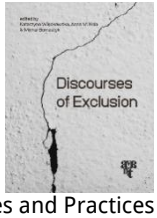

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"They Too Will Be Gone and New". Colonial Otherness in the Interplay between Humanity and Elfdom in Andrzej Sapkowski's "The Edge of the World"

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Abstract

Andrzej Sapkowski's fantasy narrative and novel saga, as exemplified by the "The Edge of the World" short story, borrows largely from J. R. R. Tolkien's depiction of elves in defining most of their traits and the relationship between them and humans. Sapkowski, however, clearly transforms the image of the (predominantly) benevolent elf defined by Tolkien. The aim of this article is to explore the way in which Sapkowski portrays the elven race as sovereign in their exclusion from the world of humanity. Sapkowski's story allows the group to maintain its unique motivations, resisting morally dualistic stereotyping at the same time. Moreover, because neither humanity nor elfdom may claim moral superiority in their conflict, the colonial experience of the elves is not simply appropriated by the author as an example of Indigenous victimhood. Rather, it serves the purpose of presenting readers with a multifaceted tapestry of colonial conflict contained within a fantasy world. The players of this world, though opposed and prone to othering their enemies, are nevertheless rhetorically equal[1].

Keywords: The Witcher, Tolkien, Elves, Colonialism, Otherness, Monsters

[1] Source of the quotation in the article title: Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 205.

1. Introduction, or The Elf as the Other

In defining otherness, or the discursive use of such distinctions as sex and race with the specific goal of imposing the identity of the "dominant in-group" over the "dominated out-group," Jean-François Staszak enumerates three kinds of the so-called "Geographical Others" (2009, pp. 44-45). These are:

1) the cultural other (in Ancient Greek terms—the "Barbarian," "a person who did not speak Greek and thus had not mastered the *logos*;" 2009, p. 44),
2) the natural other ("the Savage"[2] or "the Man of the Forest;" 2008, pp. 44-45), and
3) the racial other (found in "the opposition of colonist/native or White/of Color;" 2009, p. 45).[3]

All three categories seem closely linked with a belief in the inherent crudeness of the out-group. Just as the Barbarian lacked access to the superior cultural heritage of the Greeks, so, too, the natural and racial others are deemed inferior by the in-group. As suggested by Alison Mountz, it is not certain if the interplay of these hierarchies is currently heading in any direction which could be deemed beneficial for such out-groups, as, though the UN posited in the 1950s that "all humans [belong] to a single human race", the remnants of racialised (or othered) modes of discourse and classifications remain heavily ingrained in, for example, the US census (2009, p. 332). The relations of cultural and political subjugation and exclusion through othering thus still seem a treacherous ground to tread, and yet some authors choose to relate or adapt these conflicts and hierarchies to a dimension (seemingly) detached from our world, which is the realm of fantasy.

Within this realm, the road to presenting fantasy race dynamics has seemingly been paved by J. R. R. Tolkien[4]. His writings are ripe with creatures distinguished by their racial and cultural traits, such as humans, hobbits, elves, dwarves, and orcs. Among these groups it is the orcs who seem to be the ones most deserving of Staszak's categorisation of the cultural others as beings representing the "corruptions of the 'human' form," both in morality and appearance. As such, they are not (and possibly may not) be counted as one of the "'free peoples of Middle-earth'" (Tneh, 2011, pp. 37-38). Tolkien's orcs have already been reviewed by numerous critics, many of whom have explored their seemingly evil

[2] The term "savage" itself contains the imagery of the woods, as it is derived from the Old French word "sauvage" meaning "from the woods" (Simpson, 2007, p. 562).
[3] These three terms (the cultural other, the natural other and the racial other) are of my own invention, their aim being to more efficiently reference Staszak's definitions of otherness.
[4] Sources reviewed in the writing of this article, as well as Tolkien himself (Battis, 2004, p. 194), have used the term "race" when referring to such fantasy peoples as the elves. However, as Wizards of the Coast, the publisher of the popular Dungeons & Dragons fantasy role-playing game, have decided to use the term "species" instead (Carter, 2022), calling race "a problematic term" (DND Beyond, 2022), a critical analysis of its use in fantasy writings is warranted.

nature (Tneh, 2011, Loback, 1990), with some emphasising their honourable aspects (Tally, 2010; Young, 2010, p. 358). Yet, as noted by Robert T. Tally Jr., "the unquestioned assumption of the 'free peoples' … is that Orcs must be evil by nature" (2010, p. 21). In Tolkien's tapestry of races, however, there remains a certain under-appreciated tension—namely that of elfdom and humanity.

Elves as a race are considered extensively in criticism devoted to Tolkien's fantasy world (Fimi, 2006; De Rosario Martínez, 2010; Simpson, 2011), yet with noticeably little attention paid to their geo-political dealings with humans, most probably due to the fact that both races belong to the aforementioned alliance of the free. Despite this, Helios de Rosario Martínez observes, that the elves "dwindled [in power] as the world grew older" and as humans rose in strength (2010, pp. 73-74). It is seemingly in this state of withering that the elves of *The Lord of the Rings* depart for the Undying Lands, despite having aided the triumph over Sauron (Tolkien, 2004, pp. 224-225). Moreover, it is this state of elfdom that goes on to be explored by the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski, author of the critically acclaimed witcher saga (Majkowski, 2021). It is, perhaps, of little surprise that Spakowski borrows the races of dwarves, hobbits (or halflings; Sapkowski, 2022, p. 142) and elves in the creation of his fantasy world, as he has argued himself that obliviousness to the genre's Anglophone tradition was, in his view, the condemning factor of modern Polish fantasy texts (Sapkowski, 1993, p. 70)[5]. As a result, the world inhabited by Geralt of Rivia (Sapkowski's titular monster-hunter or "witcher") could, at first glance, be characterised as twin similar to Middle-earth. His depiction of elves, however, would seem to disprove this claim.

Jacqueline Simpson defines Tolkien's elves as "noble, wise, beautiful, deathless beings living in remote and enchanted woodlands" (2011, p. 76). As people of the woods, then, they would fall into Staszak's category of the natural other, though, in Tolkien, they may not in any way be conceived as either "[h]airy" or "violent" (Staszak, 2009, p. 45). Simpson argues that, although they are given some moral variation in Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, they are nevertheless "wholly benevolent" in his *The Lord of the Rings*, despite the fact that they inspire "awe" and "fear" in other races (2011, p. 76). In this, they collectively resemble the character of the elven Lady Galadriel who, though terrifying, in the end manages to ward off the dark influence of the One Ring (Tolkien, 2012, p. 443). Sapkowski twists the positive image of the elves into a yet more multi-faceted construction, however, as exemplified by his "The Edge of the World" short

[5] It seems that in Sapkowski's opinion, Polish culture simply lacks any sort of cultural archetype that could be used as replacement of Celtic tradition, which he found to be prevalent in Western fantasy writing (p. 66, 1993). Despite such assertions, one of the aliases of the prophetess/goddess Lille from Sapkowski's "The Edge of the World", namely "Lyfia" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 204) or, originally in Polish: "Żywia" (Sapkowski, 2014, p. 244), has been linked to the western Slavic goddess by the same name (Obertová, 2022, p. 128; Zaborowski, 2015, p. 22).

story. Namely, his portrayal of the race presents it as a socio-political group which remains sovereign despite its exclusion from the colonial status quo of the humans.

Sapkowski's short stories and novels have already been analysed as to their racial implications. Describing the conflicts of the world of the witcher, Katarzyna Kaczor notes that "the elven-dwarven antagonism classic to fantasy has been replaced [by Sapkowski] with the human antagonism towards all members of the Elder Races [i.e. elves and dwarves, among others]" (2015, p. 252)[6]. This observation does not fully reflect the dynamics of othering presented in "The Edge of the World," however. As noted already by Szymon Cieśliński, the elves, too, use racial hatred in motivating their views and actions (2015, pp. 56-57). Cieśliński's broader approach to the racist rhetoric displayed in Sapkowski's imaginarium will be of much help in defining its racial implications, yet in this article I will focus on describing such aspects in "The Edge of the World" specifically, as I believe that the short story may serve as an example *par excellence* of the ways in which Sapkowski defines his racially and politically complicated world.

Kaczor and Cieśliński's colonial and racial explorations of Sapkowski's writings, coupled with comparable approaches to Tolkien (Battis, 2004; Kim, 2004; Young, 2010), prove that fantasy as a genre is rich with contexts of othering and exclusion, which must be carefully weighed in order to analyse both the colonial relations of the peoples contained within and the ways in which said relations reflect real-world struggles. This, precisely, will be the aim of this article. As noted by Staszak, "if … otherness comprises a geographical dimension, it is because cultural surfaces are divided into supposedly homogenous spatial blocs" (2009, p. 44). Though Tolkien's elves supposedly belong to the same civilisational "bloc" as humans, it can be observed in *The Lord of the Rings* that their unique mode of being all the same excludes them from partaking in the spoils of their victory. Sapkowski seems to follow this idea closely, even going as far as speculating about a moment in future in which the humans themselves will be left behind. Thus, "The Edge of the World" encapsulates a space in which the dynamics of othering, exclusion and subjugation are fluent and everchanging. Nevertheless, it is only in this ambiguous net of relations that a racialised or monstrous other may find parity with the in-group, as, within, humanity itself may also bear the marks of a monster. As claimed by Kaczor, there indeed seem to be "no manifestations and representatives of absolute Good and Evil" in the world of the witcher; "instead, there are only the arguments of protagonists fighting for the right to make their own decisions" (2015, p. 252)[7].

[6] My own translation.
[7] My own translation.

2. "Werethings", "Bats" and "Myriapodans"[8]

"The Edge of the World" could very well be interpreted as a story devoted entirely (or at least predominantly) to presenting the degrees of otherness found in the relationship between humanity and those it perceives as monstrous. In Sapkowski's imaginarium, the monster-hunting witchers, such as Geralt of Rivia, are, after all, the ultimate tool of exclusion, or rather "extermination," that humanity may use against beings it deems too otherworldly to exist (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 164). And yet, as observed by Cieśliński, the witcher saga "lacks any clear-cut distinction of monstrosity"[9] (2015, p. 65). Because of this, it is perhaps all the more important to consider Sapkowski's monsters in detail.

In the story, Geralt and his trusty companion, Dandilion the bard[10], embark on a journey through the villages of the remote "Valley of Flowers" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 169), inhabited mostly by human farmers. Their worldview is immediately rejected by the witcher, as he is not at all impressed with their stories of "werethings," "bats" and "myriapodans" (p. 164-165), and thus, does not intend to promise the villagers to eliminate the creatures that he knows to be fictitious. They do, however, seem to perceive a real danger in the form of the elves inhabiting the mountains surrounding the valley. The alderman of Upper Posada, one of the two villages that the travellers visit in the story, describes the race in the following terms:

> Only look ye yonder, see ye those mountains? There's elves live there, that there is their kingdom. Their palaces, hear ye, are all of pure gold. … 'Tis awful. He who yonder goes, never returns. … From the land of elves [the werethings] come, to be sure. (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 165)

The elves are hence categorised by the villagers as simultaneously awe-inspiring and dangerous, much akin to Simpson's remarks about the race in Tolkien (2011, p. 76). And yet, the alderman's beliefs ascribe them with a much more nefarious nature. This is because both the imaginary monsters invoked here, as well as the elves may quite accurately be described by the categories of monstrosity proposed by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen in his "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)."

Staszak observes that such "savages" or "woodsmen" as the elves are spatially relegated to the outskirts of society, such as forests (2009, p. 45); or in Sapkowski—the mountains. According to Cohen, the same is true of monsters, as they are defined by a kind of "ontological liminality," that is existence outside or on

[8] Taken from Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 164-165.
[9] My own translation.
[10] Although the later translator of the witcher saga, David French, chose to translate the Polish name of "Jaskier" the bard as "Dandelion" (e.g. in Sapkowski, 2022, p. 20), Danusia Stok's "Dandilion" is used here for consistency with her translation of "The Edge of the World" and the rest of *The Last Wish* (Sapkowski, 2020a). Incidentally, "jaskier" (Zmigrodzki et al.) would seem to find its more literal translation in "buttercup," rather than dandelion (Sinclair, 1999, pp. 219, 398), though both flowers are yellow.

the border of man-made categories (1996, p. 6). Here, these *limites* are apparently both the story's eponymous "edge of the world," in which such creatures dwell and, more specifically, the outskirts of the human-made village—both constituting different layers of distance from civilisation. As Cohen posits under his Thesis V, "[f]rom its position at the limits of knowing, the monster stands as warning against exploration of its uncertain demesnes" (1996, p. 12). This exactly seems to be one the functions of the monsters of Lower Posada, as, because "[h]e who yonder goes, never returns," he who does not—survives (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 165). On the other hand, in this apparent "abjection" (a term defined by Julia Kristeva) there must be an element of attraction (Cohen, 1996, p. 19), and we find it precisely in the elves' golden palaces. Sapkowski's elves, in their monstrosity, thus become at once terrible and alluring—beautiful and deadly. Again, the dualistic nature of Tolkien's Galadriel is evoked, and yet Sapkowski complicates it further by presenting the elves as the epitome of the monstrous other.

So far, this analysis has considered the fictitiously monstrous (the "werethings") and the truly or abject monstrous (the elves), but there remain, at this point, at least three other creations. To return to Staszak, perhaps the most classically defined figure of an othered woodsman, at least at this point, is to be found in the human denizens of the Valley of Flowers themselves. This is both because of Geralt's harsh judgment of their worldview, and because of Dandilion's mockery of their use of "jargon" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 180). Though the villagers do not seem to fully meet any of Cohen's criteria, and thus seem more "other" than specifically "monstrous," they are nevertheless excluded on the account of Geralt and Dandelion's cultural sensibilities. After all, it is Geralt who takes the position of superiority necessary to dismiss Upper Posada's werethings, and it is Dandilion who reserves to himself the power to criticise their imperfect mastery of logos (Staszak, 2009, p. 44), even though he quickly falls victim to the same "infectious mannerism" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 180-181). And yet Geralt, as a witcher, is monstrous himself.

This is the case because witchers, in Sapkowski's imaginarium, are human beings turned monster-hunters by means of magical mutation and extraordinary training. This treatment seemingly bolsters their bodies, as well as allows them to use magic and further enhance their natural capabilities by their use of alchemic concoctions (Sapkowski, 2020b, p. 22). As such, Geralt may be seen as "[a] construct and a projection," that is—the projection of human fear towards monsters (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). Geralt's body is a weapon in the hands of humans, but one which may also prove dangerous to themselves, as demonstrated by his bloody moniker—"The Butcher of Blaviken" (Sapkowski, 2020c, p. 117). As both human and non-human (mutated or magical), Geralt is also a Cohenian "Harbinger of Category Crisis" (1996, p. 6). Hence, the fictitiously and truly monstrous categories of othering are supplemented in this analysis by two

more: the provincially other (the villagers) and the weaponised/mutated monstrous (the witcher Geralt). There is, however, yet one more monstrosity worth mentioning here.

As Geralt and Dandilion travel on and reach Lower Posada, they are tasked by its elder with dealing with a goat-like creature called a "doevel" (or "devil;" later classified by Geralt as a "sylvan"[11]; pp. 180, 185) from the vicinity of the village. It is with this "devil" that the story most strongly alludes to the processes of othering, or, more specifically, to scapegoating. Richard Kearney describes scapegoating as a process of exclusion in which the ostracization of the person (or group) excluded is believed to bring positive change (renewal, cleansing, safeguarding of values) for the person (or group) guilty of exclusion (2003, pp. 26-28). This, as it seems, would be a perfect role to play for a half-human, half-goat hybrid such as the satyr-like sylvan[12] as goats have been used extensively to fill this role (2003, p. 27). And yet, this easily accessible context is not realised in "The Edge of the World."

Instead, the "doevel" is characterised by Dhun, the elder of Lower Posada, as little but a trickster, or in fact—an occasional benefactor, fertilising the soil and scaring birds away (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 171). It is, thus, little surprise, that the villagers do not want to see the doevel killed, but only want to push him out of the proximity of the village, seemingly to limit the extent of his mischief.[13] This creature, however, can hardly be seen as a monster, though it remains in an ambiguous, liminal position of a dweller of the fields—both part of the village and part of nature. Hence, the seemingly most monstrous entity of the story (the hybrid scapegoat) is described as one of its most benign characters, and the fair elves take on the mantle of the primary monster of the Valley of Flowers.

3. The Fading

As Geralt and Dandilion pursue the devil, they eventually fall victim to an attack by an unknown rider who defends the creature and at the same time—secures the heaps of offerings in the form of various plants and seeds that it has received from the villagers. This stash and defence thereof are crucial to the story, as they provide evidence that the doevel's mischief has had goals far larger than itself. As Geralt and Dandilion awake tied-up and brutalised, having been rendered unconscious by their unknown assailant, they are made privy to a most informative conversation:

[11] The name itself seems related the woods, i.e. the Latin *silva* (Sinclair, 1999, p. 1550).
[12] According to Amanda Herring, *satyr*, *silenos* or *faun* are all names used to "describe mythological human-animal hybrids," such as the one in question (2016, p. 32).
[13] Geralt's second encounter with the devil, in which the witcher fails to persuade it to relocate and attempts to win a game of riddles with it, is strongly reminiscent of the competition between Gollum and Bilbo Baggins in The Hobbit (Tolkien, 1973, pp. 73-81).

> "Three sacks of corn," he heard. "Good, Torque. Very Good. You've done well."
>
> "That's not all," said the bleating voice, which could only be the sylvan devil. "Look at this, Galarr. It looks like beans but it's completely white. And the size of it! And this, this is called oilseed. They make oil from it." (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 190)

Galarr, the recipient of the sylvan's (or—Torque's) offerings, is one of the elves that have been the patrons of the devil's operation, its cause being to provide the *Aen Seidhe* (as Sapkowski calls his elves)[14] with seeds and methods of cultivation previously unknown to the elder race (2020a, p. 191). Thus, the story begins its proper exploration of the conflict between humanity and elfdom, which, in this case, pertains to the very elemental needs of the latter. As to why such a seemingly illustrious group would require aid, remains to be seen both in the elves' justification of Torque's mission and in a vital trait of their nature already found in Tolkien, which is their "fading."

Helios De Rosario Martínez classifies Tolkien's elves as subject to a "fading" of spirit, body, and number, which results from the aging and apparent withering of the world at large or, in Tolkien's earlier writings, to the proliferation of humans (2010, pp. 73-74). This sense of fading is precisely why Sapkowski's elves require Torque to provide them with human crops, as they find themselves stranded in a world which does not fully allow for their survival. In "The Edge of the World," however, this happens precisely because of human actions. As explained by Filavandrel, the leader of the elves encountered by Geralt and Dandilion:

> [Y]ou took our land from us, drove us from our homes, forced us into the savage mountains. You took our Dol Blathanna, the Valley of Flowers … [,] you have changed this world. …
>
> Yes, we are starving. … The sun shines differently, the air is different, water is not as it used to be. The things we used to eat, made use of, are dying …. We never cultivated the land. Unlike you humans we never tore at it with hoes and ploughs. To you, the earth pays a bloody tribute. It bestowed gifts on us. (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 197)

Hence, whereas the origin of the dwindling of Tolkien's elves as identified by De Rosario Martínez is ambiguous and does not refer to any specific act of aggression, the *Aen Seidhe* are determined and persistent in blaming humanity for actively conquering and destroying the land that allowed for elven survival.

[14] Sapkowski's usage of the word *seidhe* (similar to Irish "sidhe" used in reference of the so-called "fairy-folk"; Mac Ritchie, 1893, p. 367), coupled with his classification of Celtic mythology as the defining influence behind Western fantasy writing (Sapkowski, 1993), invites analysis of the "Old Language" (2020a, p. 192) of his elves in terms of such influences—especially as Tolkien himself was said to have had an ambiguous relationship with Celtic influences on English folklore and his own prose (Fimi, 2006, p. 156-157).

In the wake of human expansion, the elves find themselves excluded from the bountiful harvests of the Valley of Flowers, even though it belonged to them first (Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 169-170). This conflict bears the marks of colonial struggle in the terms defined by John Rieder. In his *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* he describes colonialism as "the entire process by which European economy and culture penetrated and transformed the non-European world … including exploration, extraction of resources, expropriation and settlement of land" (2008, p. 25). Here, Sapkowski's humanity takes on the mantle of the European colonialist, and so the elves are put in the position of a colonised, Indigenous nation, stripped of its land and subjugated. And yet, colonialism also refers to the "postcolonial renegotiation of the distribution of power" (Rieder, 2008, p. 25), which is what the elves of *Dol Blathanna* seek to engage in, both rhetorically and, in the scope of the later witcher novels, militarily (Cieśliński, 2015, p. 57). And yet, their colonial exclusion is only exacerbated by Geralt, who seeks to deny them the political agency necessary to criticise this turn of events. As such, in what was described by Cohen as a "self-validating, Hegelian master/slave dialectic" Geralt "naturalizes the subjugation of one cultural body by another" (1996, p. 11). This elven other has already been described by the villagers as monstrous, and, though Geralt mocked them, he nevertheless internalises the human rhetoric of othering or exclusion, which is unleashed upon the elves.

The witcher insists that in order to survive in this changed, colonised world, the elves should peacefully coexist with humanity, much like he, as a mutant, has all his life (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 197). He advocates for trade instead of the stealing of seeds, and the non-violent acceptance of human repression, rather than rebellion against it. In doing so, however, he mistakenly equates his own personal experience of otherness (based on profession and weaponizing mutation) with that of an entire ethnic group that the elves constitute in his world.[15] Thus, despite the fact that their unwillingness to cohabit with humans means the elves are "condemning [themselves] to annihilation" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 197), Filavandrel explains that they have little choice to act differently, as they would risk using their dignity and sovereignty as a nation:

> Cohabit on your terms? … Acknowledging your sovereignty? Losing our identity? … Cohabit with your women and hang for it? Or look on what half-blood children must live with? … We're not so naïve that we don't know your merchants are just outposts of your way of life. We know what follows them. (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 197-198)

[15] I here go against Cieśliński's argument that the othering encountered by Geralt may be classified as an example of racism (2015, pp. 62-64), though it is certainly exclusionary in nature. Nevertheless, as noted by Cieśliński, witchers are observed more as members of a professional "caste" (Sapkowski, 2020e, p. 5) or more classically defined monsters rather than a racial or national group *per se*, and so I would remain cautious in equating the nature of repression (rhetorical and otherwise) experienced by them and Sapkowski's non-human races.

In Geralt's conversation with Filavandrel, the story of the fair, magical race of elves as a tragically yet unavoidably fading one is transformed by Sapkowski into a much more tangible issue. It is no longer the passing of time or the mere existence of other, more populous races that forces the elves out of their world, but rather the imperialist, colonialist drive of humanity. Moreover, Sapkowski's humans, dwarves and elves are no longer joined in any sort of benevolent, cosmopolitan force, as is the case in Tolkien (Young, 2010, p. 354). Instead, it is humans that take a role comparable to that played by the Dark Lord Sauron in the socio-political landscape of Middle-earth, which Jes Battis describes as that of a domineering, enslaving colonizer (Battis, 2004, p. 911).

This relationship, solidified into discourse in the form of the villager's fictitious cautionary tales, is so ingrained in the ideology of the human in-group that to see a reality which would destabilise it is unthinkable, even for a member of another monstrous out-group, such as Geralt. After all, as pointed out by Cohen, "[t]he monster's eradication functions as exorcism and, when retold and promulgated, as a catechism" (1996, p. 18). Thus, it is permissible for the monster to renounce its monstrosity and emulate the culture of the in-group under the terms proposed by Geralt, but it is never possible for the in-group to accept the other. Cieśliński notes that "according to [Albert] Memmi and [Étienne] Balibar, a tolerant multicultural society should allow diverse cultural groups to peacefully exist next to each other," and not to force their others into "forceful assimilation" which "leads to an exclusion by means of inclusion" (2015, p. 59)[16]. This dimension, here, is seemingly lost not only on the denizens of human cities, as explored by Cieśliński (2015, pp. 59-61), but also on Geralt himself.

This change of dynamics invites a re-evaluation of Tolkien's alliance between elves and humans. Although "the 'Free Peoples' of Middle-earth" enjoy "several centuries of relative peace and prosperity" after their initial defeat of Sauron (Battis, 2004, p. 911), this prosperity does not reverse the fate of the elves, which is their voyage out of the lands of the mortal races. Instead, as is the case in the world of the witcher, it allows for the beginning of the "human era and age," which, as claimed by Filavandrel, is already "as natural as the rising and the setting of the sun" to Geralt (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 198), and which leaves no room for the existence of the elves as we know them.

4. The Indigenous Elf

Sapkowski's transformation of the doomed state of Tolkien's elves allows for the creation of a fantasy world in which the distinction between good and evil is more ambiguous than one based on racial features, such as the pointed shape of elven ears (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 191). In the world of the witcher, it seems it is geo-political conflict rather than inherent morality that defines socio-political

[16] My own translation.

relations between its species. In associating the fantasy race of elves with an experience of colonial exclusion and subjugation, Sapkowski may, however, be deemed a perpetrator of a kind of exoticization criticised by Indigenous interpretations of speculative literature. As argued by Miriam C. Brown Spiers, "[b]y labelling texts that reflect Indigenous worldviews as 'science fiction' [or in this case—fantasy] we run the risk of trivializing Native voices and communities, of reducing lived experiences to primitive superstitions" (2011, p. xvi). And yet, Rieder notes that science fiction "nonetheless estranges the colonial gaze … [,] swinging the poles between the subject and object, with each swing potentially questioning and recoding the discursive framework of scientific truth, moral certitude, and cultural hegemony" (2008, p. 10). If fantasy may wish to consider the same dimensions of historical colonialism as science fiction, it seems that it must remain wary of both Spiers' anxiety and Rieder's expressions of post-colonial potential.

As I have already tied the elves with Staszak's geographically excluded woodsmen, I feel obligated to reference the historical process of othering encapsulated in the literary and discursive trope of the "noble savage." As mentioned before, the "marginal man" or "savage," described by Murray K. Simpson as relegated to "the mediaeval wilderness" (2007, p. 562), may be most accurately represented by the humans of the Valley of Flowers (though, not fully, as they themselves constitute the valley's only stronghold of in-group human civilisation). This is because the second natural others of the story—the elves—are seemingly ascribed a much more venerable position. In Tolkien, because they are described as moral, wise, and fair (as "originators of [Middle-earth's] written culture;" Battis, 2004, pp. 909-910), they instead resemble a kind of other described by Edna C. Sorber as "The Noble Eloquent Savage" (1972). These others, predominantly American Indian leaders, were, as opposed to Staszak's Barbarians, characterised precisely as masters of *logos*—masters of oratory practice and statesmanship (Sorber, 1972, pp. 228-229). Yet, because the laudatory terms used towards such orators have always been marked with traces of the Europeans' own ideology (1972, pp. 228-229), they seem to constitute little but a "saccharine" ideological appropriation of Indigenous rhetoric (p. 228-230)[17]. In other words, Europeans alluding to the noble/eloquent savage trope did not as much value American Indians for their virtue or skill, as they projected their own political aims and beliefs onto unique Indigenous experiences and worldviews. In this sense, it matters little that Tolkien's elves may be seen as majestic and fair, as they all the same leave the mortal Middle-earth and cease to exist as an ethnic group involved in its geopolitics.

[17] This mechanism of appropriation may already be identified in the writings of Tacitus. In his *Germania*, as noted by W. Beare, he "is contrasting the Germans with contemporary Rome … [,] [s]o when he gives special praise to those tribes which, like the savage Heruli, do not allow widows to marry again, he is not so much recommending their practice of suttee …, as reflecting on the frequency of re-marriage in Rome" (1964, p. 69).

And yet, Sapkowski seems to eliminate such glorified depictions of the race of elves from his writing, which is also noted by Cieśliński in the broader scope of the witcher novels (2015, p. 56). Instead, though still portraying them as othered, colonised and monsterised, he, ironically, portrays them as fully human. This humanity, however, is not the idealised moral superiority of Tolkien's free peoples. Rather, it is a kind of humanity only found in vice, as the superstitious ramblings of the human villagers of the Valley of Flowers soon find their reflection in the stigmatising language used by the elves. Though Filavandrel claims that "[i]t is … humans who hate anything that differs from [them], be it only by the shape of its ears" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 196), the elves themselves betray the weakness to discriminate against others based on their physique. They insult Geralt and Dandilion by calling them "ape-men" and "savages," as well as insinuating that their (human) body odour is repulsive (pp. 192-193). The human, then, becomes a monster in itself, reflected through the elven perspective.[18]

This monster is both a Barbaric other, as the elves perceive humans as lowly and crude, as well as a monster in Cohenian terms. For elves, humans, though seemingly able to construct their own society, are nevertheless comparable to "lice" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 198) and are deemed unable to emulate elven sophistication. Thus, they also become "Harbinger[s] of Category Crisis" (Cohen, 1996, p. 6) and, as political others, may be reviewed as monsters who "[Dwell] at the Gates of Difference" (p. 7-8). Most interestingly, however, humanity constitutes a blend of the monstrous traits reviewed under Cohen's Theses VI and VII. Because humans and elves can produce offspring together, and because this is perceived by the elves as dangerous due to the repression suffered by "half-blood children" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 198), fear of the human monster does, truly, become "a Kind of Desire" (Cohen, 1996, p. 16). Specifically, the desire or possibility to reproduce with humans becomes (or is inextricably linked with) a fear of subjugation and repression which, eventually, may lead to the annihilation of the elven race—not only through acts of racial violence, but also through the absorption of elven blood into the more numerous human populace. In this way, the elves do not only experience the "simultaneous repulsion and attraction" of humanity (Cohen, 1996, p. 17), but also fear to become one with the monster (p. 20)—to acknowledge that the human primitivity may soon become their own.

[18] Cieśliński delineates four kinds of monsters found in the witcher saga: "I. Humans exhibiting monstrous traits. II. Monsters exhibiting human traits. III. Humans in the skin of a monster. IV. Monsters in the skin of a human" (2015, p. 65). "The Edge of the World" invites a slight re-evaluation of these distinctions, however, as the elves, too, are portrayed by Sapkowski as monstrous (monsters in extra-human skin?).

Thus, "The Edge of the World" portrays the victimised elves as, in many ways, equal to humans in their racialised hatred[19]. As both groups are capable of demonising the other, the elves are no longer the predominantly wise and benign beings described by Tolkien. This is because Sapkowski's *Aen Seidhe*, though subject to colonial conquest and repression, do not, by virtue of victimhood or any of their inherent traits, become the epitome of morality. Instead, they are nothing more than a distinct ethnic group, subject to the same violent socio-political workings as the humans they wage war against and similarly fallible in their rhetoric. Quite ironically, as Filavandrel's disciples injure and terrorise their human captives (Geralt and Dandilion), they are chastised only by the devil's, that is—Torque's moral inhibitions, rather than their own (Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 193-194). Hence, though Sapkowski's elves are "long-living" (2020a, p. 199), this trait does not exclude them from the geo-political workings of the world of the witcher, and their fantastic nature does not dehumanise them. There is, however, a crucial factor which could disrupt this apparent balance of violence and othering, and it lies in the focalisation of the story through the experience of Geralt of Rivia—the monstrous defender of the human in-group.

5. The Verdict of Nature

Whereas Dandilion seems more focused on the local women of the Valley of Flowers rather than on its monstrosities (p. 170), the witcher takes on a much more vital role. Namely, it is Geralt who carries out the role of explicitly answering some of the philosophical questions posed by the events and characters of the story, as exemplified by his deliberations about monstrosity:

> "Geralt," [Dandilion] said suddenly, "but monsters do exist. … So how do you account for people inventing ones, then? …"
>
> "People … like to invent monsters and monstrosities. Then they seem less monstrous themselves. When they get blind-drunk, cheat, steal, beat their wives …. They feel better then. They find it easier to live." (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 167).[20]

Geralt's position as the story's moral oracle is, however, distorted when, quite symbolically, his hands are tied and he is subject to Filavandrel's defense of the vengeful sentiments of his brethren. The positions taken by both speakers—Geralt's (or the human in-group's) philosophy of assimilation and Filavandrel's rejection of it—stand as rhetorically equal, as both groups seem culpable of

[19] Cieśliński goes as far as to suggest that the elves "instrumentalise difference and, as a colonised race, internalise the behaviour of their colonisers—the humans" (2015, p. 57).
[20] Geralt's definition of monsterisation seems to reflect Kearney's deliberations on scapegoating. Thus, any such "werethings" as the ones imagined by the denizens of Upper Posada become others on which the "sin" of the community is transferred and which may be sacrificed in order for the community to be cleansed (Kearney, 2003, pp. 26-27).

similar misdeeds. Moreover, the elves of *Dol Blathanna*, though subjugated, refuse to give up their ideological sovereignty, rejecting the witcher's attempt at appropriating their experience of oppression for his own, in something akin to the acts of "epistemic violence" reviewed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1994, p. 76). In this sense, Geralt's ideological defense could be read as an act of rhetorically "re-presenting" the elven struggle rather than "representing" the political interests of the race to which he does not belong (Spivak, 1994, p. 70). The elves of the Valley of Flowers clearly reject such practice.

This parity despite subjugation is, however, given more context by the appearance of the transformed Lille—the goddess of the Valley—who saves the lives of Geralt and Dandilion and whose influence distinguishes the villagers of Lower Posada from their neighbours. When met after the witcher's first encounter with Torque, Lille is presented as a shy, "strange" young girl, whose purpose in the village is to assist its old wisewoman in her art of deciphering the writings included in "the booke"—an ancient manuscript detailing ways to deal with various kinds of monstrosities that the village must face (Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 177-182). Though Geralt is quick to notice that Lille's "strangeness" has its source in her supernatural status as a prophetess (pp. 183-184), the true reveal of her capabilities takes place only when his discussion with Filavandrel draws to an end, and he is about to be executed. Right before this happens, the story reads:

> Lille entered the glade.
>
> She was no longer a skinny peasant girl in a sackcloth dress. Through the grasses covering the glade … floated a queen, radiant, golden-haired, fiery-eyed, ravishing. The Queen of the Fields, decorated with garlands of flowers, ears of corn, bunches of herbs. …
>
> "Dana Meadbh," said Filavandrel with veneration. And then bowed and knelt. (Sapkowski, 2020a, pp. 201-202)

As an authority for both groups, *Dana Meadbh* allows for a point of comparison to be drawn between their beliefs. As exemplified by the villagers' inhibitions against enacting violence upon Torque (p. 172) as well as her intervention, she is not only a goddess of crops and harvests, but rather—a being who preaches non-violence and rejects revenge. Despite this, neither group can fully internalise her message, as both use or have used violence in the past against their opponents. Moreover, Lille does not, as a deity, stand for the moral superiority of either of her peoples. Rather, she safeguards the continuous prosperity of *Dol Blathanna*, regardless of which race comes out on top. This benevolent intent does not, however, come without its price. As Geralt replies to Dandilion, again taking on his warrior-philosopher mantle:

> Geralt? Lille lives in the village, among people. Do you think that–
>
> –that she'll stay with them? … Maybe. … If people prove worthy of it. If the edge of the world remains the edge of the world. If we respect the boundaries (Sapkowski, 2020a, 206).

Lille thus becomes an equalising factor in the othered discourse of both races. She does not favour the chronologically first nation to inhabit her valley (the elves), nor does she blindly enforce the status quo (the human colonial rule). Rather, she is an entity interested in preserving the unique character and balance of her land. Therefore, no conflicted group existing on this land becomes ontologically superior by virtue of divine grace—both are subject to the same laws of the universe they inhabit and both may fall from the grace of powers much stronger than themselves. After all, as is writ in "the booke," "different tribes will follow," but Lille "eternal is, was and ever shall be until the end of time" (Sapkowski, 2020a, p. 205).

Lille, as a goddess of nature and non-violence, invites a conclusion that the only way to escape such power dynamics as the ones employed by her subjects (humans and elves) is to find a political *tertium comparationis*—a point of reference allowing for shared peace and understanding. In Kristevan terms, as summarised by Kearney, such a shared basis of thought could be found in the Kantian Universal Republic, which "would fully honour the diversity of cultures, languages, confessions and peoples …, safeguarding the right of hospitality to 'strangers' on the basis that the world … belongs to everyone" (Kearney, 2003, p. 75). This is akin to the definition of a truly tolerant society as proposed by Memmi and Balibar, which was mentioned before (Cieśliński, 2015, p. 59). In "The Edge of the World," however, it is not quite so. The Valley of Flowers does not belong to everyone—it belongs to *Dana Meadbh*, harmonic nature personified. What is more, it is her prosperity alone that can ensure the survival of the peoples she deems her own, and her favour is not easily gained. If there is any hospitality to be found in her valley, either by her people or any strangers, it is only to be found by respecting her boundaries—by accepting her broader perspective as one's own. And yet, the concrete nature (*nomen est omen*) of these boundaries remains unclear.

6. Conclusion, or Weighing the "Grains of Truth"[21]

Hence, whether humanity will prove worthy of Lille's favour remains to be seen. In this way, the story seems to advocate for a detachment from the perspective of one's in-group and for the ultimate internalisation of the monstrous in the self. If there is a moral verdict in "The Edge of the World," then it may only be found when negotiating the perspectives of all its peoples and only

[21] In reference to Sapkowski's "A Grain of Truth" story, included in *The Last Wish* (2020, pp. 39-69).

when respecting the unique sensibilities of all groups present in this heavily politicised world. This lack of a clear moral conclusion could be interpreted as a means of trivialising or discrediting the colonial experience of the elves, yet it neither disproves the violence enacted upon them nor pictures them as morally superior. The *Aen Seidhe* thus escape the noble-eloquent coding applied to the elves by Tolkien, which allows for evaluating the race not on the basis of its inherent positive traits, but rather based on its actions as a player in a geo-politically interconnected world.

If, in this world, everyone can be a monster in the eyes of another, then perhaps everyone can also negotiate with the "fuller knowledge of [their] place in history" that the monstrous brings with itself into the ideology of the in-group (Cohen, 1996, p. 20). This knowledge, gained through shared experiences of othering, provides insight into how racialised hatred and political considerations create the "homogenous spatial blocs" mentioned by Staszak (2009, p. 44). Because the differences between humans and elves are cultural, surely the elven perception of humans as vermin is superfluous. Because humans may soon find traces of elven blood in themselves, surely their mode of being needs revaluation to accommodate the other. When this is not the case—when degrees of otherness and monstrosity are nevertheless used to exclude certain kinds of people from the in-group—monsters, indeed, are born, but not out of mutation or magic: only by fear, hatred, and violence.

Though this analysis has focused mostly on Sapkowski's racial interplay of elves and humans, humanity itself is by far not monolithic. For example, the villagers of Lower Posada, as followers of Lille, seem to obtain a fuller, less hateful and more peace-oriented outlook than that of their neighbours, as exemplified by their treatment of Torque. What follows "The Edge of the World" is a saga of novels which describes in detail an invasion set against the human Northern Kingdoms by the southern Empire of Nilfgaard (beginning with the appropriately named *Blood of Elves* novel; 2020d). In this struggle of north versus south, the northern human colonialism, to which the elves of *Dol Blathanna* fell victim, is contrasted with yet another imperialistic force, which transgresses notions of inherent speciesist solidarity. Thus, Sapkowski creates a fantasy world the races and nations of which are entities in a multi-faceted web of fluctuating historical and ideological conflicts, and it is only in this complicated tapestry of others that such groups may ever hope to stand as rhetorical equals, despite their spiteful preconceptions.

A fuller analysis of the world of the witcher would need to carefully consider its racial interplays, bearing in mind that Sapkowski's Polish cultural background includes both the experience of "the colonized and the colonizer" (Wise,

2010, p. 285-286),[22] much like his human Northerners[23]. Nevertheless, when analysed primarily on the basis of the human-elven relationship of othering, colonial exclusion and monsterisation, Sapkowski's "The Edge of the World" seems to prove that discussing racial struggles in a fantasy setting is possible, as long as, to quote Geralt the philosopher, we respect them, treating each group as sovereign. This, however, is seemingly not that simple, as others following in Tolkien's footsteps, such as the Canadian video game developer BioWare, are criticised for crudely or simplistically appropriating Indigenous experiences in their dark fantasy narratives (Isaac, 2020). And yet, as argued by Lydia Isaac, who commented on BioWare's presentation of the Indigenous elf: "[t]he solution is *not* to stop with the allegories. … *The solution is to make an effort*" (2020).

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[22] As examples of the latter, Wise, quoting Ewa Thompson, mentions "the partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century and occupation of Poland by Soviet Russia after the Second World War" (2010, as cited in Wise, 2010, p. 286). As to the former, Aleksander Fiut notes that "[u]ntil the end of the 19th century the supremacy of the Polish cultural pattern in the territories of today's Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine was regarded, at least by the Poles themselves, as self-evident, and suitable for the purpose of fostering a sense of a civilizing cultural mission" (2014, p. 37).

[23] An analysis of the post-colonial dimensions of CD Projekt Red's *The Witcher 3* video game has already been proposed by Majkowski (2018) though, as admitted by the author, it leaves the relationship between the game and Sapkowski's source text "mostly unexplored" (2018, p. 3).

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