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Introduction

In less than forty years, *The Witcher* has become a global phenomenon, putting Polish fantasy on the bestselling lists all over the world. From a short story initially published by Andrzej Sapkowski for a niche audience, to a cycle of nine books – soon to be ten – translated in dozens of languages and adapted into every media imaginable, this story about a mutant monster hunter, Geralt of Rivia, set in a medievalist world has won over a vast readership, which has regularly been reinforced by transmedia adaptations.[1] What was initially known as *Wiedźmin*, from the original Polish neologism created by the author in 1986, was step by step reoriented to a wider international audience under the translated title *The Witcher*. The story of this cycle's publication is indeed a story of translation as much as creation: although, as I will explain in the following pages, the first short stories published by Sapkowski in Poland had already gained an important local success, it is their translations in Europe which transformed the specific fantasy work into a widely recognised transmedia franchise.

In June 2015, when the first collection of Sapkowski's short stories, *The Last Wish* (*Ostatnie życzenie*), was published in English, it 'appeared among the *New York Times*' 15 bestselling mass-market paperbacks in the US. It was the only translated book on the list.'[2] The book industry worldwide is clearly characterised by a dominance of anglophone publications, especially

[1] In 2015, the Archeological Museum of Gdansk created an exhibit with '103 foreign editions, original illustrations, unpublished projects, movie costumes, radio plays and games'. Exhibition 'Wiedźmin w kulturze popularnej', 3 October–4 December 2015, Muzeum Archeologiczne w Gdańsku. My translation. https://archeologia.pl/en/aktualnosci-strona-glowna/archiwum-aktualnosci/archiwum-aktualnosci-2015/wystawa-wiedzmin-w-kulturze-popularnej-2.

[2] P. Drewniak, 'Literary Translation and Digital Culture: The Transmedial Breakthrough of Poland's *The Witcher*', in R. A. Chitnis, J. Stougaard-Nielsen, R. Atkin and Z. Milutinović (eds.), *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 205–26, p. 205.

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in genre fiction.[3] This tendency is the result of several historical, cultural and commercial factors, including of course the fact that English remains the most spoken language in the world, with 380 million native speakers and 1.135 billion second-language speakers. As a result, in the book industry, English implies an automatically wider potential readership, as well as an easier access to translators. The editorial market of genre fiction is a direct reflection of this global tendency. Accordingly, cultural contributions from Central and Eastern European countries and languages are regularly marginalised, especially in a fantasy genre largely dominated by publications of English-speaking authors, read in the original English or in translations. Poland, as part of Central Europe, has long been seen as a 'small state' on the world scene, including in the limited sphere of Europe.[4] This means that the cultural contribution of Poland, as well as Hungary and the Czech Republic for example, is less frequently highlighted, in their own countries and on a global scale, and that the literary production of Central Europe is more rarely translated, especially outside of Europe.[5]

With these circumstances in mind, we might wonder how a fantasy story initially published in Poland became such a cultural phenomenon, despite its inherent literary merits. Indeed, in the current editorial market of genre fiction marginalising Eastern European texts, *The Witcher* seems like an exception. Its author and creator, Andrzej Sapkowski (born in 1948), has always been an avid reader, but he did not directly aim at a literary career: 'Trained in economics in college, he spent years as an international fur

[3] In 2023, a study in France established that almost half of new stories published were translations, and that the rest in genre fiction were 'predominantly Anglo-Saxon'; Observatoire de l'imaginaire, 2023, p. 15. www.calameo.com/books/0015454988e295100bfef. On this topic, see H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, (1994) 2012).

[4] I. Bibó, *Misère des petits États d'Europe de l'Est*, trans. G. Kassai (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986).

[5] A. Branchadell and L. M. West (eds.), *Less Translated Languages* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2005).

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salesman and later translator of science fiction.'[6] Thus, it is through translations, which he read and later produced himself, that Sapkowski started his intense relationship with genre fiction. Translations would later on play an important part in the author's career and the global recognition of *The Witcher*. Sapkowski has always been interested in the fantasy genre; in a 2015 interview, he explained: 'Me and fantasy, it was love at first sight.'[7] Because he has been reading, and notably reading fantasy, for several decades, and because he is naturally passionate about history, Sapkowski is part of the 'literary branch' of fantasy writers, who display a 'true erudite passion for the past (continuing the antiquarian movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries)'.[8] His action-filled fantasy stories about fighting supernatural creatures and reuniting a war-torn family are also rich in historical, literary and cultural references, which means that they can be very demanding for readers, translators and academics wanting to study *The Witcher*. Sapkowski is 'an erudite author who fills his books with multiple intertextual layers', who draws from historically and geographically diverse sources to build a new fantasy world associating surprising elements with familiar constructs.[9]

The author's writing process reveals an interesting paradox in the way his fantasy cycle has been received by readers worldwide. While extremely diverse cultural references are regularly exposed in Sapkowski's fiction, *The Witcher* has repeatedly been presented by publishers, journalists and readers alike as 'Polish fantasy'. It has been described as 'the most recognisably Polish fantasy series of all time' and as 'Poland's (so far) most successful

[6] K. Larsen, *Science, Technology and Magic in The Witcher: A Medievalist Spin on Modern Monsters*. Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy 83 (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland and Company, 2023), p. 9.

[7] D. Cutali, 'Interview with Andrzej Sapkowski', *Sugarpulp* (13 July 2015). https://sugarpulp.it/intervista-ad-andrzej-sapkowski.

[8] V. Féasson, 'La fantasy archaïsante survit-elle à la traduction?', *Tropics*, 9 (2020), p. 3, § 7. My translation. https://tropics.univ-reunion.fr/1725.

[9] A. Michalska, 'Otherness and Intertextuality in *The Witcher*: The Duality of Experiencing Andrzej Sapkowski's Universe', unpublished master's thesis, Utrecht University (2020), p. 30.

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cultural export'.[10] This literary cycle remains strongly associated with its country of origin, because of Sapkowski's nationality of course, but also despite the fact that the author himself repeatedly nuanced this localised association. It is indeed a surprise to find a Polish fantasy cycle at the top of many countries' bestselling lists. However, *The Witcher* has regularly been recognised for its literary value not despite the fact that it was not an anglophone story, but *because* it was Polish. Contrary to a long tradition of minimising Poland's cultural contribution, *The Witcher* has been internationally marketed as a Polish production, both in its literary form and in its first media adaptations, especially as video games.

Nevertheless, it would be reductive to state that, through the example of Sapkowski's success, the key to becoming 'a fantasy superstar . . . lies in modern digital cultures'.[11] As we will see, *The Witcher* has been transposed into comic books, movies, TV series, video games, board games and many other forms since its literary debut. Some of these adaptations gained an important recognition on a global scale, including the three current video games produced by Polish studio CD Projekt and its development department, CD Projekt Red (2007–15, with a fourth opus planned for 2027), and the American series created for Netflix by Lauren Schmidt Hissrich (which premiered in 2019 and was planned for five seasons). Even though the multimedia adaptations clearly increased the availability of Sapkowski's texts worldwide, the original success of *The Witcher* cycle started well before its first adaptation, and the nine current books did not achieve 'bestseller status simply by being a tie-in with the game', as the exponential number of translated versions in Europe prove.[12] It is mainly the translations of the various volumes that helped make Sapkowski's work available outside of Poland, as 'only' 43 million people speak and read Polish. The history of these translations and the editorial choices made by European publishers reveal fascinating tendencies in fantasy fiction, as well as heterogenous approaches to translating and marketing genre fiction to foreign audiences.

[10] N. Đorđević, 'How *The Witcher* Became Poland's Most Successful Cultural Export', Emerging Europe (14 September 2021). urlr.me/HEKawq.

[11] Drewniak, 'Literary Translation and Digital Culture', p. 205. [12] Ibid., p. 212.

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While a new stand-alone *The Witcher* novel, *Rozdroże kruków* (*Crossroads of Ravens*), was published in Poland at the end of 2024 and has been translated into more than twenty languages, and while a new upcoming volume has been announced in 2026, Andrzej Sapkowski's work has now become a worldwide reference in fantasy literature. And yet most of his fans do not read his texts in their original language. This study aims at tracing the editorial journey of Sapkowski's fantasy from Poland to the world, focusing on the various stages of dissemination, translation and publishing that *The Witcher* has been undergoing in Europe. The analysis developed in the next pages concentrates on the author's intentions and those of his editorial teams, considering the target audiences, the successive translations and the series in which the books of *The Witcher* have been published.

The first chapter retraces the literary and historical context in which Sapkowski published his fantasy cycle, from the initial short story 'Wiedźmin' to its cultural impact in Poland. The author gained local success and critical recognition with two collections of short stories before launching the quick publication of five serialised novels. It was only years later that Sapkowski came back to his praised fantasy universe to include two more stand-alone novels, in a continuation that also responded to the first media echoes of the cycle. This chapter studies the multilayered referential style adopted by the author to question the frequent 'Polish fantasy' label affixed to *The Witcher*, and what it may imply when transmitting the story in other countries.

The story of publishing *The Witcher* is indeed intrinsically associated with translations. However, the cycle includes its own pitfalls, from the infusing of Polish historical context to the specificities of fantasy fiction: 'Despite its significant popularity outside its circle of readers, fantasy as a genre is still commonly regarded as second-rate literature. This perception might have a bearing on translation quality and the decisions translators take.'[13] Because *The Witcher* is fantasy fiction, it requires special attention

[13] D. Guttfeld, 'Fantastic Neologisms in Translation: Creature Names in Professional and Amateur Renderings of Sapkowski's "Witcher" Series into English', *Między Oryginałem a Przekładem*, 23(2/36) (2017), 77–96, p. 77. https://doi.org/10.12797/MOaP.23.2017.36.05.

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from translators. The second chapter of this volume focuses on what translating fantasy implies for an international audience.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the actual history of publication of these translations in many European languages. The publishers' demands varied from country to country, as did their goals for translating *The Witcher*, with understandably mixed results when it came to sales figures. This chapter studies the linguistic issues posed by Sapkowski's texts and the editorial choices made in book formats and covers to promote these stories to the world.

The final chapter in this volume questions the place attributed to *The Witcher* and its author in an ever-growing multimedia fantasy empire. The literary cycle has been simultaneously praised as most explicitly representing the current tendencies of the genre, and slowly reoriented by its editorial team to nuance its inherent association with fantasy. The international readership of *The Witcher* considerably grew and demanded an expanded fictional universe, and the way the extended cycle was received helped question genre barriers in fiction, as many masterpieces in the history of literature have.

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1 Publishing Fantasy in 1980s–1990s Poland

1.1 Polish Editorial Context

The history of *The Witcher*'s publication started in the second half of the 1980s in Poland, and the first wave of publications by Andrzej Sapkowski occurred throughout the 1990s, before the work was transmitted in Europe in the following years. As with every cultural production, the creation of this literary cycle is necessarily influenced by its historical and geographical context, and publishing fantasy in 1980s and 1990s Poland presented its own difficulties: 'The early 1990s in Poland were a strange time.'[14] Culturally, politically and economically speaking, the country was living through a slow decline of Soviet influence after the collapse of the USSR, mixed with the growing impact of Western capitalism. In Poland, it implied radical changes in political and social organisation, with the transition from the Polish People's Republic that existed from 1952 to 1989. This was a period of political and social doubt, which reinforced the agitated context that had already characterised post-war Europe for several decades. It is in this atmosphere of cultural instability that Sapkowski published his cycle, and we could argue that '*The Witcher* was perfectly and consciously timed for this moment, both by the author and the publisher.'[15]

The story of Geralt, of course, is set in a fictional medievalist land and does not directly mirror the situation of Central Europe. *The Witcher* is not about Poland. Nevertheless, Sapkowski clearly wrote *with* and *for* a Polish context, 'reflecting stereotypical Polish national self-perceptions, preoccupations and attitudes to the wider world and the country's place within it'.[16] The general atmosphere of the texts reveals a constant turmoil, mostly seen from outside but lived through its consequences: although most characters keep away from the battlefield, war is always around them, following them in its hardship, its destroyed families and its social and racial tensions. But this is not the main preoccupation of people in charge, be they kings, emperors or magicians. After the Second World War and again after the fall of the Soviet Union, Poland was left to deal with the conflicts' aftermath, sometimes lost

[14] Drewniak, 'Literary Translation and Digital Culture', p. 216. [15] Ibid., p. 216.
[16] Ibid., p. 206.

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between two cultural empires. *The Witcher* can be read as a reflection of Poland in the 1980s and the 1990s, that is to say a country that saw itself as other European countries tended to see it, 'as peripheral, even in areas where this [was] counterfactual'.[17] As a result, the end of the twentieth century did not appear as the ideal time to export Polish literature.

However, Sapkowski is far from the first author to gain success in Poland and in other countries. The country already had a long literary tradition, with an important number of books regularly published and read by its inhabitants. Sapkowski himself is a product of this deeply set cultural practice; he has repeatedly stated that he has read several books every week since he was able to read – and his extensive literary knowledge attests to this. The cultural production of the country was thus already rich, and Polish literature was already exported in the twentieth century, especially in Central Europe. A few Polish authors were read and even massively translated, like Henryk Sienkiewicz, author of short stories and epic novels notably about Polish history and recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1905. His young adult novel, *W pustyni i w puszczy* (*In Desert and Wilderness*, 1912) was an important success in Central and Eastern Europe, and Sapkowski has on multiple occasions been dubbed the 'literary son of Henryk Sienkiewicz'.[18] Others, like Witold Gombrowicz, who used humour to tackle profound existentialist questions and Poland's troubled history, followed in this international recognition of Polish literature – even though their style could hardly be more different.

When it comes to genre fiction, Poland also had a rich publication tradition, even though it was mostly dedicated to science fiction rather than fantasy. 'Before the political changes in '89, it was (Soviet) science fiction that was most commonly read.'[19] With a heavy demand from readers and the dynamism of Poland's editorial market in the middle of the twentieth century, a few Polish authors gained success writing science fiction. The first influential author is probably Jerzy Żuławski, a writer, poet and translator known for his *Trylogia*

[17] Ibid., p. 209.
[18] Z. Szczerek, 'Czy Wiedźmin jest prawdziwym Polakiem?', Wyborcza.pl (6 December 2024). urlr.me/YbKepv.
[19] Michalska, 'Otherness and Intertextuality in *The Witcher*', p. 49.

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Księżycowa (*Lunar Trilogy*, 1903–11), a story about a human colony established on the moon and developing over the years a religious cult. The trilogy was quickly translated into Russian, Czech, German and Hungarian, and only recently into English. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Polish science fiction scene was also occupied by Janusz A. Zajdel, known for his dystopian worlds and for being a founder of social science fiction (*fantastyka socjologiczna*) in Poland. His novels include an important reflection on the (often negative) consequences of technology and its impact on society. Many of his books and short stories have been translated into Russian, Belarusian, Slovenian, Bulgarian, Czech, Finnish, Hungarian and German, with once again a late and only partial translation into English.

But the most highly recognised Polish science fiction writer is indisputably Stanisław Lem, the famous author of *Solaris* (1961) and *Ze wspomnień Ijona Tichego Kongres futurologiczny* (*The Futurological Congress*, 1971), among other influential novels. His works reveal his interest in technology and anthropology, questioning the limits of human intelligence and humans' ability to communicate. Many of his novels and short stories have been translated into more than fifty languages, regularly adapted for the screen and widely read all over the world. Lem received many awards, not only in Poland, including the French Grand Prix de Littérature Policière for his crime fiction *Katar* (*The Chain of Chance*, 1976), and the Austrian State Prize for European Literature; interestingly, he also has the honour of having a minor planet, 3836 Lem, named after him. Considered a visionary, he has sold more than 45 million books and remains an acclaimed science fiction reference to this day.

As many other Europeans did at the time, Polish readers expressed a demand for speculative fiction, which led to the development of means of publication, for example with new publishers, series and magazines. In 1982, Adam Hollanek, who was himself a writer of short stories, novels and poetry, created *Fantastyka*. This Polish magazine, entirely dedicated to science fiction and fantasy, was the first genre fiction magazine in the Eastern Bloc countries, and quickly became 'an outpost of the international fan movement in Poland'.[20] While book production used to be centralised by the state, submitted to censorship and was victim of a general paper

[20] Drewniak, 'Literary Translation and Digital Culture', pp. 213–14.

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shortage which limited access to books, the year 1989 saw an important liberalisation of the editorial market. It is in this context, when Polish genre fiction was largely oriented towards science fiction but was in clear demand, and when book production was facilitated, that Sapkowski proposed his vision for a fantasy war-torn world in the 1980s and 1990s.

Even though Polish publishers seem less interested in fantasy, the genre was characterised by a strong and growing community. Books were recommended and exchanged by avid readers, and many people who translated fantasy in Poland were fans of the genre before being professional translators: 'In the post-1989 era many Polish translators of Anglophone fantasy have been recruited from the fan community, characterized by insider knowledge and deep attachment to the type of literature; for such translators, reading fantasy, or speculative fiction in general, often precedes translating.'[21] As a result, fantasy was not a new object when Sapkowski started publishing, and its Polish readers enjoyed an increasingly dynamic editorial market. In Poland, genre literature, and especially fantasy, corresponded to a typically Western form of culture that readers were keen to read. Specific facets of the genre were developed, mixing influences and creating hybrid subgenres: 'Since the beginning of the twenty-first century a new literary genre, combining the features of historical novel with fantasy literature, Gothic (including Gothic crime story) and horror, has been developing in Poland.'[22] The earlier success of historical novels and the dynamic field of genre fiction in Poland allowed for a great opportunity to publish a new kind of story, associating history and speculative fiction with a dark turn.

1.2 'Wiedźmin' (1986) and the First Short Stories

The literary adventure of *The Witcher* started with an initially autonomous text. Sapkowski submitted his short story 'Wiedźmin' to the second writing

[21] Guttfeld, 'Fantastic Neologisms in Translation', p. 77.

[22] W. Werner, 'From Andrzej Kmicic to Witcher: Alternative History and Historical Fantasy in Poland at the Turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries', in V. Julkowska and W. Werner (eds.), *Contemporary Lives of the Past* (Poznan: Adam Mickiewicz University, 2018), pp.139–63, p. 146.

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