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Threats or Victims: The Ambiguous Nature of Supernatural Creatures in Andrzej Sapkowski’s and George R. R. Martin’s Fantasy

Many postcolonial readings of fantasy fiction focus on exploring complicated relationships between different fantastic races that inhabit a certain secondary world. However, such studies often overlook interactions of these races with the supernatural animals and beasts that live alongside them. Fantasy narratives like Andrzej Sapkowski’s *The Witcher Saga* and George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* depict fantastic settings where the relationship between the inhabitants of the world and the supernatural creatures is just as important as the interracial relations because it is based on similar principles of interaction between the Familiar and the Other and can be used to characterize them. Therefore, this article will address the following issues: how the supernatural creatures are perceived in their respective secondary worlds; what attitude prevails in this perception; and why it prevails above other reactions.

key words: supernatural creatures, the Other, fantasy, Martin, Sapkowski

In the introduction to her study *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*, Jessica Langer makes an interesting observation: that science fiction and the postcolonial studies are interested in examining similar themes and concepts. She argues that the two most common signifiers of the genre – the Stranger (“the figure of the alien [who is] extraterrestrial, technological, human-hybrid or otherwise . . .”) and the Strange Land (“the figure of the far-away planet ripe for the taking”) – are identical to the two myths of colonialism, the Other and the exotic land of the Others respectively (Langer 3). Bold as it may seem, this statement appears to be correct as Langer proves later in her book. Although she primarily focuses on examples from the realm of science fiction, I think that her assertion works for fantasy fiction as well.¹ Numerous texts belonging to this genre closely examine the differences between the Familiar and the Other, try to understand the nature of the Other, and depict various scenarios of relationships between the two. I want to analyze how these issues are addressed in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* and Andrzej Sapkowski’s *The Witcher Saga*.

Overall, these narratives showcase a wide range of different Others: social, religion-related, national, and racial. Such a variety grants plenty of material for research into different representations of the Other in Martin’s and Sapkowski’s fiction.² In this article I am most

¹ At one point in her book Langer even uses examples from the fantasy-themed MMORPG *World of Warcraft* to illustrate how racial stereotypes are imposed on the non-human characters and factions.

² In his essay “A Different Kind of Other,” Brent Hartinger explores how social Others, specifically people with physical disabilities, are treated in George R. R. Martin’s novels. Likewise, Polish researcher Magdalena Roszczyńska makes a detailed analysis of national and racial Otherness in the works by the Polish author in her book *Sztuka fantasy Andrzeja Sapkowskiego* (see Chapter 3).

interested in examining the depiction of supernatural creatures and the peculiarities of their relationship with the other inhabitants of the secondary worlds of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *The Witcher Saga*.

Despite the fact that the secondary worlds portrayed in the fantasy works by Andrzej Sapkowski and George R. R. Martin are not entirely alien to magic, the latter is not part of common knowledge. A selected few may learn the arcane arts under the guidance of other sorcerers and warlocks in places such as Aretuza or Ban Ard and the Citadel or Asshai³; however, the public practice of magic in other places is often met with suspicion, even though it may be officially tolerated. On the other hand, when the inhabitants of these secondary worlds witness various manifestations of uncontrollable wild magic, including different supernatural creatures that appear because of it, they find themselves endangered and in fear.

Such a reaction is very similar to the one explored by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his book *Thinking Sociologically* when a representative of a group with one set of values encounters a member of a group with different values. As Bauman explains in his study, this difference always leads to a social division into “us” and “them.” The markers associated with the group to which one chooses to belong, or “us,” are generally positive. They include, among others, notions of affection, trust, safety, and the ability to communicate. In contrast, the group which is called “them” by “us” is perceived through markers bearing the opposite meaning: antipathy, suspicion, fear, and communication failure (Bauman 46). As Bauman stresses, such a drastic change in perception is a result of “us” not understanding or refusing to understand the processes that happen in the “them”-group; therefore, everything that is done by “them” seems unpredictable and scares “us” (46-47).⁴ Identically, due to general ignorance concerning magic the creatures known or suspected to have any connection to magic are seen by many as a threat in the narratives by Sapkowski and Martin.

I will begin with *The Witcher Saga*. The stories and novels which constitute this fantasy series introduce many supernatural creatures that have entered the “Witcher-world” in the aftermath of the magical cataclysm called the Conjunction of the Spheres when different dimensions temporarily merged. Many of these creatures are violent monsters – ghouls, basilisks, wyverns, manticores, and bruxas – that threaten the safety of other living beings. However, there also exist benevolent, relatively peaceful creatures which are mostly indifferent to the affairs of others. Nevertheless, the universal reaction toward all creatures is the same: humans and non-humans alike – those who consider themselves the native inhabitants of this secondary world – distrust and fear the intruders from beyond, and see them as a danger that has to be dealt with.

Still, while Sapkowski’s books justify the extermination of the more violent and dangerous creatures that are, from the point of view of monster slayers called the witchers, “alien to our sphere, and there is no place for them here” (*Krew Elfów* 93),⁵ the stories and novels often depict other creatures as victims of general prejudice. Some of the earlier entries in *The Witcher Saga* examine the fallacy of such biased perception very closely. One of the stories that is particularly successful in showcasing the victimized supernatural Other is called “Eternal Flame,” and it focuses on the shapeshifting creature called the doppler. The main character, a witcher called Geralt arrives at Novigrad, a major city in the Northern Kingdoms and the so-called

³ Aretuza and Ban Ard are the two schools of magic in *The Witcher Saga*; the Citadel in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is an academy for the maesters which offers magical training; and Asshai, a faraway country from the same fantasy narrative, is rumoured to allow open practice of the arcane arts.

⁴ Reverse misperception is also possible because from the viewpoint of “them” it is “us” who represent unknown incomprehensible values and evoke a sense of fear and danger.

⁵ Citations from Sapkowski’s books are given in my translation.

“capital of the [human-centric] world.” Having accepted an invitation from his friend Dandelion the bard, the witcher goes to the inn where he meets a halfling merchant Dainty Biberveldt. However, their conversation is suddenly interrupted when another halfling appears, claiming to be the real Dainty and accusing the other of impersonating him. Geralt quickly restrains the accused who shifts into his real form as his deception is uncovered. The innkeeper who arrives to check on the noise recognizes the creature as a vexling. According to him, these monsters have been a bane for the good people of Novigrad for years, and they have to be exterminated in a way which the real Dainty Biberveldt calls “a barbarian custom, and typical for humans” (“Wieczny Ogień” 129), even though the halfling considers it an appropriate punishment for the impostor. The innkeeper insists that the vexling (or the doppler, according to the creature itself) is the most dangerous among all existing monsters because it is hard to discover when it shapeshifts. He says:

in the name of the Eternal Fire, I'd prefer a dragon or a devil that is always a dragon or a devil, and one knows how to deal with them. But werewolfery, this entire shapeshifting thing, it is a disgusting demonic doing; this is trickery and treachery that those foul things made up to harm humans. (“Wieczny Ogień” 132)

These remarks do not convince Geralt of the creature's hostility, but rather let him see the other man's incompetence. The witcher realizes that shapeshifting is a self-defence mechanism, and the creature in front of him is not a monster, but “a representative of a sentient race” (“Wieczny Ogień” 133). However, everyone in the room is sceptical about this statement. For them, as the representatives of the dominant human race (or persons acknowledged by it, in Dainty Biberveldt's case), creatures like the doppler named Tellico Lunngrvink Letorte (or Dudu) cannot be sentient because this fact breaks their paradigm of worldview. In this paradigm, as Magdalena Roszczynialska validly points out, sentience is regarded as a trait available exclusively to humans and the non-humans who accept their culture (119), and “the doll made from mud and meal that was staring pleadingly at the witcher with its dull yellow eyes” (“Wieczny Ogień” 133) hardly resembles a sentient being, from the dominant race's perspective.⁶ As a result, this race takes offense when Dudu demonstrates his intellect: at first, by fluently speaking common (human) language; and later, by showing impressive merchant skills which exceed Dainty's. In doing so, the doppler proves that he can become a part of the society and even make a contribution by providing skills that are highly regarded by it.

Later in the story, when Geralt finds the doppler after his escape, Tellico explains to him the reasoning behind his actions. As it turns out, he and other shapeshifters like him have been the victims of humans who deliberately destroyed them, unwilling to communicate; even the settlements of these creatures have been targeted when the dominant race has sought to expand its cities. Therefore, regarding it as retribution for the harm inflicted on his people (“Wieczny Ogień” 162), Tellico decides to live on within the human society as one of its own:

You gave . . . the dwarves, halflings, gnomes, and even the elves a small chance to assimilate. Why am I worse than them? Why do you refuse me this right? What should I do to be able to live in this city? Should I turn into a she-elf who has the eyes of a doe, silky hair, and long legs? Tell me. Why is the she-elf better than me? Because when you look at her, you begin to stumble, and when you look at me you want to vomit? . . . As the citizen of Novigrad, I'll be

⁶ A similar dismissal of the Other's abilities by the seemingly advanced Familiar was advocated during the Western colonization of the Oriental countries. See Said 43-44.

trading, making willow baskets, begging, or stealing; as one of you, I'll be doing what one of you is usually doing. Who knows, maybe I'll even marry? ("Wieczny Ogień" 162-63)

The witcher, being the Other as well,⁷ sees the doppler's determination and lets him go, and Dainty Biberveldt makes him his trading companion and takes him (disguised as a halfling) into his family. This story is one of Sapkowski's few that leaves the aftertaste of hope: not only because Dudu receives what he has aspired to, or because it is revealed that more dopplers actually live in Novigrad (one of them even impersonates the high priest) ("Wieczny Ogień" 166), but due to the story's utopian stance that the Other can be incorporated into society as an equal.

The story also dismisses the idea that ugly, scary, or non-human looks signify someone's dangerousness or hostile intent. The other characters from Sapkowski's books that undermine the validity of this idea similarly to the doppler are the golden dragon Villentretenmerth ("The Bounds of Reason"), Nivellen, a man under the beast curse ("A Grain of Truth"), and high vampire named Emiel Regis (the novels). Throughout the books, these characters (basically monsters) show more reason, intelligence, compassion, and overall humanity than most human and/or fair-looking characters.⁸ In fact, one of the best examples of the dichotomy between a sympathetic monster and callous human can be found in *Baptism of Fire*, the third novel of *The Witcher Saga*. As Geralt and his team wander through a war-torn land, they encounter some peasants who prepare to burn a local girl for witchcraft at the command of a mad priest. However, it becomes obvious fast enough that the priest has no evidence to support his charges; he is led only by his hatred toward everyone who represents or is believed to represent Otherness (*Chrzest Ognia* 158). Afraid of the priest's wrath, the peasants do nothing to help the convicted girl, and only Regis (although not yet identified as a vampire by Geralt) steps in and passes the Trial of God by holding a scorching horseshoe, thus proving the girl's innocence (*Chrzest Ognia* 160-61) and reinforcing the point that the supernatural creatures in Sapkowski's secondary world are not as malevolent as some representatives of the human society, even though the former are always blamed.⁹

Similarly to *The Witcher Saga*, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* introduces several creatures whose supernatural origin becomes the basis for biased perception by the inhabitants of the secondary world. The researchers of this text note that it depicts a setting which is almost free from magic or any other supernatural influence ("A Sword without a Hilt" 124). In fact, in comparison with the Polish fantasy narrative where magic has become part of everyday life, Martin's series seems almost sterile in this respect. Therefore, when magic starts to manifest itself throughout the continents of Westeros and Essos, people are afraid of it. The supernatural creatures which appear simultaneously with the sudden emergence of magic in the ordinary world are met with strong suspicion and opposition as well.

⁷ According to the lore of the series, the witchers are mutants whose abilities are enhanced through magic and alchemy. As a result, many people see the monster hunters as unholy abominations and discriminate against them. As for Geralt of Rivia, Andrzej Sapkowski's narrative presents him as a hybrid figure because he possesses traits of the dominant human culture and the racial Others. However, neither the former nor the latter acknowledge him as their own.

⁸ In fact, a bruxa (a female vampire) which Geralt has to fight at the end of the story "A Grain of Truth" impersonates a beautiful girl (66-67).

⁹ In the story called "The Edge of the World" Geralt tells Dandelion that humans like to blame supernatural creatures, real and invented alike, for their own misfortunes and abusive behaviour so that they can feel less guilty about their actions in comparison (174).

The episode in the beginning of *A Game of Thrones* which introduces the direwolves, the fantastic counterparts of the more familiar animals, demonstrates this attitude quite well. When Lord Eddard Stark's party comes across a dead direwolf near his household Winterfell, everybody agrees it is an omen because the creature is a sigil of House Stark. However, the interpretations of this omen differ. The household guards consider it a morbid sign because the animals do not live to the south of the Wall but to the north of it, in the sinister magical realm; therefore, their presence in the south cannot signify anything good. Additionally, the fact that the beast is dead is considered a harbinger of bad luck for the House. At the same time, Lord Stark's illegitimate son Jon Snow notices a different sign: although it has died, the direwolf has given birth to five cubs whose genders reflect those of the lord's trueborn children. As Jon puts it: "Your children were meant to have these pups, my lord" (*A Game of Thrones* 19). The significance of Snow's observation is almost instantly proved further as he finds a sixth, albino cub for himself.

This episode also demonstrates the different ways in which the society perceives the supernatural Other, and it provides a preliminary overview of characters that have different reactions toward these creatures. Firstly, there are the common people who are afraid of any manifestations of the magical and supernatural. For them, it is better to stay away from any magic and harm that it may cause. This is why Lord Eddard's household guards ask him to leave the direwolf's body alone and kill its pups (*A Game of Thrones* 18). Then, there are people like Jon Snow and his brothers and sisters who choose to claim the creatures they are connected with. And finally, there are persons like Lord Eddard's ward Theon Greyjoy who shows disgust with the direwolf, calling it a freak (17), and is willing to kill its cubs (19). Interestingly, in the following volumes Theon will betray the Starks. It has to be noted that all the characters who intend to harm them, not just Theon alone, show a disgraceful attitude toward the supernatural creatures that represent their House. For instance, Queen Cersei demands to kill Sansa Stark's harmless direwolf after Arya Stark's animal has bitten the Queen's son (to protect her owner from him) and fled (157). Likewise, when the Freys of the Crossing plan to murder Robb Stark, they first take away his "wild beast [that] has a taste for human flesh" (*A Storm of Swords* 696). These examples show an interesting pattern: even though some people, especially the superstitious common folk, may be suspicious toward the supernatural Other, they are regarded as a threat and become victimized only by the negative characters of the series, contrary to *The Witcher Saga* where such a distinction is not present.

It has to be mentioned that not only the direwolves, but also their owners – the Stark children and Jon Snow – are looked at with suspicion and distrust, especially after they manifest their ability to transfer their consciousness into their animals, or to wargs. For example, when Jon is considered for the Lord Commander's position in the Night's Watch, his opponents refer to the character's skinchanging skill as an argument against his election (*A Storm of Swords* 1093). Such attitude toward the wargs is based on the preconception that they use their magical powers, once attributed only to the supernatural children of the forest who inhabited Westeros before the humans' arrival, to harm, forcefully possess human beings, and commit other evil deeds.¹⁰ Informed about these beliefs, Jojen Reed, who discovers Bran Stark's warging ability, warns the boy against telling others about it because "[s]ome will hate you if they know what you are. Some will even try to kill you" (*A Clash of Kings* 523). The wildling warg Haggon shares

¹⁰ In the prologue to *A Dance with Dragons*, it is stated that the wildling skinchangers follow a very strict ethical code which forbids any of the mentioned actions; violators of this code (e.g. Varamyr Sixskins) are despised and called abominations (4).

Jojen's concerns, but also notes the difference in the perception of the skinchangers in the two lands divided by the Wall: "The world beyond the Wall is not for our kind . . . The free folk fear skinchangers, but they honor us as well. South of the Wall, the kneelers hunt us down and butcher us like pigs" (*A Dance with Dragons* 11). In my opinion, the opposite view on the wargs among the wildlings is primarily based on the fact that their community lives in the land where magic and the supernatural are considered normality, and the free folk are accustomed to these phenomena, unlike the southern inhabitants of the Seven Kingdoms.

I will not delve any further into the topic of wargs because I believe that it is rich enough for a separate article. Instead, I would like to return to the issue of the representation and perception of supernatural creatures in this fantasy series. While the direwolves simply emerge on the southern side of the Wall, the birth of the dragons at the very end of *A Game of Thrones* is a result of the ritual attempted by Daenerys Targaryen. Nevertheless, the reaction to their presence is very similar to the attitude toward the direwolves. Common Dothraki nomads who have witnessed their hatching in the flames of their former leader's funeral pyre regard their new ruler, Daenerys, and her so-called "children" in awe and fear (*A Game of Thrones* 806). For others like the mystics and merchants of Qarth, the only three living dragons in the world are a wonder (*A Clash of Kings* 202). As for Daenerys herself, she regards them as her only children and source of self-identification as a member of the royal dynasty. As the story progresses, it is also implied that as long as she remembers her true identity and allegiance to her House, the dragons cannot harm her.

However, as the dragons grow throughout the series, the fascination with them begins to dwindle. Instead, they become terrifying and threatening to every living being just like the otherworldly monsters from *The Witcher Saga* and unlike the direwolves that obey their masters. Unable to control them, especially after a tragic incident when the fiercest of the dragons killed a child (*A Dance with Dragons* 45), Daenerys decides that they have to be contained. Interestingly, though, she imprisons only the two relatively peaceful dragons while their violent brother evades containment. It has to be noted, however, that despite not being as bloodthirsty as Drogon, Rhaegal and Viserion also pose a significant threat to people as *A Dance with Dragons* proves. Near the end of the novel Prince Quentyn Martell, who has arrived to Meereen with a marriage proposal for Daenerys, dies from dragonfire in an attempt to steal one of the imprisoned beasts (*A Dance with Dragons* 898) while the dragons break loose and ravage the city (*A Dance with Dragons* 914).

Still, even the dragons, no matter how fierce, are not the most fearful and dangerous supernatural creatures that inhabit the secondary world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. In my opinion, the analysis of the supernatural forces in this fantasy narrative cannot be considered complete without a mention of the Others. These creatures are depicted as the quintessence of the unknown otherworldly danger that brings fear to all living beings. Even their name signifies their difference from the *status quo* of the fictional normality of Westeros and Essos.

I think such a representation of the creatures works in the novels because George R. R. Martin successfully employs the rhetorical techniques of the intrusion fantasy in their depiction. As Farah Mendelsohn writes in her *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, the rhetoric of the intrusion heavily depends on "the naïveté of the protagonist and [their] awareness of the permeability of the world – a distrust of what is known in favor of what is sensed" (115). The characters in the prologue to *A Game of Thrones*, the rangers of the Night's Watch scouting the wildling sightings to the north of the Wall, are constructed to reflect this distrust. Seasoned rangers Gared and Will sense an unexplainable wrongness and dread in the air that they haven't felt ever before (*A Game of Thrones* 6). Their commander, Ser Weymar Royce, who has joined the Watch recently disregards

their fears because he still carries the knowledge that magic and supernatural creatures do not exist. Guided by this knowledge, he is not terrified when the group arrives at the abandoned wildling site although Gared has reported that the criminals are dead and cannot move: Ser Weymar only concludes that the other ranger must have misinformed him, and the wildlings have moved on. After that, the Others appear, finally shattering Royce's rational knowledge-based worldview. And as Mendlesohn points out (115), he no longer denies the intrusion of magic and the supernatural, but rather accepts it and fights it (*A Game of Thrones* 9).

However, as the Others kill the witnesses of their emergence, and Gared is "dead of fear" (*A Game of Thrones* 15) to tell about them before being executed for desertion, the world remains in the dark regarding the upcoming threat. Martin also detracts the readers' attention from it by immersing them into the world of courtly intrigues and feuds, where magic belongs only in the old tales and those claiming to witness it are laughed at. The sense of unrest is sustained only by cryptic reports that the number of deserters and lost rangers of the Night's Watch has increased. As a result, when the animated dead commanded by the Others start to kill the unsuspecting members of the Night's Watch in their castle (*A Game of Thrones* 565), the readers are caught by surprise. Such a writing style reflects the rhythm of the intrusion fantasy: "suspension and release, latency and escalation, hesitation and remorselessness" (Mendlesohn 115).

Additionally, each stage of escalation is more intense than the former as the Others emerge from hiding and march against the living. George R. R. Martin shows this intensification using another rhetorical mechanism that Mendlesohn describes: sounds (153). Every appearance of the Others and their minions is accompanied by more noise. In the prologue to *A Game of Thrones*, it is noted that "[t]he Others made no sound" (*A Game of Thrones* 8). When the undead ranger attacks the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, his steward Jon Snow hears it due to the sudden shriek of his master's raven (*A Game of Thrones* 565). In later books, the arrival of the Others is heralded by the three long horn blows (*A Storm of Swords* 17). Samwell Tarly's fight with the wight is also very loud as he constantly screams at the undead (*A Storm of Swords* 645). Finally, the last of the depicted encounters with the Others' minions is also accompanied by the loud cries of the fighters (*A Dance with Dragons* 173).

However, although Martin's novels depict frequent interactions with the Others, these creatures' intentions and goals as of now remain an enigma for both the characters and the readers. By the end of *A Dance with Dragons*, characters such as Jon Snow or Samwell Tarly do not know more about the Others than what was known in *A Game of Thrones* (*A Feast for Crows* 114-15): neither about their agenda and their society (if they have one¹¹), nor about effective ways to stop their massive forces. This lack of knowledge makes the Others difficult to comprehend, and therefore, they evoke an even greater sense of fear and danger.

As I have shown above, in both Polish and American fantasy narratives discussed here, there exists a similar pattern in the perception of supernatural creatures. The dominant human culture (and the racial Others, to some extent) interacts with them based on the fixed preconceptions that these creatures are significantly different from them and, therefore, represent danger. The same presumptions are applied to all the creatures despite their behaviour, intentions, actions, and intelligence. Such preconceptions derive from the lack of understanding of this type of Other. As the examples from the fantasy texts demonstrate, there is a definite link between the amount of knowledge about a specific supernatural creature and its supposed dangerousness. By

¹¹ In season 4 of HBO's adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the Others are shown to have a society of sorts. However, as it has not yet been confirmed by the books, I regard this episode as a piece of artistic imagination of the show's creators.

showing that the humans and non-humans both often perceive the supernatural Others without distinguishing the benevolent and the malign among them, George R. R. Martin and Andrzej Sapkowski's novels stress an important point: the relationship between the dominant culture and the supernatural Other will remain antagonistic and tense so long as the former judges the Other stereotypically instead of seeking knowledge about them.

More importantly, this point is accurate not only in terms of *The Witcher Saga* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, but also the real world. Events from our history (e.g. the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Holocaust along with other national genocides) can attest that persecutions that have transpired in the past or are happening now on the basis of racial, religious, cultural, or other differences take place because the persecutors fear the persecuted for their Otherness, but are reluctant to understand and recognize it as something normal and not threatening. Driven by stereotypical (and often offensive) knowledge regarding the Other, these persecutors decide to subdue and impose their own "right" rules upon them, or destroy them if the former fails. The fantasy novels show us in their own imaginative way that such an approach leads only to mutual decline and suggest that we should be willing to learn about the Others who live beside us, accept them, and cooperate with them rather than constantly succumb to fear of the unknown. As Sapkowski and Martin prove, only then can humanity have a bright and peaceful future.

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