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Queen versus Pawn: Female Genius in The Queen's Gambit

Dama contra peón: la genialidad femenina en Gambito de dama

Abstract

The miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*, whose protagonist is an orphaned chess player with emotional problems and a dependence on drugs and alcohol, was the most watched fictional drama in the history of the Netflix platform in 2020. This article develops a feminist analysis thereof with an interpretive approach and a qualitative methodology, in order to elucidate to what extent it disrupts the mainstream paradigm of female representation, which is characterized by sexist stereotyping, an emphasis on the body and beauty, or the instrumentalization of sexual violence. Our study reveals that the series displays an imperfect heroine who disrupts gender stereotypes, yet is not wholly free of problems, such as the description of the concept of genius, which is trapped between the male pattern and a mental deviation typically seen as feminine.

Resumen

La miniserie Gambito de dama, protagonizada por una ajedrecista huérfana, con problemas emocionales y dependencia de los fármacos y el alcohol, fue la ficción más vista en la historia de la plataforma Netflix en 2020. En este artículo se realiza un análisis feminista de ella mediante un enfoque interpretativo y con una metodología cualitativa, con el objetivo de dilucidar hasta qué punto la serie rompe con el paradigma mainstream de representación femenina, caracterizado por la estereotipia sexista, el énfasis en el cuerpo y la belleza o la instrumentalización de la violencia sexual. El estudio revelará que esta ficción brinda una heroína imperfecta, que rompe estereotipos de género, aunque no exenta de algunos problemas, como la descripción de la genialidad, a caballo entre el patrón masculino y el extravío mental estereotípicamente femenino.

Keywords

Chess; empowerment; feminism; gender; women; Netflix.

Palabras clave

Ajedrez; empoderamiento; feminismo; género; mujeres; Netflix.

1. Introduction

The miniseries *The Queen's Gambit* (Scott Frank and Allan Scott, Netflix, 2020), a TV adaptation of the novel of the same name by Walter Tevis (Random House, 1983), became in 2020 the most-watched fiction in the history of Netflix, the leading video-on-demand (SVoD) platform in the sector[1]: 62 million people watched it in the first 28 days since its premiere on 23 October 2020, ranking among the top ten most watched series in 92 different countries, in 63 of them as number one (Avendaño, 2020).

The Queen's Gambit, named after a chess opening, tells the story of a child prodigy (the orphan Beth Harmon, played by Anya Taylor-Joy). Its seven episodes, directed by Scott Frank, have not only won over audiences, but the show has also received multiple awards, including two Golden Globes and two Emmys (2021). Among its consultants was Garri Kaspárov, chess World Champion, and Grandmaster Bruce Pandolfini, commentator of the famous 1972 Fischer-Spassky game in Reykjavik, the "match of the century" that inspired the film *Pawn Sacrifice* (Edward Zwick, 2014). Both participated in the recreation of the board games reproduced in the fiction.

The huge popularity of *The Queen's Gambit* boosted the sales of the novel on which it is based, which, 37 years after its publication, appeared among the bestsellers on *The New York Times* list. Likewise, worldwide purchases of chess boards, Google chess searches, school registrations, federation registrations and the number of games played online have all gone up (Ardiansyah, Surwati & Sos, 2021; Gibson & Marback, 2021). Its social influence is only increasing: in Lexington, KY, where the series is set, the Queen's Gambit Tour has been designed, and the city is taking profiting from the show to offer new tourist experiences (for example, the 21c Museum Hotel has named a themed room "The Harmon Room"). The press, for its part, uses the series as an excuse to produce content on chess. In Latin America, it has also received a very positive reception, which may have been influenced by the Argentinian origin of the leading actress. In Mexico, for example, the fourth episode (*Middle Game*), which recreates a luminous and cosmopolitan Mexico City in the 1960s, was very well received, although the filming of these locations actually took place in Germany. For the shots of the *art decó* Aztec Palace Hotel, the Friedrichstadt-Palast theatre in Berlin was used, and the Chapultepec Zoo is also recreated from the one in the German capital. In Peru, chess master Deysi Cori acknowledged in the Peruvian press that the programme had served to debunk myths about the game and also to promote its practice, with a record number of tournament registrations reached in 2021[2].

The product discussed here addresses two variables that break with the audiovisual narrative tradition: opting for a strategic game (and not one based on physical exercise or gambling) and choosing a woman as the protagonist. Moreover, it emphasises issues that are usually invisible in chess stories, such as the importance of financial prizes (Marocco, 2021: 95). The originality of *The Queen's Gambit* addresses the rarity of champions (in life and on-screen) and, specifically, that of female chess players. This extraordinary quality of its main character - a poor, orphaned girl in the mid-twentieth century - helps to compensate for the absence of narratives that correct the complacent or invisible gaze on experiences of exploitation or violence. According to Marocco, a story with a protagonist like *The Queen's Gambit*'s has both the right and the duty to redeem the victims (Marocco, 2021: 99).

It should be noted that platforms such as Netflix, HBO or Amazon Prime are using equality, sexual diversity or feminism as one more production variable (Zurian, García-Ramos & Vázquez-Rodríguez, 2021: 4). Research has found that feminist arguments and female representation (more women in front of and behind the cameras, all-female crews, explicit ascription to the feminist movement) has increased since 2017, when the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements became popular (Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021: 31). In addition to its role as a platform for global content (Ferrera, 2020), current fiction is opening up new possibilities for female protagonist profiles that break both the absence and the stereotypical representation that had characterised many audiovisual products (Bernárdez-Rodal & Menéndez-Menéndez, 2021; Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021; Morejón, 2020). Thus, one fact must be hihglighted in *The Queen's Gambit*: the whole story rests on the shoulders of the female protagonist, whose body language and gestures (especially her hypnotic gaze) and choice of camera shots (especially the close-ups and the play of shots/counter-shots) are reminiscent of the Amélie played by Audrey Tautou in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001).

The approach of this article is essentially based on feminist film theory, a paradigm of what Casetti (2005: 20) calls "field theories" since, according to Colaizzi, these approaches offer:

> a critical reflection and crucial questions about vision, representation, the construction of subjectivity and identity, pleasure, modern epistemology, contemporary culture, the multiple power relations that mark us as historical subjects, and about our perception and definition of reality as subjects necessarily involved in processes of cultural construction and elaboration (Colaizzi, 2007: 10).

2. Frame of reference

2.1. Feminism and Film Theory

Television representations (characters, stories, outcomes) provide new imaginaries that suggest behavioural models, particularly among young people (García-Muñoz &Fedele, 2011). According to Sánchez, TV fiction is providing new identities and patterns of behaviour and relationships that "make symbolic resources available to imagine identity options, to understand them, to put oneself in the place of the other" (2020: 16).

Following Teresa de Lauretis, we must understand audiovisual discourse as a technology capable of "controlling the field of social signification and thus producing, promoting and instituting gender representation" (1987: 18). From the point of view of equality between men and women, fictional audiovisual representations can contribute to the construction of a more egalitarian society (Belmonte-Arocha & Gillamón-Carrasco, 2008) even though, in general, women are represented within a gender system in which they respond more to consumption requirements than to their interests (Colaizzi, 1995: 17). Indeed, historically, it has been men who have decided what to represent and how, "according to perceptual and conceptual schemes provided by patriarchal ideological and social formations" (De Lauretis, 1992: 110). It should be remembered that there is consensus in admitting that audiovisual representations have an impact on society, especially on girls and women who declare themselves influenced by the models they observe on the screen[3].

The representation of women and the female sphere in audiovisual culture has been widely studied since the 1970s, when feminist film studies emerged (Hudson, Mezzera & Moreno, 2019: 97). The article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", published by Laura Mulvey in *Screen* magazine in 1975, has been the most influential of all those written on film and feminism, and it has become the seminal work on feminist film theory. The text, with a psychoanalytic approach, studies the construction of sexual differences in classic Hollywood cinema, based on its ways of looking. Mulvey explained how men were the active subjects, while women were only passive individuals, elements of male desire and objects of the fetishist gaze. This gaze, according to the author, has shaped the mainstream audiovisual logic (Mulvey, 1975). After her, among the pioneers in this theoretical framework we find names such as Annette Kuhn (1982), who in her influential work *Women's Cinema* argued that ideology has repercussions in society so that representations (including those of cinema) are always influential elements in social structures (Kuhn, 1982: 19); or Ann E. Kaplan, who would contribute another volume of reference for the discipline, *Women and Cinema* (1983), where she studied some films in the light of the concepts defined by Mulvey.

Incorporating contributions from disciplines such as sociology, semiotics, psychoanalysis and cultural studies, during the last half-century feminist literature has been analysing how the aforementioned issues are reproduced in contemporary audiovisual products, adding TV fiction to film as an object of analysis. Although the original studies were linked to cinema, they continue to inspire the entire feminist literature on gender representation: their contributions apply to any visual discourse, such as advertising, video games or photography and, of course, television. This is because their findings are not limited to the big screen but apply to other formats. Although there is an increasing amount of specific literature on TV analysis, and just sticking to the Spanish-speaking world, it is worth highlighting works produced from a gender perspective such as those of Garmendia (1998); de Miguel (2004), Galán (2007a; 2007b) and Menéndez (2006; 2008).

In this sense, contemporary texts specifically interested in television fiction have tackled parameters such as reception (Lacalle, 2012), male and female prominence (Menéndez & Zurian, 2014) or the roles of the characters according to gender, based on variables such as initiative, decision-making and conflict resolution, communication or friendship, family, love and sexual relationships (Belmonte-Arocha & Guillamón-Carrasco, 2008; Ferrera, 2020; García-Muñoz &Fedele, 2011; Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021; Lacalle & Castro, 2017; Lacalle & Hidalgo-Marí, 2017; Lacalle & Gómez, 2016). The existence of sexism and violence against women in the narratives has also been addressed, with researchers showing interest in the choice of complacent or critical gazes applied on the reproduction of these phenomena (Menéndez & Fernández, 2020). The literature has found a problematic representation, since in general a symbolic universe is constructed which, as had already been observed in films, "invigorates and updates an androcentric and patriarchal vision of the world" (Aguilar, 2010: 271).

The results of the abundant specialised literature show that, although there have been changes in production over the last two decades, the existence of gender biases is still very evident. These biases can be seen in the fact that, for the most part, women in audiovisual fiction appear in much smaller numbers than men, and they do so in traditional roles and in a stereotypical manner. Female characters are often emotionally unstable, described based on their physique rather than their intellect, and unable to compete with male characters (Graydon, 2001). Hypersexualisation is common, especially in characters with some power, such as science fiction heroines (Menéndez & Fernández, 2015: 96); love

(idealised and described on the basis of the romantic myth) continues to be the main project in female characters (Laguarda, 2006: 148). As for sexual violence, it is eroticised, depoliticised in the context of love or it appears as a precondition for their empowerment (Menéndez & Fernández, 2020: 211). The roles most often embodied by actresses are those of victim or prostitute (Aguilar, 2010: 264) and, usually, the narratives focus on the relationships between the different women only from the point of view of rivalry. These stereotypes are reinforced by elements such as non-verbal language (Martín-Sánchez, Hernández-Herrarte & Fernández-Ramos, 2020).

Finally, it is worth noting Barbara Zecchi's contribution (2013). She coins the term *gynocinema* to overcome the limitations of concepts such as "women's cinema", "women's cinema" or "feminist cinema". This proposal applies to television fiction: by shifting the adjective "feminist" from the text to its interpretation, the author recognises that all works made by women incorporate practices derived from their position as subordinate or oppressed subjects, broadening the gaze beyond direction and accepting the possibility of men making feminist cinema, a useful idea for the audiovisual text addressed here.

2.2. The universe of *The Queen's Gambit*: fact and fiction

The Netflix miniseries discussed here is characterised by an outstanding setting. The carefully chosen costumes, the excellent photography and the preciousness of the sets evoke series such as *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, AMC, 2007-2015) or *Babylon Berlin* (Henk Handloegten, Tom Tykwer & Achim von Borries, ARD, 2017-present). It also stands out for its recreation of the world of chess (especially when reproducing the characteristics of the competition) and its reality in the 1960s, when women were an exception in a sport that is still essentially masculine today. Sometimes using stereotypes - such as hitting the clock violently during the game - and at other times falsifying certain issues - such as the fact that someone can succeed as a chess player without losing a single game – it builds a story full of dynamism about a competition of intellectual nature, a priori not very TV-friendly. Chess seemed condemned to be portrayed as a static, parsimonious and even boring exercise. However, in *The Queen's Gambit*, audiovisual and narrative resources - sometimes hyperbolic – are used, which brings the games closer to the life-and-death duels of the western genre. Significant for its originality and brilliance is the use of fantastic images to illustrate the workings of Beth Harmon's mind. In the novel, she recreates the games in her head, and in the TV fiction they are projected three-dimensionally on the room's ceiling, in a suggestive manner and with an ability to recreate graphically a purely mental movement. There is literature on the relationship between the use of imagination and chess in terms of spatial possibilities (Coates, 2013: 212): for the player, the pieces on the board come to life, not as an abstract formal system but as an emotional presence.

Walter Tevis, the author of the novel on which the series is based, was a professor of literature at Ohio University who died in 1984. He explained that he had been inspired by his own experience when writing the book, particularly in what concerns the protagonist's drug addiction (Mitgang, 1983: 15). He used many real elements, such as games, strategies and above all biographies, to construct his fictional heroine, who does not really represent anyone in particular. That is why specialised websites and dozens of press reports have been devoted to finding female names that could have inspired Harmon's character. Among them, the British Vera Menchik (1906-1944), the first woman to participate in a men's tournament and world champion for fifteen years, stands out. Beth perhaps also evokes the Georgian Nona Gaprindashvili (1941-), who sued Netflix in 2021 for defamation, since in the last episode (*End Game*) she is mentioned in a line of the script that claims she never played against men (Gardner, 2021)[4]. Indeed, the five-time world champion always played in world tournaments with women, but she did play against men in other competitions. Both are explicitly mentioned in Tevis' work. The Hungarian Judit Polgár (1976-), dubbed "the queen of chess", was a child when the novel was published, but may have influenced the TV version. She was the first woman to compete in the World Chess Championship (attended exclusively by the world's top eight), and in 2002 she defeated Kaspárov, the first time that a woman did. Mention can also be made of the Mexican Hilda "Merlina" Acevedo (1970-), who, as a teenager, represented Mexico at the international level (she took part in three Olympiads) and who, like Harmon, regularly used the same openings, especially the Queen's Gambit. She also shares with Harmon that she studied Russian, probably with her future competitions in mind. All in all, although a minority in a masculinised sport, women have always played chess. The story of Madame de Rémusat (1780-1921), who played against Napoleon, is well known (Gómez y Patiño, Blanco & Menéndez, 2021).

From a symbolic point of view, the series is marked by its intertextuality with chess itself; its moves, names and rituals: as mentioned earlier, the queen's gambit is a type of opening, and the titles of the seven chapters of the mini-series follow the order of a game. It should be noted that a gambit is always a material offer in exchange for an advantage. The queen's gambit is about opening the way for the queen (the most powerful piece: it can move all over the board and in any direction) by offering the pawn, leading to a game where the black pieces will attack white queen, taking advantage of their numerical superiority. However, unlike the other moves that share the same name, in the queen's move the white side can easily regain numerical equality. In other words, it is a false gambit.

This game within the game exists behind the plot of the Netflix series, as it did first in Tevis's book. The gambit or opening, in this fiction, suggests the possibility of a new look (or opening) at issues such as addictions or politics (the Cold War is the geopolitical setting in which the story is framed). Beth Harmon's character is confronted throughout the story with different choices (or gambits) that she must accept or reject, both in life and in the game. The gambit also tells us about the sacrifice that the protagonist is willing to accept to become the best chess player (which gives its name to the story itself).

3. Research objectives and hypotheses

The hypothesis of this paper proposes that the Netflix miniseries elaborates a discourse of autonomy and self-improvement imbricated in a female representation that breaks with gender stereotypes, which makes it of great interest for feminist analysis. Thus, *The Queen's Gambit* suggests a useful paradigm for the practices of female empowerment and for advancing in the construction of more egalitarian imaginaries, inhabited by intelligent women with their own projects. It also explores the possibility of constructing imperfect and complex heroines, as is the case with male heroes. The analysis will reveal that, in contrast to the usual results in the academic literature on female representation, we will find a character who is atypical from the point of view of gender and the mainstream representation paradigm, characterised by what she is *not* and/or by what *does not* happen to her. Harmon does not suffer sexual violence, she does not confront other women in relationships of rivalry, she is not defined by her initial situation as a victim of abandonment and lack of affection, she is not part of a story based on romantic love or dependence on a man, she is not instrumentalised in the erotic or bodily dimensions, she does not stand out or triumph because of her beauty but because of her intellect and, finally, she does not establish a negative or competitive relationship with her mother.

Synthesising the ideas presented above, this article proposes a general objective (O1) interested in determining whether the female representation of *The Queen's Gambit* offers a positive representation of talented women, based on the initial hypothesis already described. Furthermore, the secondary objectives are: (O2) to determine the existence of female heroines who do not respond to the stereotype of the majority of audiovisual productions; (O3) to establish the variables of difference concerning the representation of other heroines in fiction; (O4) to demonstrate the absence of tropes about female prominence in terms of sexual violence, romantic love or female rivalry.

4. Methodology

Amanda D. Lotz (2001: 31) argues that, for an audiovisual product to be defined as feminist, it is necessary that it reproduces relationships that empower women, that it offers a plural conceptualisation of gender and sexuality, that it represents feminist strategies as a response to situations of oppression and/or that it shows women's challenges based on their ability to overcome them. To validate the hypothesis put forward, this article constructs a qualitative methodological design that allows us to satisfy society's demand for knowledge about gender equality through a feminist approach. In this sense, there are three main techniques for examining the inclusion of feminist content in TV series (Lotz, 2001): the analysis of the representation of female characters, the observation of narrative strategies related to feminist issues and the emergence of feminism as a theme in itself. Here we are interested in the first two and, following Puleo (2007: 17-26), whose contributions are followed by Menéndez and Fernández (2020), we offer an interpretative approach based on analytical variables such as gender status, gender norms and sanctions, stereotypes and legitimising discourses. In this way, we follow methodological proposals already tested in texts such as those of Mateos-Pérez and Ochoa (2016), Zurian and Herrero (2014) or Menéndez and Fernández (2020).

The research, therefore, uses an interpretative approach and a qualitative methodology (Vallés, 1999) and, shares the conclusions of Azahra, Rifai and Arindawati (2021), who state that *The Queen's Gambit* breaks with five common myths in drama series: women considered inferior, characterised as weak characters, sex objects, instrumentalised to increase consumption and/or annoying for males. In the Netflix series discussed here, sexism appears clearly through these five tropes (for example, when the orphanage janitor does not want to teach the protagonist to play chess because of her sex), but Harmon's character can overcome it by using her intelligence.

Table 1. Variables of analysis according to the specialised literature

V1. Variables for defining an audiovisual product as feminist **(Lotz)**	V1.1. It replicates relationships that empower women	**T1. Techniques for studying variables** **(Lotz)**	T1.1. Analysis of the portrayal of female characters
	V1.2. It offers a plural conceptualisation of gender		
	V1.3. It depicts feminist strategies as a response to oppression		
	V1.4. It shows women's challenges based on their ability to overcome them		
V2. Gender variables **(Puleo/Menéndez & Fernández)**	V2.1. Gender status		T1.2. Analysing narrative strategies related to feminist issues
	V2.2. Gender-specific rules and sanctions		
	V2.3. Gender stereotypes		
	V2.4. Legitimising discourses		
V3. Tropes in the construction of female characters in drama series **(Azahra, Rifai & Arindawati)**	V3.1. Women considered inferior		T1.3. The emergence of feminism as a theme
	V3.2. Women characterised as weak characters		
	V3.3. Women represented as sex objects		
	V3.4. Women instrumentalised to promote consumption		
	V3.5. Women annoyed with and for men		

Source: own elaboration.

The previous sections have provided an informative account of the TV product itself (contextualised with elements of production and social context, as well as its literary referent). They are now followed by fieldwork that includes the most significant variables of analysis extracted from the specialised literature (Table 1) and enriched with interpretations produced from the closed reading. To this end, the seven episodes that make up the audiovisual product at hand have been viewed, and the literary work on which it is based has been consulted.

5. Results

5.1. On genius

> "I would say it is much easier to play chess without an Adam's apple."
>
> Beth Harmon, *The Queen's Gambit*

First of all, we are interested in answering the question of whether or not *The Queen's Gambit* reproduces traditional representations of women and the feminine in audiovisual fiction. From the viewing of the seven episodes – all of them reflecting the resilience of the protagonist and her development as an independent, intelligent and assertive woman - it can be inferred that it breaks with the usual female stereotype in the cultural industries. In this sense, chess is to be seen as a men's game, for warriors who embody stereotypes of masculinity through the armies of black and white pieces (Ghozlan, 2021: 87).

For Shivani Menon (2020), Harmon's central role offers authenticity without forcing the appearance of feminism that simply exists, constituting the antithesis of patriarchy. From the very beginning of the story, when she enters her first competition and is told that she must face another female player, one senses that her path will not be an easy one. Beth Harmon will dismantle sexism through her intellect, "fighting from a 64-square board" (Menon, 2020: par. 4). In *The Queen's Gambit* there are no verbal duels, nor does Harmon need physical power like other audiovisual heroines, such as Amalia True in *The Nevers* (Joss Whedon and Philippa Goslett, HBO, 2021), who has extraordinary hand-to-hand fighting skills; or Sameen Shaw in *Person of Interest* (Jonathan Nolan, CBS, 2011-2016), who is just as tough as the male action character in the series, the inexpressive John Reese. Harmon is, quite simply, a determined and bold woman, driven by a great ambition that at no point implies negativity, suggesting intrinsic feminism.

It is relevant that, contrary to what tends to happen in popular culture, *The Queen's Gambit* breaks with the trope of the unattractiveness (or normative femininity) of intelligent women (Menon, 2020: par. 5). This issue is especially important in the audiovisual version because of the choice of actress, a corporeally normative woman, emphasised by the camera angles and close-ups. Also because, once the character is beyond childhood, when her lack of beauty is frequently mentioned (in the

literary version she is defined with the term *plain*, applied especially her nose, skin and hair colour), she becomes a woman of undeniable attractiveness, somewhat enigmatic, well-dressed, always impeccable. This is so much the case that it has been problematised (Hallet, 2021: 6), mainly for two reasons: firstly, because there is a too-perfect image of the character, for example, after an episode of drunkenness or a sleepless night, when the camera shows her perfectly dressed and combed. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the TV version contradicts the novel's depiction of her as much less attractive. Still, her beauty is noticeable, but it is barely mentioned in the story, and bodily judgement or sexualisation are not present in any scene.

The emphasis on reason and talent explains why some authors propose that Harmon embodies the archetype of the *wise woman* (Garrido & Zaptsi, 2021: 26). It is clear that she has a privileged mind despite her problems with alcohol and drug addiction, and she is, therefore, an infrequent representation in audiovisual narratives. Both addiction (a stereotypical element via which male vulnerability is elaborated) and creative or intellectual exceptionality are reserved for male characters, who do not lose value or consideration even when they are drunk. Aware of the unusual quality she possesses, Harmon worries about her possible loss of talent through substance abuse, but the story does not judge her addictions and does not turn them into an element of rejection of a character who, despite her descent to hell, maintains her dignity, as well as the respect of others.

While the protagonist's mental health problems and addictions demystify the idea that success guarantees happiness, Menon explains, her friend Jolene (played by Moses Ingram, who appears as a balanced and happy person), breaks with the stereotype of the *angry black woman* (Menon, 2020: para. 9), although she does so by representing another one: that of the best friend (Evans, 2021: 23) or *magical negro*[5]. Thus, authenticity in representation is an incontestable variable of feminism. It is worth remembering that the author of the novel, Walter Tavis, explained in some interviews that his character was a tribute to cerebral women (Mitgang, 1983: 15). The choice of this protagonist, in the context of the feminism of the 1960s and the sexism inherent both in the Cold War period and in the chess world itself, is a political act that allows the text to be read as feminist.

The construction of Beth Harmon as intellectually extraordinary sometimes falls into the myth of *the lone genius*: dysfunctional characters unable to manage success or even simple everyday life. Marion Hallet (2021) sees this as a female version of this masculine myth of nineteenth-century European culture, combined with the contemporary myth of the American superhero. For her, while this element can be understood as subversive, it also makes it a fantasy. As was the case with Sherlock Holmes in the series *Sherlock* (Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, BBC, 2010-2017), the protagonist's talent is so powerful that it borders on the supernatural, something emphasised by the images that show the workings of Beth's mind, in the style of what happens in *The Good Doctor* (David Shore & Daniel Dae Kim, Sony/ABC, 2017-present), whose protagonist is within the autism spectrum and has Savant Syndrome. Like in these male characters, Harmon's obsessive characteristics and anti-social tendencies are also part of the construction of genius. However, and despite what she considers ambivalent sexism, Hallet (2021: 4) describes some characteristics of the myth of the solitary genius that is relativised in *The Queen's Gambit*: firstly, autonomy, which at some points in the story is replaced by the company of others or collaboration in training, countering the almost inevitable individualistic principle of today's society. On the other hand, the idea that mental disorders are intrinsic to genius is debunked: Beth Harmon's addictions are acquired and not innate, the result of her trauma and abandonment. Genius is not the cause of the protagonist's self-destructive habits, but rather her refuge from them. Thirdly, the series breaks with the idea that genius does not need improvement or instruction: no matter how talented the protagonist is, she cannot become the champion she wishes to be without study and training. In other words, in *The Queen's Gambit*, genius exists, but it is linked to collaboration, effort and the management of addictions.

In the same vein, Albertini (2021: 243) stresses that the Netflix miniseries deals with relational trauma bonds and their parallelism with chess moves in a universe that is obsessive and masculine by definition. Chess, explains this author, constructs a world of myths, rules, practices and oddities where each player has his/her style, which the rest study in their books. Thus, some moves and strategies are known and emulated in the games because the aim is to win. This requires obsession, as well as the study of the opponents and the ability to predict the moves. Among chess players, an error appears fatal, and learning to make mistakes is a difficult process that Harmon must also go through. According to Marocco (2021: 94), the show can (de)construct the links between rationality and imagination, extending Harmon's algebraic talent as an appendix of her imaginary through which every night she elaborates the strategies of the games, when the champion is in that state between sleep and wakefulness that she feeds with the consumption of drugs.

It is relevant, however, that in *The Queen's Gambit* the protagonist will be rescued from her particular hell (embodied in her addictions), not by a prince charming or a marvellous knight, as usually happens in mainstream audiovisual stories, but by her friend from the orphanage, a sensible woman who has

managed to build a life project despite her initial conditioning factors as an African-American orphan. Thus, an element intrinsic to the feminist gaze appears: sisterhood or the relationship of complicity, empathy and support between women, although, as has already been pointed out, through the use of the stereotype of the *magical negro*.

5.2. Building a heroine: Beth Harmon's independence

The heroine of *The Queen's Gambit* survives in a hostile context, from her arrival at the orphanage after her mother's death to her development in the professional chess world, a male ecosystem. The frightened little girl who appears at the beginning of the story, the pre-adolescent adopted by a father who has no interest in her, the newly orphaned young woman who must face loneliness, and finally the player who develops in a space populated by men with whom she shares alcohol and drugs, anticipated the appearance of a stereotypical protagonist; basically a victim forced to grow and become strong on the basis of the violence inflicted on her. However, in *The Queen's Gambit* - and this is one of the variables that ensure its emancipatory message - none of the circumstances that usually surround women in audiovisual fiction occur.

Particularly noteworthy is Harmon's relationship with men: there is no conventional love myth, nor is there sexuality implied in a romantic context. The affective relationships that she establishes are never central to the story, appearing as secondary plots with little narrative weight. Moreover, there is no trace of sexual violence, an issue which, for audiences accustomed to its almost hegemonic appearance in stories with female characters, is perceived as an (unfulfilled) prophecy that hovers over every episode in which the protagonist faces a context potentially harmful to her integrity. According to Barjola (2018), the threat is constructed for audiences through the sexual terror that is part of women's socialisation. A feeling of danger arises in certain circumstances in which nothing is really happening, but which ignites the alarm of sexual terror. It is, Barjola explains, "a certain knowledge about rape, inscribed in the memory of women's bodies" (2018: 263).

Fiction, especially TV fiction, seems to revel in the reproduction of female bodies that are sexually abused within narratives that eroticise such aggressions (Glynn, 2012: 161). However, throughout her career Beth Harmon does not have to face situations of explicit sexism or harassment, dismantling the tradition of audiovisual discourses that are incapable of constructing narratives of female empowerment if the protagonist does not first suffer sexual violence or a whole list of grievances as a price for becoming a leader (Menéndez & Fernández, 2020: 220). The character establishes a relationship of complicity with the young men who surround her in the world of chess, preserving her autonomy and her femininity.

In Netflix's fiction, it is also worth noting that the protagonist is built from trauma and loneliness, with a disheartening beginning for a child who is sent, after the death of her biological mother, to the Methuen home for girls, an orphanage with few resources and no interest in the emotional development of the inmates. However, she is able to thrive through her ambition and her enormous curiosity for the game of chess, which she learns about with William Shaibel (played by Bill Camp), the institution's janitor. The chessboard is Harmon's refuge and, given its competitiveness, it will become a project of emancipation and success, albeit with certain overtones of obsession. Beth will never again be afraid of loneliness, something that is observed when she is already a teenager and, above all, when she loses (again prematurely) her adoptive mother, Alice Harmon (played by Chloe Pirrie).

Chess is the basis of the autonomy project of a character who can not only contemplate a professional future from what seemed to be a hobby, but who also achieves success and prestige relatively quickly. Some texts have conceptualised this journey of the protagonist as a new Helen of Troy, capable of confronting her ghosts despite her weaknesses which, in this case, have to do with her addictions, making her guilty of self-destructive behaviour that puts her professional and personal future at risk. It should be remembered that Tevis's novel begins with an extract from a poem by Yeats about Helen, a woman of genius and beauty in her silence (Hossain, 2021: 1115).

Nor does *The Queen's Gambit* exploit the idea of not being like other women, an element that could make Harmon exceptional, and therefore incapable of constructing a model for others to follow and which, above all, could feed the patriarchal idea of female rivalry. As the fiction evolves, we see her poise and appearance improve. The money that she earns playing allows her to buy things, especially clothes or items to decorate her home, in a process that indicates the normality of her growth as a woman who, while very different from the rest of the girls and young women around her, is still one of them. Although the female characters with weight in the series are not very numerous, we do witness the establishment of relationships of cooperation with and affection for others, especially Jolene, her companion at the orphanage and, above all, with her adoptive mother, to whose home she is sent as a pre-adolescent and with whom she develops a bond of camaraderie, reciprocity and sincere affection. Thus, in *The Queen's Gambit*, female rivalry, a frequent patriarchal strategy in many stories, is not instrumentalised, and in particular, a negative bond with the mother is not constructed.

5.3. The patriarchal gaze: weaknesses from the gender perspective

The dimensions addressed in the previous sections report a representation of the heroine of *The Queen's Gambit* that breaks with the stereotypical construction of women in audiovisual fiction, especially in her elaboration of feminine genius, her cooperative relationships with men and women and her search for a life project as a central value in the evolution of the character. In terms of narrative strategies, those discussed so far articulate the resilience of a protagonist with the capacity to overcome trauma, to choose relationships that allow her growth and empowerment, and to exist beyond sexist tropes about gender and sexuality.

However, it is also possible to point out some contradictory variables that bring us back to the concept of *ambivalent sexism* (Glick & Fiske, 1996) that we already mentioned via Hallet in section 5.1. and that make the story less credible. For example, Harmon has sexual relations with men with whom she does not establish a romantic bond (although she does create one of complicity and cooperation), always based on her capacity to decide without sacrificing her autonomy. These are not very affective relationships, and they do not interfere with her professional project or with her ambition as a player, establishing a novel condition of her sexuality. This element is not positive for Hallet, who sees it as masculinisation of the character, who would be adopting patterns more common in men. In our view, Hallet's reading is problematic because, although there are options that are socially considered masculine (career over personal projects, sexuality detached from love or commitment), it is still an acceptance of the sexist stereotypes themselves - as well as falling into a certain kind of essentialism – to reject the idea that a female protagonist chooses projects that historically have been considered suitable only for men.

In Beth Harmon's relations with men, and more specifically with the chess champions, there is another issue to be problematised: the miniseries is not realistic because it does not capture the tensions that arise in everyday life when a woman triumphs in a masculinised world. In other words, patriarchal discomfort or anger are nowhere to be found in *The Queen's Gambit*. While the protagonist's success story allows sexist narratives to be thwarted, it is unlikely that this could happen in the chess world of the 1960s. Unfortunately, women do not gain social respect and prestige through their talent alone (Hallet, 2021: 6). Systemic sexism does not appear in the miniseries, and thus the possibility of discussing the real experiences of successful women in the male spheres of power that exclude them is lost.

Another problematic aspect is the existence of the *male gaze* (Mulvey, 1975). The creators of the audiovisual story - Scott Frank and Allan Scott, two men - incorporate a certain gender bias, especially in the representation of the beauty of the protagonist, a very white and very thin woman, following the standards of female beauty in contemporary society. It should be emphasised, in any case, that there is no sexualisation of her looks, although there is a reproduction of the aesthetic canons that operate in today's audiovisual culture. It should be remembered here that, on the contrary, her friend Jolene is indeed sexualized. As explained above, she is African-American, and at the beginning of the story she is framed within the stereotype of excessive sexuality, reproducing the racist trope of the hypersexualisation of women of colour[6].

Alongside physical descriptions, another issue with potential for improvement to achieve a narrative that could be really free of patriarchal mandates concerns Harmon's dependence on alcohol and drugs. This issue normalises the possibility of an imperfect heroine (even an anti-heroine), as is the case with men in audiovisual products, who are allowed this vulnerability without it undermining their authority or prestige, or who are constructed as complex characters because of their ambivalence. This is the case, for example, of Dr. Gregory House, who is addicted to Vicodin (*House M. D.*, David Shore, Fox, 2004-2012), or Donald Draper, a heavy drinker and smoker (*Mad Men*, Matthew Weiner, AMC, 2007-2015). In *The Queen's Gambit* Beth is allowed to be addicted without it challenging her integrity. However, some readings warn that, in the case of women, there is always the risk of placing the character in the stereotype of the deviant woman and not of a complex protagonist with strengths and weaknesses. In this respect, it should be remembered that in our culture the trope of the *mad woman* has survived, understood as one who defies the rules, who is punished by the system and who, through self-destructive practices, becomes a victim incapable of escaping gender mandates.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Following the contributions of Mateos-Pérez and Ochoa, this article has chosen a strategy of "relational and dynamic analysis of gender representation, rather than an identification of stereotypes of female and male characters", a very common formula in the literature specialising in television fiction. This approach has allowed us, as suggested in their text, to "delve into the dynamics that produce these representations in the story" (Mateos-Pérez & Ochoa, 2016: 57) and to approach the object of study innovatively and rigorously. Our work demonstrates, according to the variables described by Lotz (V1.1.; V1.2.; V1.3. and V1.4) that the story can be described as a feminist work or, at the very least, one of interest for feminist film analysis due to its emancipatory proposal and its positive representation of female talent.

Mentioning representations evokes the concept of field theories that allow for a wide variety of approaches: from the analysis of the forms of representation to the position and situation of the receiving audience, the role of the medium as a political actor or the reconstruction of history, among others (Casetti, 2005: 24). Here we have put it into practice employing gender-specific categories and others based on common tropes in dramatic fiction when it comes to elaborating female characters (V2.1; V2.2; V2.3; V2.4; V3.1; V3.2; V3.3; V3.4 and V3.5). With these instruments, we have emphasized the reading of the politics of representation of the feminine from a little-studied element: genius, an infrequent attribute in the protagonists of audiovisual and even literary fiction. This genius has allowed us to read Harmon's character as a novel and disruptive element: she proposes that a woman should not be the result of the gender mandates of a society where power is still reserved for men.

This image of Beth Harmon, which responds to objective O1, is elaborated on two levels: on the one hand, without turning her into an enemy of women, but able to arouse empathy in the audiences who have followed the story with interest (as reflected in the series' success in terms of viewership), but also without constructing her in the image and likeness of a man, although she does assume some of the qualities considered masculine to achieve success and survive as an autonomous subject in a space that is not very open to the presence of women, such as chess and, more specifically, that of the tournaments of the 1960s.

Our reading is nourished by Zurian and Herrero's (2014) proposal for a transdisciplinary methodology, which, without abandoning the theoretical paradigm and narrative exposition, goes beyond the use of empirical categories of analysis or positivist studies. The chosen system, in constant dialogue between disciplines, has made it possible to draw conclusions about female representation that respond to the O2 objective, interested in how Netflix fiction has constructed female talent. Harmon is an imperfect heroine, and this is part of the value of a character endowed with multiple sides to her personality, with flaws and virtues and, above all, guided by a dream of success based on her intelligence and capacity for effort. The protagonist is never portrayed as inferior to anyone, especially men, a situation that is very evident in her beginnings in a competition which is almost exclusively male. Not even when her addictions make her push her limits does she lose her dignity and decision-making capacity. As a consequence, it is not possible to read her as a weak character, beyond her contradictions, mistakes and flaws. These appear rather as the outcomes of her autonomy and strength of action.

Addressing the legitimising discourses mentioned by Puleo (V2.4.), the series normalises that women can be the result of their own projects, just as men are always portrayed and encouraged to fight to make their life plans a reality. In the Netflix production, the female chess player is constructed with personality and talent characteristics that are almost always reserved for male characters (V2.2.): self-confidence, capable of fending for herself, independent and rational. This allows us to argue that she breaks with the stereotypes so often analysed in the specialised literature (V3).

Drawing on the categories of feminist analysis of audiovisual texts, in *The Queen's Gambit* we find a character who does not fit into the conventional pattern of dramatic heroines, thus responding to objective O3, whose interest was to identify the variables of difference. In particular, it should be noted that the story does not fall into the temptation of making her a victim, even though, due to her past as an orphan and her present as a substance addict, it could easily have done so. Nor does sexual violence, an almost inevitable threat in the women's stories produced by the culture industries, a threat that viewers know well from their socialisation in the culture of sexual terror, appear. Not least, there is no rivalry between women or tension in the mother/daughter relationship. Thanks, among other things, to these issues that do not appear, the miniseries allows the construction of a life project based on ambition and intelligence, a resounding preminence of Beth's talent and genius. Despite her shadows, she is capable of pursuing a dream and achieving it, all elements more akin to male heroes' stories.

Objective O4 demonstrates that none of the tropes that feature in the audiovisual has been used in this fiction. For example, Beth is never portrayed as a sexual object. Although the series shows us normative beauty (on-screen Beth is more beautiful than the protagonist of the literary version), this attractiveness is never instrumentalised or exploited. Nor are her relationships with men based on this dimension: Harmon's friends respect her for her intelligence and her skill at the game and, when they decide to help her win the main tournament, they do so out of both affection and respect, never out of condescension or paternalism. If the literature on feminist film analysis has proved that female protagonists in fiction are often used more as an element of consumption (V3.4.), in the case of *The Queen's Gambit* the choice of emphasis on talent is an incontestable fact that breaks with the usual politics of gender representation.

Finally, and probably somewhat utopian given the period in which the story takes place, Harmon is never the typical female character placed to provide the counterpoint to a male protagonist who feels annoyed, irritated, interrupted, entertained or diverted from her main purposes by her presence (V3.5.). The reading provided by the fiction is resoundingly autonomous and starts from the establishment of the protagonist's talent and capacity for self-improvement.

This work contains the limitations inherent to the social sciences, which make it difficult to obtain closed answers to complex phenomena. Nevertheless, the scarcity of literature on this recently produced fiction opens up multiple lines for the future. Here we have pointed out the possibility of delving deeper into the trope of the *magical negro* and also in the analysis of Jolene's character from an intersectional perspective that discusses the stereotype of the *angry black woman* and/or that of Jezebel, but there are undoubtedly other dimensions with room for expansion, among them the weaknesses from the gender perspective that we have also pointed out. All in all, we agree with the discourses that call for contemporary audiovisual production to construct more characters like the one in *The Queen's Gambit*, which breaks with the stereotypical representation resulting from the patriarchal system and contributes to the academic discussion on women and their imaginaries. In particular, it is necessary to put an end to the under-representation of intelligent women.

7. Contributions

Contributions	Authors
Conception and design of the paper	Author 1
Bibliographical search	Authors 1, Author 2
Data collection	Author 2
Analysis and critical interpretation of the data	Authors 1, Author 2
Revision and approval of the proofs	Authors 1, Author 2

8. Acknowledgement

9. Bibliographical references

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Notes

1. Netflix is today the leading transnational company providing SVoD services (Feix, 2021). Present in almost every country in the world, in spring 2021 it had more than 207 million subscribers (García, Albornoz &Gómez, 2021: 2 & 4). Much of its success is due to an extensive catalogue of content, as well as the use of big data and algorithms to improve the consumer experience (Rodríguez, Paíno & Ruiz, 2021: 340; Heredia-Ruiz, Quirós-Ramírez & Quiceno-Castañeda, 2021: 118). The use of non-intrusive advertising is relevant, especially *product placement*, which their audience does not reject (Martín-García, López-Carmona & Victoria-Mas, 2022).

2. See Peru.info, 19 October 2021. Available at: https://cutt.ly/1UAr6LV

3. See the 2019 report of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. Available at: https://cutt.ly/0UAt5Ai

4. In October 2022, with this article in print, Netflix signed a settlement with the chess player to avoid going to court. The company is expected to have accepted to pay millions as compensation. See https://cutt.ly/XBHFMhS

5. For reasons of space and methodology, we cannot address at length the intersectional dimensions provided by the analysis of Jolene's character, which has the potential to problematize the figure of the *magical negro*, a stereotypical trope consisting of a kind of guardian angel, saviour of the white character. Experts such as Hughey (2009: 543) define these ambivalent characters as lower-class, uneducated and magical, transforming scruffy, uneducated or broken white people into competent individuals. For further discussion, see Burke (2019), Hughey (2012) or Tembo (2019). This variable of study may be contemplated in further work.

6. One line of research that this character opens up is the analysis of the myth of Jezebel in American culture: An African-American woman, always hypersexualised and stereotypically defined as a "man-eater". This original slavery-era myth still exists today. For further discussion, see Brown, White-Johnson and Griffin-Fennell (2013), Leath et al. (2021) or West (1995).