for what they believe in. Their existence may be seen from two different perspectives: on the one hand, they are free to live without restriction, domination, or being monitored within their territory on their own, and on the other, their living space is bordered by a forest, and they do not venture outside of it. These women are reminiscent of the old stories of witches who lived in the woods and practiced magic. However, unlike the witches who were persecuted in the Middle Ages and forced into isolation, these women protect and heal a young, innocent girl. Having the ability to heal, they help a young, innocent girl, moreover, not only physically but also psychologically help her by keeping her bad dreams away.

Triss Merigold is a sorcerer mostly known for his healing power and knowledge of herbs. When Cirilla goes to Kaer Morhen, Geralt invites Triss to help her to cope with the changes she is experiencing and heal her soul and wounds. Triss quickly mends the injury on her face; in stark contrast to the red hair often associated with the negative stereotype of evil witches from history, the colour of the hair may be chosen deliberately to highlight that she reverses the stereotype of a witch. As womanhood brings the ability to heal innately, these sorcerers in the series can use this magic power for the benefit of others or not. However, Triss chooses to use it to heal Cirilla physically and spiritually. In Kaer Morhen, Cirilla stays with witchers who do not understand her, and they do not know what a woman needs. During her days in Kaer Morhen, Triss helps Cirilla find herself and overcome her fears and nightmares by

companying her. Furthermore, in the Sodden War, where sorcerers fight for the sake of innocent people, Triss uses her magic to keep the gate closed, and her neck is burnt. She almost sacrifices herself for others in return for nothing, which stresses that she does magic to protect and heal. The sorcerers heal not only others but also each other. In spite of the controlling power of Brotherhood and their personal disagreements, the sorcerers unite against any danger. Tissaia de Vries struggles to keep Yennefer safe and often visits her since she assumes that Brotherhood may discomfort her after her refusal of the Council. Likewise, after Triss is damaged in the war, Tissaia merges her magic power with others to heal her wounds, to keep her alive. In contrast to Brotherhood, the non-institutional council of the sorcerers protects each other; what they do is also healing. The result of their cooperation enhances their collective strength, providing this association more than their individual magical powers.

In addition to Triss, Yennefer is portrayed as a woman who mends the wounds of others. For instance, she helps Jaskier, Geralt's companion, in recovering from his injuries and heals the wounds of Coen, another witcher. Moreover, Yennefer's most notable healing ability lies in her fire magic during the Sodden war. The war rages between Nilfgaard and the "innocent" people living in kingdoms supported by the witches. Yennefer and other witches - Sabrina, Triss Merigold, and Tissaia de Vries - join forces despite their past conflicts, to fight against the enemy that invades innocent people's land in search of more power. When Tissaia realizes that they are bound to lose, she urges Yennefer to take charge and save the people and the Continent. Tissaia tells Yennefer, "[I]t's your turn to save these people, this Continent. This is your legacy... Everything you have ever felt, everything you've buried... Let your chaos explode" ("Much More", 2019, 48:02). She motivates Yennefer to unleash her anger and magic. While focusing on the spell, Yennefer recalls the words of Brotherhood about her weakness and ugliness and burns the enemy with magic. Although she uses "evil magic" and incinerates the enemy, she does it for the sake of the innocent people who need her help; in a sense, she heals them. Nevertheless, she loses her powers after using the fire magic and subsequently searches for a way to recover them, which leads her to the Temple of Melitele.

Melitele is the "Goddess of fertility and harvest...The graduates of the temple school are known to become midwives, historians, healers..." ("Dear Friend", 2021, 12:40), and in the temple, "[t]here's no fighting.... No politics. The temple is known for its neutrality. The temple is what you make of it ("Dear Friend", 2021, 13:22). It is a meditating place where witches are taught to control their magic find inner peace, and be helpful to others. It is run by a woman named Nenneke and is known for its neutrality, with no politics or fighting taking place within its walls. The temple represents values that are in opposition to those of Brotherhood. While both institutions teach how to control magic, Brotherhood focuses on preparing for enemies at Aretuza, whereas the temple teaches sharing, helping, and healing of others. Historians, who are essential for the future, healers who cure, and midwives who manage women's reproduction are all educated at the temple.

### **Control over reproduction**

One of the primary reasons why women are perceived as a threat to the patriarchal system is their control over reproduction. Women and nature are similar to each other because of their ability to reproduce new life. Yet, unlike nature, women also have the ability and will to stop it. The choice of women threatens the patriarchal system's continuity as women can choose not to bear children and stop the propagation of the race. As a result, male authority "has spared no efforts in its attempt to wrench from women's hands the control over reproduction and to determine which children should be born, where, when, or in what numbers" (Federici, 2004, p. 91). Throughout history, male authority has controlled

women's bodies, deciding when they should give birth or have an abortion, instead of allowing the body owner to make the decision. During the Medieval ages, women, especially midwives, “were not trusted...because their exclusion from the profession undermined women’s control over reproduction” (Federici, 2004, p. 184). Women negotiated and supported each other, but state authority intervened, by considering it dangerous for birth control. The same fear was evident when birth control pills were introduced in the 1950s, and they were promptly prohibited with the belief that women should not be in charge of birth control and their bodies as it could endanger the permanence of the patriarchal system. In the 1970s, women brought the table new issues such as pregnancy testing, contraception, abortion and “the aim was to gain control over our bodies” (Hanmer, 1997, p. 349). In *The Witcher*, Yennefer of Vengerberg, the most powerful sorcerer, controls her reproduction and sacrifices her natural right to procreate in exchange for power and beauty.

Yennefer of Vengerberg is portrayed as the most defiant character against authority and its institutions in *The Witcher*. She comes from a family where her stepfather treated her as a servant and was later sold to a witch for a mere “four marks.” She was then taken to Aretuza by Tissaia de Vries to study magic. Throughout the series, Yennefer is established as the most powerful witch who is highly ambitious and willing to risk her life to gain more power. Despite having the ability to open portals before coming to Aretuza, she often fails in her studies at the school, which can be seen as her inner rebellion against the institutions of male dominance. Although she is educated by a female teacher, Tissaia de Vries, the school is primarily governed by Brotherhood. Yennefer's actions are driven by her own desires and agenda, rather than adhering to the rules of the school. She defies the authority by making her own choices about where to serve and controlling her body.

In Aretuza, witches, upon completion of their education, are dispatched to kingdoms as representatives of Brotherhood. Stregobor, a character from the story, suggests that witches should be controlled like kingdoms because “[u]nchecked kings and queens lead to rebellions. Massacres. It’s the reason this chapter was formed” (“Betrayal Moon”, 2019, 25:44). Initially, Yennefer is meant to go to Aerdin, where she wishes to be. However, her quarter-elf heritage would lead to political complications with other kingdoms, so she is unable to go there. Moreover, Yennefer has a deformed body with a hunchback, making it even more difficult for her to be accepted. Driven by fury after being rejected by Aerdin, she undergoes a transformation, where her spine and jaw are forcefully straightened to give her a “beautiful” appearance. In exchange, she goes to the enchanter of Brotherhood, who beautifies witches before dispatching them to various kingdoms. The notion of making women charming and attractive symbolizes the patriarchal worldview. It suggests that women must be beautiful to be accepted as vessels of Brotherhood by the male authorities.

In an attempt to fit in, Yennefer goes even further and allows the enchanter to remove her reproductive organ. This can be analyzed in two ways: first, as a woman, she surrenders her most significant power, that of procreation, in exchange for a “normal” appearance and acceptance by male-dominated society. Second, she has control over her body and willingly foregoes the opportunity to bear children because controlling over a woman’s own body is an essential sign of self-determination. During the surgical procedure, Yennefer experiences excruciating pain and burns, as depicted in the scene, which is intercut with Geralt and Striga's fight. The second scene also relates to the theme of reproduction, representing a different woman who could not choose what happened to her body and gave birth to an unwanted child that turned into a monster.

The story of Foltest and Adda explicitly demonstrates gender differences. Foltest, the King of Temeria, rapes his sister, Adda, as a consequence of the rape, Adda gets pregnant and dies while giving birth to Striga. Adda, who is the victim of the rape, dies in the end, yet, Foltest becomes a king without any punishment. The scene highlights two contrasting examples: the first is of a woman who defied male authority and exerted control over her body, enduring intense pain and suffering. The second is of a daughter whose mother was raped and cursed, leading to monstrous consequences. As Silvia Federici argues in *Caliban and the Witch*, “male-centered systems of exploitation have attempted to discipline and appropriate the female body, demonstrating that women’s bodies have been the main targets, the privileged sites, for the deployment of power techniques and power relations” (2004, p. 15). In both Yennefer and Striga's cases, their bodies become the targets of power.

After arriving in Aerdin, Yennefer's task is to safeguard Queen Kalis and her infant daughter. However, during their journey, they encounter an assassination attempt. Before the altercation, Queen Kalis expresses her admiration for Yennefer's power and independence by saying, “[p]eople look at you for who you are, not for what you can give them. You made the right choice, giving all that nonsense up” (“Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials”, 2019, 00.22). King Dagorad orders the assassination of his own wife, as she is unable to provide a male heir for the kingdom's stability. In the ensuing conflict, Yennefer employs her magical abilities to create portals and protect the baby and Queen, but the assassin ultimately captures Kalis. In a desperate bid to save herself and her child, the Queen offers her baby and promises to produce a male heir. However, this plea fails, and she is murdered. Although Yennefer attempts to save the baby, she is unsuccessful, and the infant dies. While burying the child, Yennefer speaks to her:

Your mother was right about one thing. We're just vessels. And even when we're told we're special, as I was, as you would've been, we're still just vessels...for them to take...and take...until we're empty...and alone...So, count yourself lucky. You've cheated the game and won without even knowing it. (“Of Banquets, Bastards and Burials”, 2019, 48:53)

Yennefer demonstrates an awareness of the oppressive system that subjugates women both psychologically and physically. According to Federici, this resistance can be seen as “a true war against women clearly aimed at breaking the control they had exercised over their bodies and reproduction” (2004, p. 88). Yennefer is a prime example of a woman who resists male power and fights to retain control over her body. However, in contrast, Kalis and Adda are either unwilling or compelled to submit to male authority. Adda suffers sexual abuse at the hands of her brother, and her sexuality is reduced to an object for Foltest's satisfaction. In the end, both Kalis and Adda fall victim to patriarchy's subjugating power.

## Sexuality

The discussion of women's sexuality dates back to Adam and Eve. Women's bodies have been objectified and treated as commodities ever since. According to the story, Eve's desire to eat the forbidden fruit led to her seduction of Adam, resulting in their fall from heaven and this event marked the beginning of women's demonization in religion (Martin, 2013). Therefore, throughout history, women's sexuality has been viewed as dangerous and shameful. Federici elaborates on this by stating:

All these were the means by which a patriarchal caste tried to break the power of women and erotic attraction...With the adaptation of this repressive legislation, sexuality was completely politized...by the 12th century, we see the Church not only peeping into the bedroom of its flock, but the making of sexuality a state matter” (2004, p. 37-38).

Consequently, women's bodies became a matter of state, enabling male authorities to control them and restrict women's decision-making power over their bodies, including abortion. They “[d]emonized any form of birth control and non-procreative sexuality while charging women with sacrificing children to the devil...all the European governments began to impose the severest penalties against contraception, abortion and infanticide” (Federici, 2004, p. 88). Consequently, during Medieval Europe, “[t]he woman who exercised her sexuality outside the bonds of marriage and procreation” (p. 184) was seen as a witch and subjected to prosecution and execution.

The notion that women would enslave men and make them the objects of their sexual fantasies can be traced back to the story of Adam and Eve. However, in reality, it is the patriarchy that has enslaved women and restricted their freedom of choice. As Federici explains, control over women's bodies and “reproductive capacity, through the criminalization of abortion and the introduction of a system of surveillance and punishment that literally expropriates women's bodies” (2018, 17). Women were reduced to serving as mere sexual objects for men. They were expected to perpetuate procreation and not derive any pleasure from the act. Women were denied the freedom to be sexually liberated and were instead confined to societal expectations. According to Federici, “[a] sexually active woman, then, was a public danger, a threat to the social order as she subverted a man's sense of responsibility, and his capacity for work and self-control” (2004, 191). The demonization of women's sexuality made it a source of fear, limiting women to their reproductive function as mothers.

In *The Witcher*, Yennefer of Vengerberg is a fiercely independent woman who embraces her sexuality on her own terms. She exemplifies the archetypal witch of Medieval Europe: she does not bear children, exercises complete control over her body, dresses in “feminine” attire, practices forbidden magic, and engages in premarital sex without regard for social conventions. Yennefer does not behave so as to please men; instead, she occasionally uses her sexuality to attract men. Therefore, sexuality becomes a means to exercise power. Her physical attractiveness and charm attract the attention of Geralt of Rivia, Istredd, and Jaskier. She is the opposite of the “proper” woman of the Middle Ages when “[n]akedness was penalized, as were many other ‘unproductive’ forms of sexuality. It was forbidden to drink, swear, curse” (Federici, 2004, p. 137). Yennefer boldly defies social conventions and even hosts a sex party where men and women engage in sexual acts under magical influence, challenging the patriarchal order. Despite being tasked with maintaining order, Yennefer creates chaos and breaks the rules. In one notable scene, Yennefer and Istredd have sex while a group of people watch and applaud them, and her sexual encounter with Geralt is gazed upon by Jaskier. Yennefer's character is the epitome of rebellion and she rejects the oppressive and isolating societal norms imposed upon women, she embraces and celebrates her sexuality without apology.

Yennefer loses her power after the fire magic she does in the Sodden War. Lacking magic power makes her less sexual; she neither wears conspicuous clothes nor make-up; she looks “innocent”. It can be asserted that Yennefer internalized the male standpoint of women: she accepts that her power comes from her magic. Yet, her sexuality, whether she has magic or not, belongs to herself. As Federici says, patriarchy seeks to control and regulate women's sexuality, yet when a woman decides to embrace her sexuality and does not avoid it, she challenges the disciplinary power of the male authority. Before Sodden, Yennefer challenges the practices of Brotherhood. Nevertheless, she cannot see herself as a powerful woman after losing her magic power. Contrary to what she thinks, she still can use magic with her knowledge of herbs. In a scene, she protects Cirilla from evil by mixing herbs and using the spell against it. Here, the difference between a woman and sorcerers of the series can be explicitly observed: a woman can use herbs to make magic, but Yennefer could use her supernatural power for magic.

## Women resisting Brotherhood

In *The Witcher*, each witch in Aretuza is educated to channel chaos, referring to magic in the series, into order. Their education trains them to use their abilities to serve kingdoms as counsellors. As stated in the series, “[b]alance and control. Without them, chaos will kill you” (“Four Marks”, 2019, 18:02). In the academy, the witches are taught “proper” magic, while forbidden practices, such as fire magic, are not permitted. In the series, as Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995), the school functions similarly to prisons and mental institutions in terms of defining, classifying, controlling, and regulating witches. Foucault describes discipline as:

‘Discipline’ may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a “physics” or an “anatomy” of power, a technology. (1995, 215)

Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary power can be applied to both genders. Brotherhood in *The Witcher* acts in accordance with Foucault's definition of disciplinary power; it uses the sorcerers as vessels serving for the benefit of its own institution. However, suppose the sorcerers cannot succeed in Aretuza, or they are the opposite of the standard that was established by Brotherhood, they can be ostracized and isolated from the community. The candidate sorcerers who have the talent yet cannot control their chaos were transformed into eels. It can be claimed that Brotherhood enables the sorcerers with the condition that they contribute to the system; otherwise, it disables them to exist in the system: it prevents them from education, shelter and so forth. Yet, Brotherhood fails to fully exercise disciplinary power as it cannot oppress the women who resist it, such as Yennefer, Fringilla, Tissaia de Vries, and Cirilla. As Foucault states, “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (1978, p. 95). Resistance can be thought of as an exercise in reversing power, using the same strategies to work in favor of those who want to carve out independent areas for their own choices (Hartmann, 2003).

Yennefer is a witch who refuses to comply with the regulations set by Brotherhood: In one scene, she is reprimanded for disobeying Brotherhood's decision to travel to Nilfgaard, instead of Aerdin. In response, she blames Brotherhood for their actions by stating, “Instead, I went to a prized kingdom and did fuck all for decades. Just as you taught us. Helped murderers and rapists keep their crown. Maybe it is time for something different” (“Before A Fall”, 2019, 34:08). Yennefer frequently disobeys Brotherhood's orders, thereby betraying them. Firstly, she declines to go to Nilfgaard, as instructed, and instead alters her appearance and heads to Aerdin. Secondly, she rejects Brotherhood's request to kill Cahir, a captive Nilfgaardian commander. Stregobor, the chair of Brotherhood, opposes Yennefer's membership in the Council and strives to isolate her from Brotherhood and society. However, Yennefer perseveres. Federici's definition of a witch aligns with Yennefer's character: “The witch was also the rebellious woman who spoke out, argued, cursed, and did not cry during torture” (Federici, 2004, p. 184). Yennefer is a determined individual who prioritizes her own interests, in contrast to many other women, and consequently becomes the target of Brotherhood. Silvia Federici contends that “hundreds of thousands of women could not have been massacred and subjected to the cruellest tortures unless they posed a challenge to the power structure” (2004, p. 164). Women perceived as a threat to men's power are deemed dangerous, which is why patriarchy seeks to suppress them, such as Yennefer of Vengerberg.

Yennefer's rebellious nature is evident from the very beginning of her education in Aretuza. When she is taken to Aretuza for her education, she cuts her wrists on the first night, but is rescued by Tissaia de Vries. Yennefer believed that ending her life would grant her control over it: “You should've let me die.

At least I had control over that” (“The End’s Beginning”, 2019, 15:56). Nevertheless, Tissaia explains that Yennefer “[wasn’t] taking control. You were losing it” (“The End’s Beginning”, 2019, 16:03). Despite being portrayed as a representative of Brotherhood, serving as the Rectoress of Aretuza, Tissaia struggles to change the system from within. She protects Yennefer from Stregobor at Brotherhood’s Council, insisting that Yennefer should go to Aerdir as planned. Tissaia confronts Stregobor by saying, “Still afraid of Falka, are you? [to Stregobor] And you, you spare your niece her duties? [to Vigo] Not enough fragrance in Toussaint to take the stench off that nepotism” (“Betrayal Moon”, 2019, 25:51). She does not hesitate to remind them of Falka and is surprised that they are still fearful of her rebellious nature and the power of women against men. Later, Tissaia rescues Yennefer from the dungeon while Stregobor questions and reads her mind. Additionally, when Tissaia assumes that Yennefer has been killed during the Sodden War, she searches for her and grieves for her. Despite being a member of Brotherhood, as a teacher in Aretuza and having a seat on the Council, Tissaia serves as a unifying mother figure for her witches, aiding, inspiring, and mending their wounds.

Fringilla is Artorios Vigo’s niece and a prominent figure in Brotherhood, akin to Stregobor. Fringilla follows her uncle’s footsteps and becomes a proficient magician. She proves to be one of the most successful students in Aretuza, indicating her ability to internalize power structures and male authorities and to succeed within that system, which is unlike Yennefer. The contrast between Yennefer and Fringilla becomes evident in Yennefer’s statement about Fringilla, “[t]he most important thing they teach you at Aretuza isn’t magic! It’s to make people in power believe anything you want them to. Do anything you want them to! Fringilla’s a political animal” (“Redanian Intelligence”, 2021, 24:58). According to Yennefer, Fringilla excels at the politics of Brotherhood because she is often undermined by the male-dominated power structure.

Yennefer and Fringilla are two distinct characters: In Aretuza, Yennefer disregards the orders of Brotherhood, while Fringilla is a model student and obedient to the rules and education of the academy. Nevertheless, Fringilla’s fate changes when Yennefer chooses to go to Aerdir instead of Nilgaard. Fringilla is sent to Nilgaard, contrary to Brotherhood’s preference: “Your girl is... With all due respect, your niece is only capable of doing what she’s told. No ambitious mage wants to be assigned anywhere south of Sodden. But Nilgaard needs correcting. Perhaps we consider sending someone there with a bit more... spine” (“Betrayal Moon”, 2019, 24:52). Stregobor’s statement suggests that Fringilla adheres to Brotherhood’s authority and is submissive to it. Yet, it is apparent that she is not entirely so.

In her service to Nilgaard, Fringilla transforms into a rebellious figure, working alongside Cahir, the Nilgaardian commander, and invading other kingdoms in pursuit of power and territory. She even fights against Brotherhood and her fellow students from Aretuza. However, even in Nilgaard, male dominance operates in a similar manner, as other commanders and Cahir continually manipulate and oppress her. Despite her status as a powerful commander, she is often questioned about her leadership abilities by men. For instance, when a male commander appears, Fringilla is asked, “And you call yourself a leader?” and her capabilities are constantly undermined, as she is reminded, “You are not their commander. She should remember that” (“Voleth Meir”, 2021, 07:24). Ultimately, Fringilla emerges as a figure of resistance, as she becomes increasingly aware of the power dynamics in Aretuza, Brotherhood, and Nilgaard. The more she realizes how men’s power oppresses her and others, the more she embodies resistance. She eventually becomes rebellious and murders the other commanders who oppose her power, stating, “[m]y most valuable lesson...came on my last night there. When Yennefer of Vengerberg stole the seat of Aerdir to which I was entitled, and that taught me whenever a lesser light tries to steal what is yours...you do not sit there and take it” (“Voleth Meir”, 2021, 35:08). Towards the

end, Fringilla meets her uncle, Vigo, and asks if she can return to Aretuza. Vigo responds, "Let's be honest. Whatever is brewing out there, Brotherhood needs reinforcements in here. If you were to return, you'd need to plead your case. Apologize, as well." The reason for the apology is "for believing that you could have any impact there at all, my dear. Some are obsessed with finding power and those who know their place. You know which one you are, thank God. You wouldn't have come back here if you didn't" (Voleth Meir", 2021, 32:04). Even Artorius Vigo believes that Fringilla remains obedient despite her transformation.

Cirilla is a significant character whose existence represents resistance to Brotherhood. She is a princess of Cintra, possessing remarkable independence and strength of will. Raised by her grandmother Calanthe, Queen of Cintra, after her parents' death, she inherited uncontrollable magical power from her mother. As a descendant of Lara Dorren, who is a warrior aiding the Elves in their victory over humans, Cirilla is known as the "Child of Elder Blood, Child of Wrath," and is cursed to bring about the apocalypse. After her grandmother's demise, Cirilla embarks on a journey to seek answers and comprehend her true identity. Various groups, including Nilfgaard, Cintra, Brotherhood, Elves, Yennefer, and a Deathless Mother, pursue her. The Elves believe that Cirilla is their savior and seek her as such, while Cintra seeks to unite their kingdom and crown her as queen. Yennefer pursues Cirilla and eventually teaches her how to harness her magic at the behest of the "Deathless Mother," also known as "Voleth Meir," an ancient witch who thrives on suffering. Brotherhood hunts Cirilla down in the meantime because they believe she is too strong to manage and want to get rid of her. The connecting thread among these organizations is that they want to take advantage of her influence or eliminate her to stop the apocalypse. Consequently, as a young adult, Cirilla requires protection after her grandmother's demise. Geralt becomes a paternal figure and protects Cirilla, but unlike the other male characters in the series, he does not try to suppress her power or view her as a threat.

Cirilla possesses many unique qualities, such as being human, carrying Elder blood, having magic like a witch and being trained like a witcher, which sets her apart from the others and provides her a distinctive identity. In the series, Cirilla is often on the move, fleeing from her adversaries with Geralt. Introduced as a graceful character, Cirilla is loved by the people she meets, and even when a woman harshly criticizes her grandmother and kingdom, she remains understandable. Cirilla defies stereotypes as she is perceived as a fragile young adult who is beautiful and kind, but at the same time, has the power to bring about the apocalypse and fight like a witcher. As Cirilla says, "my grandmother fought battles and wore dresses. You can do both" ("Redanian Intelligence", 2021, 31:44). Cirilla is an essential character in understanding that Brotherhood and other male authorities cannot merely subjugate women for being powerful. She becomes a witcher, a role not typically afforded to women. Geralt hides her in Kaer Morhen, where other witchers reside and are trained as witchers. It is possible to conclude that when women receive the same training as men, they can also become mighty warriors and witchers. It is not a question of ability but rather of opportunity and equality.

In the world of *The Witcher*, women face significant challenges, including oppression and inequality at the hands of male authorities who seek to exert power over them. However, despite these obstacles, female characters resist and fight to assert their agency and freedom. For instance, Yennefer, who resisted Brotherhood's demands and its oppressing rules from her earliest days at Aretuza, has served as a symbol of resistance. Top student at Aretuza Fringilla first obeys rules but ultimately defies Brotherhood and the Nilfgaardian generals who try to control her. Even Tissaia, the rectoress of the school and a member of the Council, struggles to make significant judgments; in the end, she manipulates and deceives Brotherhood to further the witches' agenda. In contrast, Cirilla transcends

stereotypes and has the ability to influence how the world will develop. She pursues a career as a witcher, a role normally held by men, and her connection with Geralt offers a positive outlook on a time when men will have this position.

## Conclusion

Since the Middle Ages, women have struggled for autonomy, bodily agency, and even survival. The power of men has prevented women from progressing by creating various justifications or excuses, such as “prosecuting them at law, to break their power by a punishment which could extend to having them legally put to death” (Hutton, 2017, p. 41). This authority thwarts women’s empowerment. The female ability to control reproduction and sexuality, as Silvia Federici notes, poses a threat to the patriarchal order’s continuity. In *The Witcher*, the witches of Aretuza, Yennefer, and Fringilla are educated to be the vessels of Brotherhood in order to be advisors in the kingdoms, create order from chaos, and foster peace. These witches must be attractive, practice only practical magic, and follow only the rules allowed by Brotherhood. Additionally, they must not be too powerful or disobedient. Even within Brotherhood, women like Tissaia are permitted to be teachers, “a proper job for a woman,” but not authorized to guide the future of their students.

Yennefer, Fringilla, Tissia de Vries, and Cirilla realize the exploitation of Brotherhood; they struggle to adopt a stance of resistance and subvert established hierarchies and power structures. These four women who resist Brotherhood have different characteristics, yet, they resemble each other in terms of becoming conscious of male domination reflected in their everyday lives. They unite, create their Council of sisterhood and “they no longer want to take part with the male norms as passes; they want to 'come as they are', with roots originating in their own experiences and precepts” (Dahlström & Liljeström, 1983, p. 14). The most powerful sorcerer, Yennefer, who often stands out against the decisions of Brotherhood and the education system in Aretuza, sacrifices her womanhood to fix her deformed body, does not comply with the judgment of the Council, and lights the resistance fire; Fringilla, in the beginning, she respects male authority, yet, in time she rebels against the regulating practices of Brotherhood for the sake of power and freedom; Tissaia de Vries, a member of Brotherhood, establishes a new Council of sorcerers where she discusses the manipulative behaviors of Brotherhood and acts to adverse it because she believes and supports the primary purpose of Brotherhood, which is to educate women yet intends to save the Council from the corruption of older male members. Lastly, Cirilla, who is expected to bring about the apocalypse as revenge for the massacre of Elves, is the most strong-willed character. She refuses to be under the control of Brotherhood, kingdoms, or witchers; she pursues her own destiny by either running away from or fighting against the male authorities on some occasions.

The relationship between Cirilla and Geralt of Rivia offers a glimpse of hope for escaping the patriarchal system. While rejecting stereotypes about women’s vulnerability and dependence, Geralt assumes the role of a nurturing father for Cirilla. He assists her in evading those who pursue her, acknowledging her need for protection not because of her gender but because of the danger she faces. Despite his austere and stoic demeanor, Geralt emerges as the most compassionate character in the series, embodying fairness, honesty, and helpfulness. However, more importantly, the organization of women and the Council they create is the most important way leading to freedom. Yennefer's collaboration with Fringilla and Tissia against the Brotherhood, the mentorship provided by Yennefer to Cirilla, and Triss' companionship with Cirilla are significant actions that potentially indicate a departure from patriarchal norms. These sorcerers not only resist patriarchy’s monstrous influence and empower each other by

consciously using their particular agency and adhering to a personal code of ethics but also augment their strength by combining their innate traits with their magical power.

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