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THE FANTASY HERO AND GENDER ROLES IN ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI'S «THE LAST WISH»

The article explores the transformation of the fantasy hero and the representation of gender roles in Andrzej Sapkowski's «The Last Wish». The study focuses on the reconfiguration of traditional heroic masculinity through the figure of Geralt of Rivia, as well as on the inversion of gendered archetypes in the portrayal of male and female characters. Drawing on gender theory, fantasy studies, and narrative analysis, the paper demonstrates that Sapkowski constructs a complex system of plural masculinities and feminine monstrosity, which challenges conventional genre norms. Special attention is paid to anti-heroic and anti-villain figures, the role of Slavic folklore, and the reinterpretation of fairy-tale motifs. The article also considers the impact of adaptation and translation on the reception of the text and situates the work within a broader transmedia context.

Keywords: *fantasy literature, gender roles, masculinity, anti-hero, monstrosity, inversion, Sapkowski, «The Witcher».*

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Introduction

Contemporary literary studies increasingly focus on the problem of gender representation in genre fiction, particularly in fantasy literature, which has traditionally been associated with stable narrative models and fixed archetypal structures. For a long time, the genre reproduced conventional notions of masculinity and femininity: male protagonists were constructed as embodiments of strength, rationality, and moral authority, whereas female characters were often confined to secondary or supportive roles, functioning as objects of rescue, inspiration, or moral guidance. However, from the late twentieth century onward, these models have undergone significant transformation, driven both by the development of gender theory and by the internal evolution of the fantasy genre itself.

In this context, the works of the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski, and particularly his collection «*The Last Wish*» (1993), which inaugurates «*The Witcher*» series, offer a highly productive case for examining the transformation of gender roles in contemporary fantasy. The text demonstrates a fundamentally different approach to the construction of both the hero and the system of characters as a whole. Drawing on Slavic mythology and folklore, Sapkowski simultaneously reinterprets and subverts traditional fairy-tale and fantasy archetypes, especially in relation to gender. As a result, the narrative develops a complex system of interaction between masculine and feminine models that transcends the binary opposition of “strong male hero versus passive female character.”

The relevance of this study is determined by the need for a comprehensive analysis of gender transformations in contemporary fantasy as an important cultural and literary phenomenon. Despite the global popularity of Sapkowski's works and their significant impact on contemporary media culture – through adaptations in television, video games, and graphic narratives – the gender dimension of his prose remains insufficiently explored, particularly in Ukrainian literary scholarship. Special attention should be paid to the mechanisms through which the author combines traditional archetypes with their inversion, thereby producing new models of identity and redefining the very concept of the “hero” in fantasy literature.

The connection of this research with broader academic and practical tasks lies in the expansion of theoretical approaches to genre literature through the integration of gender studies, narratology, and fantasy studies. Moreover, the study contributes to interdisciplinary research by situating the literary text within a wider cultural and media context, including issues of adaptation, transmediality, and reception. In this sense, the analysis of «*The Last Wish*» allows for a more nuanced understanding of

how literary texts participate in the construction and transformation of cultural meanings.

The **aim** of the article is to analyze the figure of the fantasy hero in Andrzej Sapkowski's «*The Last Wish*» through the lens of gender roles and to identify the mechanisms of their transformation within the genre.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives are set:

- to characterize traditional gender models in classical fantasy literature;
- to identify the specific features of masculinity construction in the character of Geralt of Rivia;
- to analyze alternative models of masculinity through character interaction;
- to examine the phenomenon of the anti-villain as a gender-marked category;
- to explore the representation of femininity through the figures of “female monstrosity”;
- to define inversion as a key narrative principle structuring the text.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

A review of recent research and publications indicates a growing scholarly interest in gender issues within fantasy literature. The theoretical foundation of this study is based on the works of Judith Butler, who conceptualizes gender as a performative construct (Butler, 1999), and R. W. Connell, who introduces the concept of plural masculinities (Connell, 2005). Within fantasy studies, significant contributions include Rosemary Jackson's interpretation of fantasy as a mode of subversion of cultural norms (Jackson, 1981) and Brian Attebery's analysis of the structural and narrative features of the genre (Attebery, 2008).

The representation of gender in fantasy literature has traditionally been shaped by rigid archetypes. Classical high fantasy (e.g., Tolkien, Le Guin) constructs masculinity through heroism and leadership, while femininity is often relegated to supportive roles. Contemporary theory, however, redefines gender as performative (Butler, 1999) and masculinity as plural and hierarchical (Connell, 2005).

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the transformation of gender models within the fantasy metagenre, particularly in the context of twenty-first-century literature. Studies of contemporary Eastern European fantasy demonstrate a shift from binary oppositions toward more complex systems of character interaction, where gender roles are reconfigured through hybridization, intertextuality, and sociocultural dynamics (Gurduz, 2024). This tendency reflects broader global processes within the genre, including the growing prominence of female-centered narratives and the re-evaluation of traditional heroic structures.

At the same time, recent feminist analyses of fantasy literature highlight the genre's capacity to subvert established representations of femininity by foregrounding agency, autonomy, and alternative models of identity. For instance, contemporary research demonstrates that fantasy increasingly reinterprets female characters beyond passive archetypes, positioning them as active participants in narrative and ideological transformation (Rodríguez Hernández, 2024). Such approaches reinforce the understanding of fantasy as a space for negotiating gender norms rather than merely reproducing them.

In relation to Sapkowski's work specifically, recent studies have drawn attention to the representation of female agency, embodiment, and reproductive politics within «*The Witcher*» universe. In particular, the interplay between motherhood, bodily autonomy, and power has been identified as a central thematic axis that shapes the construction of female characters and their narrative trajectories (Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska, 2025). This line of research demonstrates that gender in Sapkowski's texts is not only a matter of character typology but also a key element of worldbuilding and thematic development.

Within this expanded theoretical framework, Sapkowski's work can be understood as the part of a broader shift toward complex and unstable gender identities in contemporary fantasy. His characters resist fixed categorization, embodying instead fluid and often contradictory forms of masculinity and femininity that reflect both the internal dynamics of the genre and wider cultural transformations.

The issue of adaptation and the transformation of literary texts across media is addressed in the works of Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon, 2006), which are particularly relevant for understanding the reception of Sapkowski's work in contemporary culture. At the same time, existing scholarship on Sapkowski primarily focuses on mythological sources, intertextuality, and genre characteristics, while the gender dimension remains only partially explored.

The unresolved aspect of the problem lies in the lack of a comprehensive analysis of the gender

system in «*The Last Wish*» as an integrated structure. Such an analysis should encompass not only the figure of the protagonist but also the interaction of different forms of masculinity and femininity, as well as their transformation through motifs of monstrosity, otherness, and inversion. It is precisely these issues that the present study seeks to address.

Main Body of the Study

The transformation of gender roles in Andrzej Sapkowski's «*The Last Wish*» is most productively approached through the intersection of character construction, narrative strategy, and intertextual engagement with folklore and fairy-tale traditions. Rather than merely modifying established genre conventions, the text systematically reconfigures them through a principle of inversion, which operates across multiple levels of the narrative and results in a complex and dynamic system of gender representation.

At the center of this system stands Geralt of Rivia, whose characterization challenges the traditional model of the fantasy hero. Although he initially appears to conform to the archetype of the warrior—defined by physical strength, endurance, and professional mastery—his identity is fundamentally liminal. He occupies an intermediate position between a human and non-human, social participant and excluded outsider. This liminality destabilizes the association between masculinity and dominance that is characteristic of hegemonic models, in which power, authority, and control are considered essential attributes (Connell, 2005). In contrast, Geralt's masculinity is shaped by marginality, as he is simultaneously necessary to society and rejected by it. His role as a witcher places him outside normative social structures, exposing the fragility of the link between masculinity and social legitimacy. For example, one of the characters says: „I've heard about witchers – they abduct tiny children whom they feed with magic herbs. The ones who survive become witchers themselves, sorceresses with inhuman powers. They're taught to kill, and all human feelings and reactions are trained out of them. They're turned into monsters in order to kill other monsters.” (Sapkowski, 2007, 50). At the same time, he is feared both by the creatures he hunts and by the people who hire Geralt of Rivia to kill those creatures. Instead of the traditional glory and praise that usually follow heroic deeds, this hero is met with negative reactions, the fear of the crowd, and rejection.

Moreover, Geralt's ethical and emotional complexity further distances him from the conventional heroic paradigm. His actions are not governed by absolute moral principles but by situational judgment, often informed by empathy and personal experience. This ethical ambiguity aligns him with the figure of the anti-hero and reflects a broader shift in contemporary literature toward more nuanced and unstable representations of identity. From the perspective of gender theory, such a representation supports the notion of gender as performative rather than essential, emphasizing the constructed and context-dependent nature of masculine identity (Butler, 1999). The irony in Andrzej Sapkowski's work and his deconstruction of the conventional fantasy hero is also reflected in the central motivation of Geralt of Rivia: he performs one heroic feat after another for money. In this way, he becomes an anti-prince of the fairy tale tradition: “‘I'm not interested in the princess,’ Geralt said calmly. He was sitting motionless, his hands on his knees. ‘Just in three thousand.’” (Sapkowski, 2007, 6)

The plurality of masculinities within the text becomes particularly evident in the contrast between Geralt and Dandelion. While Geralt embodies restraint, physicality, and introspection, Dandelion represents an alternative model characterized by expressiveness, creativity, and social adaptability. This juxtaposition challenges binary oppositions between “strong” and “weak” masculinity, suggesting instead that masculinity exists as a spectrum of possible performances shaped by cultural and social expectations. Their interaction also performs a structural function, as shared memories and dialogic exchanges contribute to the non-linear unfolding of the narrative. In this sense, masculinity is not only a thematic concern but also a narrative mechanism through which the text organizes its temporal and structural complexity.

A further dimension of Sapkowski's reconfiguration of gender emerges in the representation of monstrosity. In contrast to traditional fantasy, where monsters are typically constructed as unequivocal antagonists, «*The Last Wish*» introduces the figure of the anti-villain, whose monstrosity is not inherent but socially or magically produced. Characters such as Nivellen and Duny exemplify this transformation, as their condition results from external forces rather than moral corruption. Their capacity for emotional depth, reflection, and change challenges the conventional opposition between

human and monster, suggesting that monstrosity is a contingent and constructed category. This shift is consistent with the broader tendency in fantasy literature to subvert cultural norms and destabilize fixed hierarchies (Jackson, 1981).

Importantly, the representation of monstrosity is gendered. Male monstrous figures are frequently depicted as victims of circumstance, capable of redemption and moral growth. The narrative invites empathy toward these characters, thereby reconfiguring the ethical framework of the genre. For instance, Nivellen reflects on the nature of his own monstrosity: «I couldn't explain to anyone that only my appearance had changed, that although in this horrible shape I was just a stupid youngster» (Sapkowski, 2007, 53). And the main specialist in monsters, Geralt, approves: «You're not a monster» (Sapkowski, 2007, 51).

In contrast, feminine monstrosity is often associated with agency, power, and genuine threat. Figures such as the bruxa Vereena and the striga embody a form of active danger that resists the logic of victimization. This asymmetry introduces a deliberate inversion of traditional gender roles, whereby femininity is no longer aligned with passivity but becomes a site of autonomy and potential violence.

The figure of Vereena illustrates this inversion particularly clearly through its intertextual engagement with the «Beauty and the Beast» motif: «'You like birds,' continued The Witcher. 'But that doesn't stop you biting the necks of both sexes, does it? You and Nivellen, indeed! A beautiful couple you'd make, a monster and a vampire, rulers of a forest castle. You'd dominate the whole area in a flash. You, eternally thirsty for blood, and he, your guardian, a murderer at your service, a blind tool. But first he had to become a true monster, not a human being in a monster's mask'» (Sapkowski, 2007, 63). While the traditional narrative associates beauty with moral goodness and monstrosity with moral deficiency, Sapkowski reverses this logic: the seemingly beautiful female figure becomes the source of destruction, whereas the monstrous male character demonstrates emotional depth and capacity for transformation and true love. Such a reconfiguration exposes the ideological assumptions embedded in fairy-tale narratives and challenges the stability of gendered archetypes. Similarly, the striga narrative draws on folkloric motifs of transformation and taboo, linking feminine monstrosity to cultural anxieties surrounding the body, identity, and social transgression.

It is women who most often become antagonists to the witcher, powerful and fully realized enough to confront him both psychologically and physically. One such female character from the short story «The Lesser Evil», Renfri, known as the Cursed of the Black Sun, is a princess doomed by mutation to live as a psychopath and a violent killer. She represents an inversion of Snow White, living not with seven dwarfs but with a band of outlaws. Instead of an evil stepmother, it is the wizard Stregobor who tries to have her killed in childhood, along with other girls born after the eclipse, though she manages to survive. When Geralt of Rivia meets Renfri, he feels respect and admiration, recognizing in her a worthy and equal opponent, a true fighter: «There was something strange in Renfri's voice – something associated with the red reflection of fire on blades, the wailing of people being murdered, the whinnying of horses and the smell of blood» (Sapkowski, 2007, 95). If Stregobor embodies a patriarchal view of powerful femininity and a deep-seated cultural fear of the female body, the witcher, due to his own liminal position, is capable of perceiving unconventional expressions of femininity without prejudice.

The principle of inversion extends beyond character construction to the narrative structure itself. «*The Last Wish*» resists linear chronology, unfolding instead through a series of interconnected stories structured by flashbacks, embedded narratives, and retrospective dialogue. This fragmented temporality reflects the instability of identity and reinforces the idea that meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple perspectives. The text's hybrid form situated between a short story collection and a novel further contributes to its resistance to generic classification, aligning it with contemporary tendencies toward genre hybridity (Attebery, 2008).

At the same time, Sapkowski's work engages in a reflexive dialogue with the conventions of fantasy as a genre. By appropriating and transforming familiar narrative patterns, the text reveals their constructed nature and opens them to critical reinterpretation. In this respect, fantasy functions not merely as escapist literature but as a mode of cultural critique, capable of interrogating dominant ideological structures through symbolic representation.

The interpretation of «*The Last Wish*» is further shaped by processes of translation and adaptation. The transition from the original Polish text into other languages involves the negotiation of culturally

specific elements, including folklore references, idiomatic expressions, and material culture. As a result, certain nuances may be altered or attenuated, affecting the reception of the text in different cultural contexts. This phenomenon highlights the importance of considering translation as an active interpretative process rather than a neutral transfer of meaning.

Adaptations into television, video games, and other media introduce additional layers of reinterpretation, situating the text within a broader transmedia framework. In this context, it is useful to distinguish between the concepts of «universe», «franchise», and «lore». The universe refers to the internal coherence and governing principles of the fictional world, while the franchise encompasses its commercial expansion across media platforms. Lore, in turn, constitutes the accumulated body of knowledge that ensures continuity and recognizability within the narrative system. These distinctions underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of the text, whose meanings are continuously renegotiated through processes of adaptation and reception (Hutcheon, 2006).

Finally, the sociocritical dimension of «*The Last Wish*» becomes evident in its treatment of otherness. Geralt's status as an outsider reflects broader mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization that operate within human societies. The fear and hostility directed toward him by others reveal underlying anxieties about difference and the unknown. In this sense, the text engages with universal social concerns, demonstrating the capacity of fantasy literature to address real-world issues through symbolic and narrative displacement.

Taken together, these observations support the conclusion that «*The Last Wish*» constructs a multidimensional system of gender representation grounded in inversion, plurality, and liminality. Masculinity is redefined through marginality and ethical complexity, while femininity is associated with both agency and destabilizing power. The interaction of these elements not only challenges traditional genre conventions but also positions fantasy as a critical space for the exploration of identity, difference, and cultural norms.

Conclusions. The analysis demonstrates that «*The Last Wish*» constructs a multidimensional system of gender representation based on inversion, plurality, and liminality. Masculinity is redefined through marginality and ethical complexity, while femininity is associated with both agency and danger. The interaction between these elements produces a dynamic narrative structure that challenges traditional genre conventions.

Thus, Sapkowski's work not only reflects contemporary transformations in fantasy literature but also contributes to the rethinking of gender as a central category of literary analysis.

The findings of this study open up a number of promising avenues for further research:

First, it would be productive to extend the analysis to the later volumes of «*The Witcher*» saga, particularly in relation to the development of central female characters such as Yennefer and Ciri, whose narrative trajectories significantly expand the gender dynamics outlined in «*The Last Wish*». Their roles allow for a deeper exploration of themes such as agency, power, embodiment, and generational continuity.

Second, further research may focus on the comparative analysis of literary texts and their adaptations across different media, including television series, video games, and graphic narratives. Such an approach would enable a more detailed examination of how gender representations are transformed in transmedial contexts and how these transformations reflect broader cultural and ideological shifts.

Third, it would be worthwhile to draw on a broader body of contemporary fantasy for comparative analysis, which would help determine whether the trends identified in Sapkowski's work are specific to his own writing or whether they reflect general developments within the genre in a global context.

Finally, an interdisciplinary approach integrating literary studies, gender theory, and media studies may further illuminate the role of fantasy as a space for negotiating identity, otherness, and cultural norms in contemporary society.

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ФЕНТЕЗІЙНИЙ ГЕРОЙ І ГЕНДЕРНІ РОЛІ У ЗБІРЦІ АНДЖЕЯ САПКОВСЬКОГО «ОСТАННЄ БАЖАННЯ»

У статті досліджується трансформація гендерних ролей та переосмислення образу героя у фентезі на матеріалі збірки Анджея Сапковського «Останнє бажання», що відкриває цикл про Відьмака. Дослідження здійснено на перетині гендерних студій, теорії фентезі, наратології та адаптаційних студій і має на меті довести, що творчість Сапковського репрезентує суттєвий відхід від традиційних жанрових моделей у бік більш складних і динамічних форм ідентичності. Теоретичну основу становлять концепції перформативності гендеру Дж. Батлер та множинних маскулінностей Р.Коннелла, а також сучасні підходи до трактування фентезі як субверсивного літературного дискурсу.

У центрі аналізу перебуває постать Геральта з Рівії як лімінального антигероя, чия ідентичність піддажує гегемонну маскулінність через маргіальність, етичну амбівалентність і емоційну складність. Особлива увага приділяється співіснуванню різних моделей маскулінності, зокрема у протиставленні Геральта та Любистка, що демонструє перформативний і реляційний характер гендерних ідентичностей. У статті також аналізується трансформація поняття монструозності: якщо чоловічі «монстри» постають жертвами обставин і здатні до морального розвитку, то жіноча монструозність пов’язується з агентністю, владою та реальною загрозою.

Ключовим аргументом дослідження є теза про те, що наратив Сапковського функціонує за принципом інверсії, яка проявляється як у побудові персонажів, так і в організації оповіді. Переосмислюючи казкові та фольклорні мотиви, автор руйнує традиційні зв’язки між красою, моральністю та гендером, виявляючи ідеологічні підвалини канонічних репрезентацій. Нелінійна та гібридна структура тексту додатково підсилює нестабільність ідентичності та значення.

У статті також розглядається роль перекладу, адаптації та трансмедійного розширення у формуванні рецепції «всесвіту Відьмака», що підкреслює динамічний і змінний характер гендерних репрезентацій у різних культурних і медійних контекстах. Обґрунтовується, що фентезі, зокрема у творчості Сапковського, виступає не лише як ескапістський жанр, а як критичний простір осмислення ідентичності, іношості та культурних норм.

Отримані результати сприяють глибшому розумінню гендеру як динамічної та реляційної категорії в сучасній літературі та засвідчують потенціал фентезі як жанру, здатного

переосмислювати й трансформувати домінантні ідеологічні моделі.

Ключові слова: *фентезійна література, гендерні ролі, маскулінність, антигерой, монструозність, інверсія, Сапковський, Відьмак*