Witch hunts and the intersections of gender, age and class

A feminist analysis on the Western European witch hunts in the 16th and 17th century.

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of this thesis is to elucidate the effects of gender, age, and class in witch hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Western Europe from a feminist perspective. It also aims to understand the perception of these witch hunts in our present society. It centers poor, old, women who were accused of witchcraft.

Methods: a literature review will be performed to collect literature on witch hunts. Secondary analysis of this literature will be performed using an intersectional theoretical framework.

Results: the spread of christianity through Europe brought a new political ideology that divided labour into sexes. The role of women was reduced to childbearing and household tasks. Medicine became institutionalised. There was no protection for poor people or aged people in the new political ideology.

Conclusion: the new political ideology affected poor, old women most: they were no longer able to fulfil childbearing duties, could no longer practice as healers or midwives, and were not protected by the state. Due to the misogynistic, ageist and classist values at the time, their expressions of frustration could then be interpreted as witchery. Moreover, lookism could have been a factor in witch accusations.

Key words: witch hunts, gendered ageism, classism, sexism

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1. Introduction

During the sixteenth and seventeenth century in early modernity, accusations, prosecutions and executions of so-called witches surged all over Europe. Estimations of people killed for alleged witchcraft in Europe range from 40 thousand (Briggs, 1976) to hundreds of thousands (Federici, 2018). If people in Europe were found guilty of witchcraft, they were usually killed by burning them to death. Other techniques included strangling, hanging and drowning (Schnoebelen, 2009).

These historical events are largely complex, and explanations for their origins and emergence vary widely. There seems to be a consensus that the spread of christian religion throughout Europe fueled witch hunts (Toussaint Raven, 1972). Most of the early analyses focused on whether it was the catholics or the protestants who were guilty of the executions, rather than the victims. While more recent research uses more social-anthropological methods, the main focus remains on the executors (Toussaint Raven, 1972). Keith Thomas (1970) and his former student Alan MacFarlane (1999), for example, borrowed anthropological methods from studies on witchcraft in Africa, to better understand the context of witch hunts in England centuries ago.

Some historians argue that christianity simultaneously brought misogyny to Europe, that consequently put women in subordinate positions (Van Gilst, 2017), while others believe that witch hunts were not a gendered phenomenon at all (Briggs, 1976). Still, an estimated eighty-five percent of all executed accused witches were women (Bange, 2010). These percentages vary throughout regions in Europe, but they generally show that the majority of victims were women (Belien and Van der Eerden, 1985).

In my preliminary findings, it is suggested that these women were often poor and of old age (Federici, 2018, Monballyu, 2015, Bange, 2010). However, poverty and old age are often not linked to each other, or linked to women altogether. Feminist analyses tend to center the victims rather than the perpetuators of violence against them, and acknowledge misogyny as a key factor for the surge in witch hunts and prosecutions. Still, they often fail to include the intersections of age and class. Federici's marxist feminist analysis (2004 & 2018) does include poverty and old age as a key factor for witch accusations, but her analysis of early modern sexism remains on young women.

As far as I am aware, there are no studies that thoroughly analyse the intersections of gender, age and class with regards to witch hunts in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

Thus, it has been established that victims of witch hunts were also victims of misogyny, but it remains unclear why chosen victims were often *also* poor and of old age.

1.1 Aims and research questions

The aim of this thesis is to center poor, older women who were victims of witch accusations and executions during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Here, I will mainly focus on the Western European context, as contexts may vary across Europe. I seek to understand how the society and politics in Western Europe at the time viewed poor, older women, and how the same sociological and political climate made it possible to falsely accuse and kill them in horrific manners. Furthermore, I aim to investigate if and how this perception of poor, older women manifests in our present society.

Thus, I will be doing an intersectional, secondary analysis on various analyses on witch hunts and executions in Western Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. To fully understand what led up to these events, I will first reflect on society and the position of women in mediaeval ages and how these changed over time. I will then analyse the intersections of gender with age and the intersection of gender and class in which hunts. After, as I will be doing secondary analyses, I would like to dedicate some words to how we remember witch hunts today.

This leads to the following research questions:
1. What are the origins of witch hunts and prosecutions?
2. How did witch accusations and prosecutions intersect with age?
3. How did witch accusations and prosecutions intersect with social class?
4. How are witch hunts and prosecutions remembered today?

First, I will account for my position regarding the topic, and explain my choice to write about witch hunts from an intersectional perspective, and the ethics concerning my research topic. I will also account for the language I am using to refer to the victims of witch hunts. I will then elaborate on my methods used, followed by a theoretical framework with relevant literature. Afterwards, I will present relevant data on witch hunts. Finally, I answer my research

questions using the same theoretical framework. I will finish with a conclusion of my findings and implications for future research.

2. Self positioning and ethics

Haraway (1988) stresses the importance of situating the self in relation to the studied topic. As researchers, we cannot claim to be impartial or neutral, and our research findings are not universal. To account for my self positioning towards the topic of witch hunts and prosecutions, I would like to refer to the following quote:

"We are the granddaughters of the witches you weren't able to burn." - Tish Thawer in her fictional novel The Witches of BlackBrook (2015)

As a European woman, witch hunts are part of my history, a history that was rooted in a misogyny that is still present in European society today, although in different ways, that I was not taught about in school. However, my choice to study a topic that I relate to on a personal level is also rooted in ethical considerations. Lance (2021) describes how speaking for or speaking with oppressed groups in an academic context, as someone who is not part of these groups, may enforce oppressive structures. As an alternative, he suggests a new option: *shutting up*. It is for this reason that I am limiting my research to a Western European context, while acknowledging the atrocities done to innocent women that were accused of being witches worldwide. Moreover, I acknowledge that I am in no way able to grasp the sociological, historical and cultural contexts in which witch hunts took place or are still taking place outside of Europe today, and I would be heavily biassed through my European lens if researching these.

This research concerns historical events of victims who are no longer alive. I will reflect on the characteristics of some of these victims; however, I will not be using any names. For the most part, my thesis will focus on the social and political systems that were in place at the time, that enabled the murders of accused witches. Therefore, ethical considerations about confidentiality and privacy of the studied group are not relevant for this thesis. Throughout

my research journey, I have kept a research trail, where I have logged all my online library searches, online searches, and primary sources as well as the dates on which I accessed these.

2.1 Language

I would like to account for the language I choose to use, when writing about witch hunts. While self-proclaimed white witches were not an uncommon phenomenon during the periods I am studying (Borman, 2011), it is important to note that most accused and prosecuted "witches", did not identify as such (Green & Bigelow, 1998), as I will explain later in my thesis. By calling these innocent women "witches", I believe we are adopting a term used by their torturers to justify their crimes towards them. Moreover, in modern society, witches are usually seen as mythical creatures in fictional literature, movies, and series. When they are humanised, young witches are usually portrayed as beautiful, good women (see: Charmed, Sabrina the Teenage Witches), whereas old witches are portrayed as ugly and evil (see: Hansel and Gretel, The Witches by Roald Dahl). This could perpetuate the view that old witches are evil and thus, torturing them is justified. Lastly, in my opinion, the term "witches" could dehumanise and distract from the very real historical events where innocent women were tortured and killed. For these reasons, I choose to not refer to these women as witches. Instead, I will refer to them as: so-called witches, accused witches, and innocent women, throughout my thesis.

3. Material and methods

My geographical location of study was Western Europe. Here, I followed the United Nations classification of Western Europe. The classification includes the following countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands and Switzerland (United Nations, Statistics Division, no date). I am zooming in on Western Europe, not only for being Western European myself, but also because of the implications it may have for witch hunts studies. In early modernity, Western Europe had a relatively high number of unmarried people (Scribner, 1987). Moreover, the decline of feudalism was the strongest in Western Europe in early modernity (ibid). As will become clear in my thesis, this could be relevant to the witch hunts in this region.

For this study, I performed two literature reviews: one was to create a theoretical framework, and one was to collect data on witch hunts. As this study concerns historical events, creating new data was not applicable. Thus, I collected relevant materials via online libraries and via my local library, as I will elaborate on in the next paragraphs.

The aim of the first literature review was to collect relevant literature around the intersection of gender with age and class, to create a framework that could also be used to analyse the data on witch hunts with. I specifically aimed to theorise how old age and poverty affects women and their position in society, as my preliminary findings suggested this was the case during early modern witch hunts. As my thesis topic is about historical events, I also used my theoretical framework to understand how age and poverty were constructed in this period. The LiU Library was my starting point, from where I snowballed through the articles in my search results, to find more relevant articles. I also used articles that I have read as part of the curriculum of the master in Gender studies, that I thought were relevant for the construction of my theoretical framework.

To collect data on witch hunts in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, I used Federici's books *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) and *Witches, witch-hunting, and Women* (2018) as my primary sources, as these books are what inspired my thesis in the first place. Moreover, I borrowed books from my local library in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, to have a general overview of the origins of witch hunts in Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The local library was a good source of information, as it sheltered many history books on witch hunts in Western Europe. A list of these books can be found in my literature list, under "primary sources". Additionally, I expanded my data collection using the LiU library and I used the JSTOR library to access older materials. Using online sources was especially useful in finding feminist analyses on witch hunts.

I did not use archival data from records of witch processes for the following reasons: first, these processes were written by those who were complicit in the torture and murder of accused witches, and therefore likely to be heavily biased. Second, my aim is to focus on the characteristics of victims at a group level, the systematic torture and killings they endured,

and the sociological and political climate under which they took place. For this reason, I did use profiles of victims, that were previously constructed by other researchers who studied witch hunts. Third, while I do believe that an intersectional analysis on a collection of individual cases is necessary, I was not able to do so due to time constraints and language barriers. For these reasons, I performed a secondary, intersectional analysis on previous analyses on witch hunts, from both historians and feminist scholars.

After creating a theoretical framework and collecting relevant data on witch hunts, I analysed these data using my theoretical framework. In this manner, I tried to understand how the intersection of gender, age, and class informed early modern witch hunts, thus answering research questions 2 and 3. It also answered my first research question: what were the origins of witch hunts?

Research question 4, *How are witch hunts and prosecutions remembered today?*, was meant to make a nod to the present, and to my initial choice to choose the topic of witch hunts to begin with, as I explained in my self positioning section - I only knew witches from movies. To answer RQ4, I collected data on museums and memorials about witch hunts, by doing desk research. I also did desk research to find any commentaries about this. I used my theoretical framework to analyse these data.

4. Theoretical framework

The aim of this framework is to provide an overview of relevant literature concerning the intersections of gender with age and class. Due to a long tradition of exclusion of older women by feminists, I will first describe how age was treated within feminism, followed by the problem of age within marxist feminism. I am describing the latter, because Federici's marxist feminist analysis of witch hunts will have a big role in my data collection regarding witch hunts. Thereafter, I am proposing an initial theory on the intersection of gender with age and class. I will conclude with a brief overview of the construction of age and class in mediaeval times and early modernity, to better understand the context in which witch hunts took place.

4.1 Age within feminism

Bozon et al (2015) describe how inequalities between women and men start from birth and last throughout old age. For example, changes in bodies are pathologialized in female bodies, i.e. menopause whereas men do not have this cut-off point (Bozon et al, 2015). However, also in feminism, this cut-off point has been used to describe the position of older women (De Beauvoir, 1953). This is problematic, as it excludes (young) women who do not have a menstrual cycle or never had one. It also centers women's reproductive potential and the cessation of it, something that is not the case for men, who equally decline in reproductive potential as they age. Therefore, I argue that the age categorization of women by the functioning of their reproductive organs is not only reductive and sexist, but also clinically inaccurate. In the following paragraph, I will describe some literature on the ageing woman, in which sometimes menopause is mentioned.

In *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir (1953) described a postmenopausal woman as the third sex; she is finally free from being objectified, and regains autonomy over her body and life choices. However, in her often deemed existentialist book, *The coming of age*, she drew ageing in a negative light (1970). Here, she took from many domains, including biology, sociology and economy, and how these interacted with the personal, and the experience of ageing. She argued that capitalist societies not only resented, but even dehumanised older women. She found powerlessness, loneliness and unhappiness in growing older. Moreover, she detested her changing appearance. Woodward (1993) speculates that De Beauvoir's self-ageism likely stems from the lack of female older role models she had in her time. Older men were judged considerably less harshly than women, on their changing appearance and declining cognitive and physical abilities. Additionally, at the time of writing, there was a cultural taboo on old age, and De Beauvoir was even advised to not write the book (Segal, 2014). However, in 2016, Woodward re-read the book and argued it was, despite some generalisations and stereotyping, profound and exhaustive. Moreover, Woodward (2016) concluded that while De Beauvoir adopted various theories and methods, for which she had been criticised, the spiel on female ageing was largely based on Marxist analysis. Around the same time, Robert Butler (1976) published a prize-winning book on ageing. While not using a particularly feminist framework, he described the process of ageing as painful and humiliating due to social

conditions, including poverty. Thus, both De Beauvoir and Butler, pioneers in writing about ageing, described ageing from a socio-economical standpoint.

De Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* was ignored by feminists at the time (Segal, 2014). Earlier feminist movements were primarily concerned with issues of adult women in their so-called reproductive years, such as work rights and childcare (Woodward, 1993). Older women were systematically excluded in and from conversations, or as Kathleen Woodward noted: "ageism is entrenched within feminism itself" (1999). Gullette (1990) was a pioneer in the call for age studies, in hopes to combust negativity and taboo around old age. Still, old people are more likely to be excluded from society when they are women (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). Moreover, old women's knowledge is differently valued than that of old men; they are more likely to be seen as wise (ibid). A study by Chonody (2016) showed that even expressions of "benevolent sexism" towards old women, reinforced beliefs about gender roles, such as older women being weaker and more in need of care.

4.2 Marxist feminist theory on ageing

The term classism as a concept on its own has not been thoroughly studied, and there is no clear definition (Pincus & Sokoloff, 2008). It is used by marxist feminists to describe the relationship between capitalist accumulation, patriarchal societies and the oppression of women (Barrett, 2014, p.6). It is a critique of liberal feminists' distinction between public and private relations. This would be a great opportunity for studying ageing, as it usually takes place after the working phase in modern Europe, however, even in marxist feminism, older women are usually not studied (Pohl & Boyd, 1993). In fact, when they do make an appearance, it is usually to illustrate the labour they bring to younger women who provide informal care to them (Federici, 2014). Other topics raised within marxist feminism include equal work rights and child care issues. Thus, women of so-called reproductive age are still central in marxist feminism. This is interesting, as feminist marxism attempted to look beyond the labour productivity that was central in original marxism. However, marxists feminists often failed to look beyond female reproductivity, which reduces women to their

reproductive potential. Thus, it excluded women who did not have children (for various reasons), but also older women.

4.3 The ageing, poor woman

As has become clear, due to a tradition of ageism within feminism , feminist theories on ageing are still in its infancy (Woodward, 1999). In this paragraph, I attempt to theorise not only how gender interacts with age, but also with class.

The World Health Organisation mentions the double jeopardy of sexism and ageism that old women face (2007). I argue that there is a triple jeopardy in poor old women as they additionally face classism.

Higgs & Gilleard (2015) find representation of the imaginary of the fourth age in the female body. She is seen as the "dirty old woman", she is frail and cognitively declined; she is abjective. The fourth age woman is more likely to be poor and financially deprived, much more than her male counterpart. Pickard (2021) argues how this abjection of the fourth age was illustrated during the Covid-19 pandemic; the handling of the many deaths in nursing homes implied the unworthiness of their lives.

Gendered ageism and its links to classism are also found in gendered beauty standards (Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). The term *lookism* is used to describe how conventionally attractive people enjoy more privileges than those who do not meet society's beauty standards (ibid). These standards are often associated with upper class status and privilege; the beauty standards are set by the privileged, to benefit the privileged (Kozee, 2016). The value of women is heavily subjected to western standards of beauty, femininity and youthfulness. As women grow older, they become more susceptible to the phenomenon of cultural juvenilization than men (Kramkowska, 2019). This is made apparent by the many anti-ageing creams, hair dyes and other female-focused products to hide signs of ageing, that are sold in practically any drug store. There is cosmetic surgery and botox to appear younger. Unsurprisingly, biological changes, such as shrinking bodies and wrinkles, are the most commonly used indicators to classify people as "senior citizens", more so than psychological

and social changes (Panek, Hayslip & Pruett, 2014). Moreover, bodies are also classified as old differently depending on gender, class, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity (Calasanti, 2005). McHugh (2000) argues that poverty accelerates lookism and ageism, as people of lower social class generally have less financial means to "rejuvenate" themselves, such as having a sports membership. Moreover, a lot of emphasis is placed on the responsibility of individuals to slow the ageing process; such as eating healthy, working out, and using creams (Calasanti, 2005). However, this individual approach ignores inequality in access to these "anti-ageing solutions" (ibid). Studies by Jyrkinen and McKie (2012) and Calasanti (2005) also show that older women are more likely to be excluded from the workplace than men due to said lookism. I conclude that this could lead to a complex interaction between gender, appearance, age and class; ageism and lookism could accelerate poverty in older women, as it excludes them from the workplace, and due to this poverty, it becomes even more difficult to live up to society's standards of youthfulness, thus accelerating ageism and lookism.

Walsh et al (2011) theorise how gender and class, among others, interact with elder abuse; women and poor people being most affected. Moreover, the study found that due to gender roles, women were both at risk of sexual abuse and likely to keep this abuse to themselves. In terms of classism, being a woman appeared to be an accelerator for poverty. Financial dependency made it harder for old women to leave abusive situations. Thus, there was a connection between being poor, old, and a woman, and elder abuse. Financial dependency is a form of co-dependency (Sev'er, 2010). Other forms are emotional or physical co-dependency. When this is the case, older women are more likely to hide or minimise the effects of abuse and less likely to report abuse by the person they are dependent on (ibid).

A systematic review by Saif-Ur-Rahman et al (2021) revealed that gender and wealth were factors in the level of discrimination in healthcare that older people experienced. Widowed or unmarried women and women with low education levels had limited access to healthcare; the same was true for people with low incomes. This was also the case in Europe; however, countries with more social security had fewer cases of age discrimination in healthcare.

In conclusion, although feminist theories on the intersection of gender with age and class are scarce, there appears to be enough evidence to conclude that poor, old women have a

marginalised position in society - then and now. They face more violence than old men, more lookism than old men, and poverty keeps them trapped in oppressed positions. Following my readings, I propose an initial theory on the intersection of age, class and gender, in which I conclude the following. First, old women face "lookism" due to changes in appearance. This is accelerated by poverty, due to limited financial means to meet society's beauty standards. Second, poor old women are more likely to face violence, and financial dependence makes it more difficult to leave violent situations. Third, poor old women report more cases of discrimination in healthcare. Thus, poor old women take up a marginalised and precarious position in society.

4.4 The construction of old age and poverty in mediaeval ages and early modernity

To understand the context and perception of ageing and poverty during the witch hunts, I will now describe how age and class was generally perceived during this period. I will begin with describing these phenomena in mediaeval ages, to understand the changes in perceptions in early modernity.

First, I would like to touch on a common misconception about life span in mediaeval ages. While the average life span was 35 years old, it was not uncommon for people to live to 50 or even 60 years old. The average life span was low due to the high number of infant death and maternal deaths. However, research suggests that someone who lived up to 25 years old, had realistic chances to live up to 50 years old (Janega, 2021). Between 1350 and 1500, the lifespan of European nobles increased dramatically, to around 55 years old, but reasons for this rise remain unknown (Cummins, 2017). European nobles were better able to avoid the plague epidemic that surged in the fourteenth century (ibid). In the sixteenth century, Europe urbanised and the population density increased dramatically. This led to a decline in life expectancy at birth for the general population: from 40 years at the end of the sixteenth century to 33 years at the beginning of the seventeenth century (Galor & Moav, 2007). A factor of this was the high infant mortality, which was mainly a problem in urban areas: infants in rural communities had 50 percent higher survival chances. After the initial drop of life expectancy at birth, that reached a low at the beginning of the seventeenth century, life

expectancy slowly started to increase again (ibid). Here, it is important to remember that life expectancy at birth does take into account infant mortality, which significantly decreases the average life expectancy. To give an example, English aristocrats at the age of 21 could expect to live around 49 more years in the sixteenth century, and 42 more years in the seventeenth century (Lancaster, 2012). Age was hardly recorded in the general population in early modernity, I will explain why shortly. For this reason, most available data about life expectancy in early modernity concerns people from higher classes (Cummins, 2017, Lancaster, 2012).

To understand the construction of age in this time period, I will distinguish between age as a numerical or chronological fact, and the social construction of age, old age in particular. It is important to note this difference, as attempts to describe age in terms of years, have been done in early mediaeval ages already. However, these numbers had no sociological or moral significance at the time. A more popular division of the lifespan was that of the following categories (with some variations): *infans, puer, adolescens, iuvenis* and *senex*. This division emerged before the mediaeval period and lasted throughout. However, which category to place an individual in was not based on chronological age. *Senex*, old person, was primarily based on one's appearance or social status (Gilleard, 2009). Interestingly, appearance is still the most important marker to acquire the status of senior citizen in our society today (Panek, Hayslip & Pruett, 2014). *Senex* could be a married person, archbishop as well as a lord (Goodich, 1989). There was no designated category for older adults as we know today. This meant that older adults also did not have a special social status in the middle ages and special care was not provided to them. Poverty was seen as a moral problem of the self, and poverty was especially prevalent among older people. During the renaissance in the sixteenth century, with the power of the church growing, poverty began to be seen as a social problem. It was the start of a distinction between rich and poor. However, poverty was still stigmatised and the benevolence of the church was largely symbolic. Moreover, age was not mentioned in relation to poverty (Gilleard, 2002). During this time, numerological age became more widely used; however, it did not have much social significance (ibid). Using our current numerological interpretation of age, people in the sixteenth and seventeenth age were considered old when they were between 50 and 60 years old (Belien and Van der Eerden, 1985). Early ageing, caused by physical changes, was prevalent due to several diseases. In women, early ageing

was common due to the high number of pregnancies they had, and the effect it had on their bodies (ibid).

A new description of the female life course also emerged in this period; the woman was categorised as a maid, mother and finally, a widow (Botelho, 2015). Here, the mother was seen as the peak of womanhood: she was able to produce and to reproduce. The maid had potential to do the same later in life (ibid). Thus, the description of the female life course heavily relied on reproductive capacities of female bodies.

5. Results

In this chapter, I will state some of the relevant data on witch hunts. I will start by exploring the origins of witch hunts in Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, followed by the intersections of gender with age and class. Lastly, I will present data on contemporary witch memorials and museums.

5.1 Origins of witch hunts

While accusations of witchery were common in mediaeval ages, prosecutions and executions of so-called witches soared in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, during and after the European Renaissance (Green & Bigelow, 1998). The Renaissance started in Florence, Italy, in the 14th century, and had grown and had spread all over Europe in the 16th century (ibid). To fully understand how mere accusations transitioned into actual prosecutions and executions, I will first describe witchery, and the position of women, in Western Europe during mediaeval ages. I will also describe how these changed under the spread of christianity, as many historians (Bange 2010, Borman 2015, Van Gilst 2017) observed a relationship between the rise of christianity and the rise of misogyny.

Early mediaeval ages; spirituality and christianity

In early mediaeval ages, the spiritual world was taken as seriously as the material world. Germanic tribes worshipped several anthropomorphic gods and goddesses and natural phenomena such as trees, rivers and stones were ascribed magical powers. In Western Europe, most people lived in rural settings in the first millennium. According to Van Gilst

(2017) and Borman (2015), women and men were equal within these cultures. Women were seen as the preservers of the household and their value was sacred. Due to their wisdom, they were often asked for advice. Some women also possessed knowledge about healing plants and potions (Borman, 2015). Both their productive abilities as well as their reproductive abilities were acknowledged (Hanawalt, 1986). Moreover, there were many goddesses who were worshipped as much as gods. In the 8th century, there was already a belief in witches, and that they made pacts with the devil. Texts about these were rather innocent, and were used to educate people. The word malefica ("bad witch") or striga were used to search for witches (Bange, 2010). Occasionally women were accused of bad sourcery, for example in times of epidemics. This did not lead to death penalty; they were usually fined or temporarily banned from the community (Borman, 2015, p.37).

In the 9th century, missionaries tried to bring christianity to Western Europe. Germanic tribes however, already had their own religions, in which several anthropomorphic gods and goddesses were worshipped and in which natural phenomena such as trees and stones were ascribed magical powers. Missionaries tried to weave christianity into the existing religions. For example, the Christian Easter was named after Ostara, the Germanic goddess of spring (Van Gilst, 2017, p.31). However, some Germanic goddesses or demons were slowly humanised into witches. This gentle strategy was successful; open paganism was practically eradicated in the 9th century. There were many heretics still, who were against the new religion. There was an increase in both heresy and witchery. Witchery and diabolism were starting to be seen as a form of heresy. In the 11th century, the first official heretical executions started to take place (Bange, 2010, p.27). Before that, this was an unusual event; as the gentle strategy to convert heretics into christians was still favoured. However, now that witchery, diabolism and heresy were collected under the same umbrella, they were seen as more threatening and less innocent than before. People who believed in witches, were punished for two years (Borman, 2015, p.29 & Bange, 2010, p.27). In this sense, it could be concluded that "witch" executions followed heretic proceedings (Bange, 2010). Borman (2015, p.14) also mentions that templars, cathars and jews had been burnt before accused witches. They were accused of similar sins: infanticide, sexual misbehaviour and other sinful rituals (Borman, 2015, p.37). Thus, I would conclude that the church systematically exterminated perceived threats towards christian religion. In the case of witch executions however, the question remains: why virtually only women?

Van Gilst (2017) and others argue that with the spread of christianity in Western Europe, misogyny increased too. A clear example were midwives; they had knowledge about birth control and abortion, while the church saw women's worth only in their reproductive abilities. Thus, the church detested midwives who acted upon this knowledge (Federici, 2004). Additionally, the older a person would be, the less their worth became (Van Gilst, 2017). In Leviticus 27, this was literally articulated in monetary values. Women above 60 years of age were worth 10 shekels, as opposed to 15 shekels for men. Men between the age of 20 and 60 were worth 50 shekels, and women in the same age group were worth 30 (via Van Gilst, 2017, p.28). However, ageism was not uncommon before the spread of christianity. As elaborated on in my theoretical framework, in earlier feudal societies, there was no protection or designated care for older people.

A guide to torturing women

In 1487, inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger published their book *Malleus Maleficarum* in Germany. Many historians and feminists alike, have crowned this one of the misogynistic readings ever written to this day (Stringer, 2015). Malleus Maleficarum described how to recognize witches, how to make them confess, and how to torture and execute them. While a section of the book was dedicated to male witchcraft, the authors were mainly focussing on women. They were described as more impressionable, and being the weaker sex, they are more susceptible to working with the devil. Older women were accused of luring young girls into practising witchcraft. Moreover, "witches" fed themselves with babies. They were the antithesis of a good woman; they did not create nor nurture; they destroyed and they nourished themselves (Kramer & Sprenger, 1487).

The impact of Malleus Maleficarum on effective witch hunts has been debated: while the book has been generally accepted by both the catholic and protestant churches (Brittanica, 2010), at the time of publication it had already been met with scepticism (Monter, 2002) and there was no rise in witch hunts immediately after the book turned up in a region (Jolly, Peters & Raudvere, 2001). Still, it is worth mentioning Malleus Maleficarum, as it gives a clue of the general beliefs and political climate that enabled the publication to be copied and spread around.

Witch hunts as a means to force a new political ideology

Many explanations for the rise of witch hunts stop at the spread of christianity as the main reason (Van Gilst 2017, Bange 2010, Borman 2015). However, in *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici (2004) conceptualises the church as a political institution that used its power and significance to kill hundreds of thousands of women. Thus, according to Federici, these events appear rather politically motivated than motivated by religion. Federici argues that the witch hunts in Europe marked the emergence of social processes that paved the way for capitalism. Federici calls this *The Great Transformation* (2018). Here, labour became divided by sex, in which the women's labour was reduced to childbearing. She became a means of reproduction of labour power. Sex was sinful when it was for pleasure, but useful when it led to reproduction. Witch hunts, according to Federici, were a means to weaken the resistance of the peasantry and rural communities that suffered under the new state policies, that led to land privatisation, increased taxation and an increased control over virtually any aspect of the social and private life. According to Brenner (1976), peasantry in Western Europe had a strong communal organization. Le Roy Ladurie (1976) describes the case of the peasantry in Languedoc, France, that resisted, among others, the implementation of royal taxes. This was followed by a widespread belief in witchcraft. Witch hunts were mainly a rural phenomenon (Federici, 2018), which could confirm Federici's and Le Roy Ladurie's theories. They were, according to Federici (2018), also a means to pit men against women, to fear their power. They were a means to silence those who opposed the new state control, and to warn those who planned to oppose (Federici, 2004). Also according to Larner (1984), the alleged malicious witchcraft was seen as rebellion against the new society.

If the witch hunts were a result of political ideology, then the chosen victims could not have been a result of coincidence. Before I will describe the characteristics of victims, I will briefly make a note on what they were accused of, and why I choose not to center these accusations. Accusations towards so-called witches included making the milk sour, destroying the harvest, flying on brooms, spreading diseases, and turning into black cats and other animals. They were also accused of holding satanic rituals, in which they kissed intimate parts of the devil's body (Kramer & Sprenger, 1487). I will limit myself to this short list, as regardless of whether people at the time believed this as truth, the fact remains that all of these accusations could

not possibly have been proved. Extreme torture was used to force victims to admit to crimes they could never have possibly committed, and to name other women who were supposedly involved in witchery (Federici, 2004). Thus, I believe that the victims and their innocence should be centered, rather than the unprovable accusations towards them.

5.2 Who were accused of witchcraft and why? Intersections with age

While men could be accused of witchcraft, Belien and Van der Eerden (1985) proved with statistics that everywhere in Europe, including Western Europe, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, women were tried as witches far more than men. Their percentages of women in witch processes range from 76 percent in Geneva, 82 percent in South West Germany, to 92 percent in the County of Namur, France (p.167). Briggs (1996) attempts to debunk the belief that witch hunts in Europe were gendered; he does so by claiming that an average of 25 percent of tried people across Europe were men. Briggs also uses Paris as an example, where around 40 to 50 percent of accused people were men. Still, the percentages presented by Belien and Van der Eerden (1985), that cover large regions, seem more convincing.

Young women or girls could be accused of witchcraft, but middle aged women and old women were most at risk to be accused, prosecuted, and killed (Rowlands, 2001, Withney, 1995, Botelho, 2015, Bange, 2010, Caro Baroja, 1964). Belien and Van der Eerden (1985) warn that in many trials, age was not recorded, and it would be difficult to draw conclusions about the age of accused witches. Still, according to the standard literature about witch hunts, an estimated 75 percent of tried people were postmenopausal women past the age of 50 (Monballyu, 2015). Monballyu (2015) studied 31 witch trials in Nieuwpoort, Belgium, and found that all tried people in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, with the exception of five men, were postmenopausal women past the age of 40. Moreover, Monter (1976), who studied witch hunts in France and Switzerland, noticed how accused witches sometimes changed their age in trials, usually stating their age to be 10 to 15 years younger in the first trials, compared to the second trials. Still, he estimated the average age of tried so-called witches in his study to be around 60 years old. Caro Baroja (1964) describes witches as weird, mad, old women who had failed in their earlier life. Botelho (2015) observes the link between accused witches who were blamed for destroying harvests, food and pregnancies, and old

women who were no longer fertile and were knowledgeable about abortion and contraception. Thus, the older woman was a destroyer, and thus, a witch, too.

Another factor was perceived ugliness. In the seventeenth century, women feared ageing as they were aware that it could affect their social standing. They were also aware that looking aged could equal looking like a witch (Reinke-Williams, 2018). Witches were usually described as old, ugly women, with a hunchback, who had unkempt teeth, wrinkles and warts on their face, who limped and who reeked (Briggs, 1996). Monballyu (2015) read in records from witnesses in the Nieuwpoort trials, that some witches had an ugly face. He also describes cases of women with black eyes or with scars on their face; these were allegedly caused by punishment of the devil. Another woman, 58 years of age, was said to have admitted that she had an ugly face due to a disease that caused her to fall frequently. This was brought in relation to the devil's punishment (p.97).

In my previous paragraph, I have cited several authors who argue that most women in witch trials were of old age. However, this is usually not followed by an analysis to understand why specifically old women were accused of witchcraft. The mentions of old age are usually mentioned among all other factors that put someone at risk of witch accusations. There are a few theories that seek to explain why older women were at risk, which I will state here. According to Bange (2010, p.9), older women dominated communities. She hypothesises that this could lead to jealousy from younger generations; thus accusing them of witchery. However, there are no records of younger generations in particular, who accused older women in their own community of witchery. A more likely explanation from both Bange (2010) and Federici (2018), is that social relations within agricultural communities changed, and social cohesion and support for older people declined. This could lead to feelings of guilt that manifested into witch accusations.

 Additionally, from the 15th century onwards, female healers were slowly eliminated from the medical field, due to civil and religious legislations. While female healers used to learn by practice and from more experienced healers, universities started to dominate medical practice. Traditional healing practices, usually involving plants, were now seen as malicious witchcraft. Midwives remained central to gynaecology, but needed to be taught by male doctors (Juárez-Almendros, 2017). This not only decreased the authority of older women as female healers, it also put them out of jobs and those who remained in practice, were in

precarious positions. They could be blamed for stillborns and malformations in babies, and consequently be accused of witchery (Ibid). In the 16th century there was a surge in syphilis in Europe, a disease that targeted mostly women and that led to stillborns from mothers who contracted the disease during pregnancy (Ross, 1995). Of course, the midwife was the scapegoat (Ross, 1995 & Juárez-Almendros, 2017). Additionally, the surge of syphilis could lead to cognitive decline in an advanced state, such as syphilic dementia (Ross, 1995). It is worth mentioning that many historians of psychiatry attributed mental illness to witch accusations, advanced syphilis being a major cause for a surge in witch accusations in the sixteenth century (Schoeneman, 1997). Schoeneman (1977) refutes the strong statement that almost all accused women were mentally ill, by profoundly revising and criticising earlier analyses by scholars making these statements. Schoeneman concluded that many accused women were in fact not mentally ill or being accused of being mentally ill. However, Ross (1995) argues that mental illness could definitely have been a factor in a more complex web that led to witch accusations. Monballyu (2015) also names insanity, dementia and suicidal tendencies as reasons to believe someone was working with the devil. It was believed that the devil could "nest" in someone's body upon invitation by the host body, and this could manifest into antisocial behaviour such as desperation, depression, and insanity.

Bange (2010) also mentions the surplus of women after the England-France war between 1350 and 1450, as a possibility for the increase of witch accusations. They were unable to get married, and thus deemed of no value. Poor women were even less attractive to marry. However, this would only partially explain why it was poor, older women who were killed, as the killings took place over a longer period and over various regions in Europe.

5.3 Intersections with class

In this chapter, I will zoom in on the element of poverty in witch hunts. In my previous chapter, about the intersection of gender with age in witch hunts, I already touched on the element of poverty in older women. It has been difficult to untangle old age and poverty, as they seem truly intertwined. For these reasons, in this chapter, I will sometimes refer back to my previous chapter. However, I intend to focus more on class rather than age in this chapter.

Just as with age, Belien and Van der Eerden (1985) warn about drawing preliminary conclusions about the social class of accused witches. According to these authors and

Monballyu (2015), in many witch trials, the social status of accused witches was not recorded. Belien and Van der Eerden (1985) do hypothesise that poverty could be an important element in witch accusations, especially among women, who were generally poorer. They explain this with the belief at the time, that the devil could provide in financial and material benefits, which could be especially tempting for poor women. Moreover, they argue that poor people were more likely to resort to "magical means" to improve their social status. Federici (2018) refers to these practices as folk tradition. Belien and Van der Eerden (1985) also refer to a pamphlet (without reference or date) describing witch trials in Bamberg and Würzberg. In this pamphlet, it is mentioned that among the witches there were not only peasants, but also a few distinguished gentlemen and their wives. According to Belien and Van der Eerden, this implies that it was surprising that people of higher social status were allegedly involved in witchcraft, thus confirming the stereotype that it was usually people from lower classes.

Moreover, poor women were likely to age faster than well-off women, due to different living conditions and diets, and fewer means to rejuvenate themselves with cosmetics (Reinke-Williams, 2018).

Monballyu (2015) collected the profiles of thirty-one people who were tried for witchcraft. I counted twenty-six women, the youngest being 40 years old, of whom fourteen were widowed. Fifteen of these women, of whom nine widows, were killed by burning them to death. The occupation of the women, or their (former) husbands', were often not known. If they were known, it usually involved trade in fruit, milk, butter, or fish. Among the men, one, whose age was not known, was sent to jail with his wife, who was also accused of witchery. a 45-year-old man, who owned several houses, was burnt, just like his daughter, who was previously accused of witchery. A 52-year-old farmer was tried but not killed, and a baker of unknown age was burnt. A 58-year-old fruit seller was burnt. All but one man were married. In the Geneva trials between 1571 and 1572, thirty-five people were tried as a witch, for causing a plague epidemic. All accused witches or their spouses, whose occupation was known, were labourers and craftsmen (Monter, 1976).

Federici (2018), Larner (1984) and Bange (2010) also stress the element of poverty in accused women. Female beggars (Bange, 2010), widowed women, wise women (Federici 2004, p.200), and folk healers including midwives (Larner, 1984) were especially at risk. What these women usually had in common, was that they were of old age and poor. Wise women and folk healers

were usually older women in rural communities, who had been around for long enough to have collected a wide knowledge on healing plants, conception, birth, birth control and even abortion (Federici, 2004). They posed a threat towards the Church' ideology on fertility. In larger towns and cities, female beggars were more common. When they were found to be too "disturbing" in their begging, and especially when they were widowed, they risked being accused of witchery (Bange, 2010).

If these women were deemed social outcasts, or had already been suspected of witchcraft, it was likely that they resorted to small, simple houses outside the town to not draw attention. However, this could increase suspicions of witchery (Borman, 2015, p.40).

As I explained more thoroughly in my chapter about the origins of witch hunts, state and policy reforms affected rural communities in particular, and witch hunts were largely a rural phenomenon (Federici, 2018). Within the efforts of the state to reform society, disguised as christian ideology, rural communities were disciplined into a new hierarchy that gave power to the king, priests and local judges (Muchembled, 1979). Federici (2018) argues that this new society was the starting point of capitalism as we know today, in which poor people were left behind. She argues that formerly manorial systems provided for widows and the poor; they were entitled to food and housing.

According to Federici (2018) and Toussaint Raven (1972), this affected poor, older women in particular. In Toussaint Raven's analysis, the majority of accused witches were people who knocked on house doors to ask for alms or a meal, which was often refused by the other party. The dynamic that followed after this, has been described by Federici (2018), Toussaint Raven (1972), Bange (2010), and Monballyu (2015): the beggar started to hold a grudge towards the refusing party, and the refusing party started to feel guilty. These feelings of guilt were then projected on the beggar, who became vile and thus displayed antisocial behaviour in their grudge, which motivated the refusing party even more to put the beggar away as the bad one, in this case; the witch.

Federici describes this as follows:

"[...] women were those most likely to be victimized because they were the most

'disempowered' by these changes, especially older women, who often rebelled against their impoverishment and social exclusion and who constituted the bulk of the accused. In other words, women were charged with witchcraft because the restructuring of rural Europe at the dawn of capitalism destroyed their means of livelihood and the basis of their social power, leaving them with no resort but dependence on the charity of the better-off at a time when communal bonds were disintegrating and a new morality was taking hold that criminalized begging and looked down upon charity, the reputed path to eternal salvation in the medieval world." - Silvia Federici, 2018, p.387

5.4 Remembering the witch hunts

So how are these witch hunts remembered in Europe? In the Netherlands, a museum called *De Heksenwaag* is dedicated to witch hunts. The museum has a scale that was used to weigh potential witches. Based on their weight, it was determined whether they were witches. The scale can now be used to visitors - if they pass the test they will receive a certificate so that, as the website reads, they can share the good news with their friends. Personnel are dressed up as witches, with long crooked noses and pointy hats (Heksenwaag, no date). It appears that the goal of the museum is to entertain visitors, rather than educational purposes.

In Triora, Italy, people dress up as witches each midsummer. The town is known for its 31 witch trials (Patowary, 2010) and has a museum about it, *Museo Regionale Etnografico e della Stregoneria*. In the museum, there are life-sized stereotypical witches. Thus, it seems that the museum inaccurately visualises accused witches, and the town Triora is more focused on entertainment than education (Museo di Triora, no date).

Zugarramurdi in Spain is another well known witch region. It attracts yearly visitors to the "witch caves" and has a museum of witchcraft. However, it appears that in the museum, accurate information is given about the witch trials, in a respectful manner (Xaterta, no date).

The appropriation of witch trials for entertainment tourism purposes has been criticised. Federici (2018) argues that the tourism industry capitalises on the witch trials by selling different items with inaccurate depictions of witches, just because they sell best. Federici asks if this would be the case if the victims were not mainly peasant women. Gardiner (2020) points out that the circulation of inaccurate and false information about witches and

witchcraft, could be the reason that women around the world are still being accused of witchcraft.

However, some more respectful tributes have been paid. In Scotland, which had one of the highest numbers of witch executions in Europe, there are five memorials around the country. Some memorials are a shrine to one individual story of an accused witch, while others are a reminder of many executions at one specific place (Stewart, 2020).

In Vardø, Norway, there is a memorial for witch trials in Finnmark in the 17th century. It has 91 plaques, that each represent a victim. Relative to the population size at the time, there was a high number of witch trials and executions in Finnmark. The memorial was meant to restore the dignity of the victims (Nordnorge, no date).

6. Analysis

In the previous chapter, I presented literature and theories that were relevant to my research questions. In this chapter, I will analyse these data using my theoretical framework. I will be answering each research question separately. In the next chapter, in my discussion, I will bring all analyses of research questions together.

6.1 Research question 1: What are the origins of witch hunts and prosecutions?

There appears to be consensus that christianity brought new norms and values into society, and it devalued the position of women. However, christianity appeared to be merely a trojan horse with a political ideology of state power and control inside. Fuelled by the misogyny in the bible and church, the formerly equal and autonomous position of women was reduced to the reproductive capacities of their bodies. The new state divided labour by sex; women's bodies were now merely seen as work machines to produce more labour power. Thus, there appeared to be a relationship between capitalism, patriarchal societies, and female oppression (Barrett, 2014, p.6). It was for these reasons that midwives and healers were disproportionately accused of witchcraft; their knowledge was against the interests of the new state (Federici, 2018).

Federici's analyses (2004 & 2018) have a political nature; she focuses on the transition from feudal or manorial societies into capitalist societies. In her analysis, she profoundly elaborates on how these political changes affected women. I observed two ways in which she addressed how women were viewed and treated during *The Great Transformation*. One, she speaks on the new division of labour by sex that reduced women's value to childbearing. Female sexuality became an economic force when it led to reproduction, and was seen as a social threat when it did not. In other words, sex in capitalism was only seen as useful when it provided new future (male) labourers. Here, she is clearly speaking about mothers and potential mothers. Two, she observed how older women were most affected by the new policies of land privatisation and enclosures. She argues that formerly manorial systems provided for widows and the poor; they were entitled to food and housing. Hence, older women saw their rights being taken away, and became vocal about this. Federici argues that witch hunts were a political means to silence these women; hence, it was usually older women who were accused. Moreover, it killed the oral tradition of passing on knowledge about plants, conception and contraceptives, that were in the bodies of older women, and were against the interests of the new state. Moreover, a scapegoat was needed for the many diseases that spread over Western Europe, such as the plague (Monter, 1976) and syphilis (Ross, 1995). Women were an easy target, because they were seen as more likely to submit to the devil (Kramer & Sprenger, 1487).

Contrarily to Federici's (2018) argument, In my theoretical framework I described that before the rise of witch hunts, there was no designated protection and care for older people (Gilleard, 2002). Poverty was seen as a problem of the self. However, it could be possible that under the new state the conditions of older people exacerbated for older women in particular, as they were no longer included in society.

In conclusion, the origins of witch hunts appear to be politically driven, rather than religion based.

6.2 Research question 2: How did witch accusations and prosecutions intersect with age?

To understand the context of being old and possible ageism in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, I would like to refer to my paragraph where I conceptualise age and poverty in this period. Chronological age in late mediaeval ages and early modernity did not have much social significance (Gilleard, 2009). For women, the maid-mother-widow triad of fertility as described by Botelho (2015) was more widely used. This triad viewed women in relation to men; she was either not married (yet), married, or widowed. Here, the maid and mother were able to have children and to do labour, such as spinning, cooking and farming. The widow, the older woman, could not. In the eyes of the church, she was no longer seen as useful in providing for the community. In my theoretical framework, I explained that in modern literature, the term lookism is used to describe discrimination on the basis of appearance. This is accelerated in ageing, as society values youthfulness (Kramkowska, 2019). It seems that the same was happening during the witch hunts. To be considered old in this period, was much more based on appearance and social status (Gilleard, 2009). For example, a widow could be considered old, even if she were only in her thirties, because she was no longer seen as a means for reproduction. If a woman had an aged appearance, possibly accelerated by the hardships of poverty, she could be seen as old sooner than her more privileged counterparts. Thus, the complex term of "being old" that I described in my theoretical framework could be applied here; during the witch hunts, being considered old interacted with gender and social status. This becomes clear in the example I gave about women who had many pregnancies; their bodies were seen as "old" much sooner due to physical changes (Belien and Van der Eerden, 1985). I mentioned earlier that an estimated 75% of accused witches were 50 years of age or older (Monballyu, 2015). Considering the insignificance of numerical age at the time, it is likely that an even higher percentage of accused witches was "old" according to what was seen as old at the time. "Looking old" was far more determining in whether someone fit the stereotype of a witch, than their numerical age.

The new society put older women in a marginalised position: not only were they no longer seen of value in terms of reproduction, their value in terms of labour and production was lost under the institutionalisation of medicine. Their formerly meaningful contribution to communities was actively boycotted. There was no social or legal protection for them as they

were no longer seen as of any value. These women had reason to be vocal about their rights, but this was dangerous. Under the new society, vocal or rebellious women were seen as a threat that needed to be controlled (Larner, 1984). In older women, who already suffered from ageism and misogyny combined, the stigma of a crazy old lady was easily obtained, let alone if they also justly expressed frustration or anger. It is no surprise that Caro Baroja's "typical witches" were old, crazy women (1964). Bruises or scars on their face was seen as punishment of the devil; with today's knowledge, I would suggest that these could be a consequence of violence and abuse inflicted on older women (Walsh et al, 2011). It is likely that older women did not name their abuser due to shame and dependency on their abuser (Sev'er, 2010), thus fuelling rumour of the devil's punishment.

Federici (2004 & 2018) conceptualises young women as reproductive machines, and older women as bearers of "forbidden knowledge", who stood up for their rights that were taken away. From her writings, I conclude, although oversimplified and not taking in the many, many other factors, that it was women of reproductive age who were confined to labour of their bodies, and were seen of little value due to these childbearing capacities, but it was women past reproductive age who were seen of no value at all. Interestingly, very recent events have implied the same, as I spoke about in my theoretical framework: the Covid19 pandemic and the handling of the many deaths in nursing homes, most of them women, implied the unworthiness of their lives (Pickard, 2021). I would like to add to Federici's statements, that it could be likely that exactly for these reasons, it were older women who were chosen as an object of torture and executions. Poor, older women were an easy scapegoat, as they already took up an unpopular position in society; due to a combination of lookism, ageism, sexism and classism; I will further elaborate on the latter in my analysis of RQ3. They were social outcasts already. Under the new state, they served as a useful instrument to warn citizens about what would happen if they showed resistance, without losing the work machines that the new state saw in the bodies of younger women. In this light, the accusations that innocent women were tried for, such as infanticide, destroying crops, poisoning cattle, seemed to be mere excuses to kill those who were no longer of service to the new state. Thus, under the new state, there was not one, but two types of misogyny: one that affected women of reproductive age, and one that affected women past reproductive age. The latter could get women killed.

6.3 Research question 3: How did witch accusations and prosecutions intersect with social class?

Witch hunts were mainly a rural phenomenon. Former folk traditions such as healing with plants were punished (Federici, 2018). As I described earlier, older women used to work as healers and midwives. Under the new state, they were eliminated from the medical field. In other words, older women were excluded from the working society, a phenomenon that is still happening today ((Jyrkinen and McKie, 2012). This put them in precarious positions, as there was no protection for them. Begging on streets or at house doors was seen as disturbing and was punished. In my theoretical framework, I described how poverty could keep older women in abusive situations, and limited their opportunities to receive adequate healthcare. The same seemed to be happening in the witch hunts period; poor women were in precarious positions, as they had no means for survival, but could not possibly escape this situation. They could no longer work or ask for help from neighbours, but they were also not protected by the state. As I described earlier, it could lead to feelings of guilt of others in the community, that manifested into witch accusations. Some of these women resorted to small, simple houses outside the town so as to not draw attention (Borman, 2015). I would argue that living in these houses could also indicate poverty. The church tried to silence impoverished women who were vocal about their rights and livelihood being taken away, by accusing them of and trying them for witchcraft. Old age seemed to be an accelerator for poverty, and thus, witch accusations.

Moreover, ugliness could fuel witch accusations (Briggs, 1996). It is likely that the new state brought in beauty standards of youthfulness for women, as their value was seen in their bodies when they could provide offspring. Thus, looking old in itself put older women at risk for experiencing lookism, which could then manifest in witch accusations (Reinke-Williams, 2018). Poverty could work as an accelerator for lookism (Calasanti, 2005), as poor women were likely to have had different life conditions and diets than more well-off women, that could manifest in their appearance; such as more wrinkles and a hunchback. Moreover, they had fewer means to rejuvenate themselves.

6.4 Research question 4: How are witch hunts and prosecutions remembered today?

In chapter 5, paragraph 4, I described a few examples of how witch hunts are remembered today. A museum in the Netherlands and a museum in Italy seem to cater to entertainment purposes: there are life-sized "witches" or even real-life women dressed up as witches. As described in chapter 5, templars, cathars and jews suffered the same faith as so-called witches before the witch hunts, and they were accused of similar sins (Borman, 2015). Interestingly, I am not aware of any museums that mock these groups in similar ways as accused witches. A possible explanation could be that most accused witches were poor, older women, often described as ugly. In other words, they suffered from the same type of abjection as old women do today (Higgs & Gilleard, 2015). Their lives are seen as less worthy than that of men, younger people, or more well-off people (Pickard, 2021). This is also illustrated in the way the museums mentioned above visualise witches: they are ugly, with long grey hairs, with warts and a crooked nose. The fact that this gendered lookism could literally fuel witch accusations towards innocent women, seems to be completely ignored. Lookism appears to be so present in our society, that dressing up as ugly women with pointy hats, to mock women who were falsely accused of witchcraft and often burnt to death, is hardly seen as problematic.

7. Discussion

In my analysis I tried to answer each of my reasons questions separately, but this proved to be difficult especially for the intersections of gender with age and class regarding witch hunts. Gendered ageism seems to have functioned as an accelerator for poverty in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and poverty further marginalised the position of older women. They had no means to escape poverty, as begging or asking for alms or meals could result in witch accusations. On the other hand, they were no longer allowed to practice as healers or midwives and if they did, they were at risk of being accused of witchcraft.

Misogyny alone does not fully explain witch hunts. If it were, then far more younger women would have been tried for witchcraft. Misogyny does explain the general treatment of women in early modern societies; it reduced young women to their reproductive potential and it completely devalued older women. From my literature analysis, I conclude that witch hunts were not only a case of misogyny, but that it was a combination of misogyny, gendered

ageism, and classism. These three intersections cannot be taken apart; they interacted with each other and manifested in the poor, older woman, who was disproportionately accused, tried, and killed for alleged witchcraft. While some scholars have tried to debunk the influence of gender, age and/or class in witch hunts, the available records of witch processes tell us otherwise. The few exceptions, for example, small regions where nearly half of accused witches were men, do not change that in almost all regions, and on a larger scale, poor, older women were always the majority in witch processes. This also suggests that it could not have been a coincidence that most accused witches were poor, older women, many of them widows. The systematic extermination of poor, older women who did not meet social norms, could only have been possible in societies that already marginalised and devalued this group. Here, I wish to bring in the element of lookism, which appears significantly intertwined with all other three aforementioned intersections. Not ageing "gracefully" as a woman, which was especially hard for poor women, could be life-threatening as descriptions and visualisations of witches were literally old, ugly women. Beauty standards of youthfulness were already present in early modernity and affected poor, older women in particular. The actual effects of lookism in witch hunts need further study.

Moreover, under the new state, fuelled by new christian norms and values, a new political ideology emerged in which there was no room for poor, older women. Their knowledge was no longer valued, rather, it was seen as a burden. Their resistance against their impoverishment was seen as a burden. I conclude that under the new state, their only use was seen in their killings; as an instrument to warn others about the faith that could await them if they too showed resistance. Moreover, I conclude that the witch hunts were politically motivated, by institutionalising sexism, ageism and classism, and not motivated by, but merely enabled by superstition and religion.

It could be argued that the same institutionalisation of sexism, ageism and classism is still present in our society today. Poor, older women are still most affected by lookism, they are at risk of abuse, and they are at risk of not getting the healthcare they need. This could explain why there are only few respectful memorials of the witch hunts; one could wonder if this would be any different if it were young men of higher social status who suffered the same faith. The fact that museums exist where we can see life-sized witches or people dressed up as witches, with ugly features that were historically used to identify so-called witches, tells us that witch hunts are largely mocked and I argue that a plausible explanation is that the victims

were poor, older women, who still suffer from exclusion and marginalisation in our society today.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to identify the intersections of gender, age, and class in early modern witch hunts in Western Europe. It was meant to center poor, older women who were accused of witchcraft. The origins of witch hunts remain complex, but there appears to be a consensus that christening was the start. It started a new political ideology in which women were in subordinate positions. They were confined to having children and doing domestic work. This new division of labour by sexes was exclusionary to older women in itself. Older women previously enjoyed a respected position in society and meaningfully contributed as advisors, healers and midwives. There is contradictory evidence whether there was designated protection for older people in mediaeval ages and early modernity, however, it is clear that older women were further marginalised under the new state.

Various reasons have been given on why old women and poor women were most at risk of being accused and killed for witchcraft. From my analysis I conclude that poor older women were no longer seen as of service to society, as they had no reproductive potential and their previously respected knowledge on plants and obstetrics was against the interests of the new state. This perceived lack of value combined with poverty and their resistance to this, made poor, older women into a burden. Their only use was for the state to torture and kill them, as a warning to others who showed resistance. With today's semantics, this would be described as gendered, classist ageism in its most extreme form.

Moreover, an unexpected finding was the element of lookism, that seems to have been inherent to poor, older women in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Not meeting beauty standards of youthfulness could increase the risk of witch accusations and affected poor, older women in particular. The element of lookism in witch hunts and its relationship with gender, age, and class needs further study.

With all data on witch hunts available, it is surprising that the link between misogyny, classism and ageism has not been made before. While in most analyses misogyny is clearly mentioned as a key factor for the witch hunts, I could not find any article that related the witch hunts to

ageism and classism to the same extent as sexism. Even when analyses show that age and class were major factors in the witch hunts, the reasons behind this are rarely studied. The focus remains on gender and the position of women, but rarely on the position of older, poor women. The dismissal of classism and ageism as major factors could be attributed to the classist ageism that is still present in our society today, and even within feminism. This might also explain why there are so few memorials and limited education about a femicide that killed hundreds of thousands of innocent women. Museums about witch hunts often have an entertaining nature, rather than an educational aim. They appropriate old, conventionally unattractive bodies to visualise witches. This stereotype, that could get an innocent woman killed in early modernity, is now used for entertainment purposes, while fully ignoring the very real historic events behind it, and the gendered ageism that is still present in our society today.

8.1 Strengths and limitations

This thesis was written as part of the curriculum of the master in Gender Studies, Intersectionality and Change at Linkoping University. The topic of witch hunts is undoubtedly massive and complex. Due to time limitations, it has been impossible to cover all aspects of it, or to elaborate more on the aspects that were covered. It also made it difficult to make a jump to the present - a world wherein witch hunts are, unfortunately, still taking place. This would require a study on its own. For these reasons, I resorted to witch hunts in Western Europe only, that took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

As far as I am aware, this has been the first intersectional analysis on witch hunts, that centered poor, older women. I believe that this is a strength of this thesis, as it is informative of the position of poor, older women in Europe in early modernity. A theoretical framework, created with literature that was written centuries after the last witch hunt in Western Europe, was surprisingly well-applicable on the topic. This may give clues on how classist, gendered ageism never really vanished, when we look at how we treat poor, older women today.

8.2 Future knowledge

I suggest that intersectional analysis on original records of witch processes be done, to further unravel the characteristics and social identities of victims, and what they were accused of. Here, I recommend to zoom in on the effects of lookism in witch hunts in particular. Moreover, this thesis could serve as a basis to better understand witch hunts that are taking place outside of Europe today. Here, it is important to acknowledge that this thesis, including the theories used, were written from a white, western perspective.

9. Literature

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