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Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

The Spinster and the Witch: Examining the Portrayal of the Old Maid and the Witch in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926)

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Abstract: Single women have been ostracized in many ways throughout the centuries. In the eighteenth century, the discourse around the figure of old maids from previous times gained momentum, so much so that the term "spinster" was coined with negative connotations. Along with such degrading talks about them, elderly unmarried women also dealt with witchcraft accusations and ludicrous stereotypes. However, a couple of centuries later, the way authors talked about old maids changed, just like the view around witchcraft turned from obscure and immoral to fashionable and interesting. *Lolly Willowes* (1926) has been considered a feminist classic for its explicit message addressed to single women to exert agency over their own lives.

Through an ecofeminist and gender studies lens, this dissertation includes the way in which spinsters and witches were portrayed in pre-twentieth century texts, as well as an analysis of the portrayal of these two figures in *Lolly Willowes* (1926), with a comparison of the two to identify the similarities and differences. The findings conclude that earlier representations reflected the misogyny that elder single women had to face, since they were also accused of witchcraft. Sylvia Townsend Warner, instead, turned the negative stereotypes of old maids and witches into something positive with her representation.

Keywords: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Lolly Willowes, witch, old maid, spinster, gender roles

0. Introduction

Even though there have been historical movements and waves of feminism to shed light on women's struggles and the obvious power imbalance regarding men in all aspects of their lives, women continue to fight for their equal place in society. Through the study of Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926), this TFG deals with the concept of independence from a feminist point of view, examining the characterization of single women and witches within the c16-20 period. Taking a feminist and gender studies approach, this dissertation intends to explore the ways in which the figure of the spinster and the witch have evolved over time. Further, this analysis will compare how the spinster-turned-witch in *Lolly Willowes* (1926) differs from spinsters and witches portrayed in the earlier centuries, and why. To do that, this TFG is divided in four chapters. The first three offer a thorough contextualization of witchcraft, the spinster, and the witch portrayed in literature up until the twentieth century. The last chapter will apply this examination towards an in-depth analysis of Laura's identity as a spinster and a witch.

This paper intends to answer the following questions: firstly, which were the changes that the portrayal of witches and spinsters withstood throughout the centuries, what historical occurrences led to such changes, and what Sylvia Townsend Warner's characterization of the two is like. Hence, it is of utmost importance to understand that the societies of these earlier centuries made an unconscious distinction between different groups of women, and said distinctions usually had to do with their social status regarding their relationship with men. Therefore, the key concepts in this analysis of the novel are the following: the "old maid", the "single woman", the "witch" and the "new woman".

0.1.State of the Art

Sylvia Townsend Warner (1893 - 1978) was an English novelist, a poet and a talented pianist and composer. She did not receive formal education after kindergarten and became homeschooled, where she learnt about the Bible, history, geography, languages, music and Shakespeare. Unfortunately, her career as a musicologist came at a standstill when the war broke out, when she started working at a munitions factory to help refugees. She had an affair with Percy Buck, her piano instructor, which lasted seventeen years, but after travelling to Dorset in 1930 and staying in Valentine Ackland's cottage with her, they fell in love, and her affair with Buck ended. In 1926, her first novel *Lolly Willowes* was successfully published, and it was deemed a "mixture of fantasy and sharp wit" (Harman, 2023) with a "single woman in the years just after the Great War who turns to witchcraft as the only practical way of asserting herself" (Harman, 2023). The novel allowed her to be shortlisted in the Prix Femina, a French literary award created in 1904. Moreover, she claimed she wrote *Lolly Willowes* (1926) because she "happened to find very agreeable thin lined paper in a job lot" (qtd. in Southam, 2023).

The novel follows Laura "Lolly" Willowes, and her journey to live her life freely as she has always wanted. It starts with Laura's father's passing, which leaves her devastated, which results in her moving to London with her older brother, Henry, and his wife, Caroline. Throughout her stay in London, not only do they try to marry her off to no avail, but Laura also realizes how much she misses Lady Place, her childhood home which was close to nature. In a series of flashbacks, the reader gets to see Laura's upbringing and how her passion for plants and nature was born. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise when Laura decides to go against her family's wishes and moves to a cottage in Great Mop all by herself. There, her passion for witchcraft is awakened, and when Titus, her nephew, eventually visits her and decides to live with her, she encounters

the Devil and a cat (her familiar). They help her be independent again by scaring Titus away from Great Mop. Although she is not fond of Sabbaths, she participates in one, and her failure to engage in it like the rest of the members who participate in it prompts her last conversation with the Devil, in which he assures her that all he ever wants for his followers is to be comfortable. Laura, in the last speech of the novel, reflects on the issues women like her have to face and explains the reasons why witchcraft is so important to her, concluding the novel with a run-down of its most important topics.

Knoll maintains that the novel uses witchcraft as a means for the title character to free herself from socially imposed gender roles (Knoll, 344), whilst others argue that it is used to symbolize non-conformity and as a means to criticize society (Macdonald, 215). However, other authors like Bacon (2021) take an ecofeminist stance, arguing that witchcraft is a means for Laura to connect to woodland, which is what gives her life meaning (Bacon, 169). Moreover, there has been a struggle to pinpoint exactly which genre the novel is: "there has been little consensus about whether to call the novel literal or fantastic, realist or modernist" (Harker, 44). This part of the paper is dedicated to explore the views of these three critics in order to answer different questions; the first being what they think the purpose of the novel is, what use the author makes of witchcraft and what points of controversy there are between their stances.

Firstly, Knoll reads the novel through a feminist and gender studies lens, because he focuses on the portrayal of passive resistance in the story and how that affected women's lives, the explanation of gender roles and the symbols in the novel that connect to men and women, relegating religion and the representation of the church to a secondary importance (Knoll, 344). Knoll argues that Laura faces character growth: she goes from having a passive role to reject both feminine and masculine roles by turning into a witch and overcome them (Knoll, 349). Similarly, Harker contends that Laura "does not think",

and that this lack of "inwardness" is eventually overcame (Harker, 45). Regarding Laura's identity as a witch, Knoll claims that the Sabbath is "her biggest trial" and that even as a witch she is unable to become involved within society, which "represents to Laura the utter failure of her goal to get back in touch with nature, to put London behind her once for all, and to succeed in her new vocation as a witch" (Knoll, 358). Thanks to the Sabbath, though, she realizes that she must assert herself and not remain passive, because "it is not the flight from society that is a death wish, but the seductive opportunity to remain passively resistant, as society expects" (Knoll, 359).

On the other hand, Macdonald's reading of the novel is more concerned about how Townsend Warner uses witchcraft to present socially radical views and normalizing non-conformity through elements of fantasy (Macdonald, 2016). Macdonald also defends that the purpose of the novel is to tell women to exert agency over their lives. Macdonald's reading of the relationship between Laura and the Devil is that she can trust and speak to him in contrast of never being heard by other men around her, and that, by becoming a witch and turning to a man like him, she is committing an act of self-love (Macdonald, 227). Similarly, Knoll also describes the Devil and argues how the one depicted in the story, who lives in nature and makes Laura feel comfortable, steps away from the traditional representation of Satan. In the novel, Satan represents nature and femininity, whilst God represents civilization and masculinity (Knoll, 360), hence why Laura feels more comfortable next to him.

Bacon's reading of the novel takes an ecocriticism lens and she maintains that witchcraft is a means for Laura to connect with nature while also calling out the lack of research through said lens. Nevertheless, other scholars like Knoll do mention Laura's relationship with nature, but they view her interest in plants, herbs and potions as a way to show she is capable of helping herself before exerting agency over her own life (Bacon,

169). Throughout the novel, Laura has a close relationship with nature, and Bacon suggests that this relationship is possible thanks to her "passive witchcraft" because it "seems to be fashioned as a mediator between woodland and the latent wild" (Bacon, 178), and it is probably the reason why she feels safe and free in places like Great Mop instead of London. Therefore, Bacon regards witchcraft as "not so much as a means of doing "magic" as if it were scientific methodology but, more importantly, of witnessing it and allowing it to take place, benefitting from its results" (Bacon, 178).

The scholars have a general stance regarding the novel: they all think of Townsend Warner's aim as an appeal to her readers to exert agency over their own lives and encourage them not to conform to societal standards imposed by a patriarchal society through taking the image of the old maid, Laura, and dislocating her from society's standards by making her turn to witchcraft. Nevertheless, Knoll pinpoints a controversy within the work regarding Laura's assertiveness and how that affects her community, because rejecting passive resistance— and eventually choosing witchcraft— means distancing herself from her community (Knoll, 361). However, Macdonald does not find that to be problematic, because "she lives in her own society rather than in a fantasy never-never land" (Macdonald, 234).

1. Witchcraft, the Spinster, and the Witch

1.1. Witchcraft, the Spinster, and the Witch in the Context of Pre-twentieth Century Works

Canonically, "witches are women whose embodiment of femininity in some way transgresses society's accepted boundaries—they are too old, too powerful, too sexually aggressive, too vain, too undesirable" (Bergman, 2015). This was mostly because of the irrational fear that society had of them based on the patriarchal control that media had on society and legislation, first victimizing women and then demonizing them. Greek

mythology was the first time where the figure of the witch appeared with the figure of Medea, who is characterized mainly by her dangerous, unpredictable and untrustworthy nature. It is believed that this representation pioneered future representations of the witch, all linked with these negative aspects: in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), the Wayward Sisters (also known as The Weird Sisters or The Three Witches) are also untrustworthy and dangerous witches who carry the prophecy of the three Fates of classical mythology (*Moirai*) and cause many deaths throughout the play in order to ensure that Macbeth lives his destiny as it was assigned to him. They are described as old and ugly, with "chappy fingers" and "skinny lips", and they are not feminine at all (Atherton, 2017). The description Shakespeare provides of them is the following: "By each at once her chappy finger laying / Upon her skinny lips: you should be women, / and yet your beards forbid me to interpret / that you are so." (1.3.40-46)

Other representations of witches followed the same physical descriptions of being old, with long, messy white hair and even beards, making them more masculine and undesirable: in the mid Nineteenth Century, the Grimm Brothers portrayed the figure of the witch in their tales of *Hansel and Gretel* (1812) and *Snow White* (1937) as perverse, aggressive and hideous.

With the practice and talk of witchcraft becoming popularized around the fifteenth century came its first written records. Interestingly enough, the majority of authors who wrote about this practice were men, whilst the people accused of partaking in witchcraft and being persecuted for it were mostly women. One of these witchcraft records was written by Alexander Roberts, titled *A treatise of witchcraft* and published in 1616. In it, Roberts describes the practice as a "damnable art" and talks about women he has seen partake in it; one of them being Mary Smith, a woman whom he accuses of cursing neighbors in public and becoming intertwined with Satan (Roberts, 1616). Roberts

recognizes that men also take part in witchcraft, yet justifies his vile accusations towards women by saying that they "harbour in their breast a curious and inquisitive desire to know such things as be not fitting and covenient" (Roberts, 1616). Moreover, Roberts claims that "the female sex when it conceives wrath or hatred against any, is unplacable, possessed with unsatiable desire of revenge, and transported with appetite to right (as they think) the wrongs offered onto them" (Roberts, 1616). Therefore, they are more easily swayed by the Devil's persuasion and the reason why "there is no mischief above that of a woman" (Roberts, 1616). Even though Roberts' article is about witchcraft and witches, the text reads as a purely misogynistic piece against women as a group, instead of an explanation of this art, but it still conveys the popular beliefs about witches during the preceding centuries.

Although these representations are popularized ways of portraying witches and witchcraft as something evil, undesirable, and perverse, the decrease of the Witch Hunts in the Eighteenth Century made the fear of witches decrease, and with that the representation of them changed into a more positive one. It is also worth mentioning the lack of fictional literature about witches written within this period. What I have found are mostly historical accounts that do not portray a character who is a witch per se, but rather focus on the concept of real-life witches, which is a phenomenon that is quite telling in itself.

On the other hand, in English literature, the figure of the Old Maid arose for the first time in Arthur Murphy's *The Old Maid* (1760) as Mrs. Harlow, who prompted the description of "an old maid in a house is the devil." (qtd. in Shields 423). From that novel onwards, elder unmarried women were portrayed in a negative, cruel, and satirical way: they were regarded as nuisances who were "not answering their 'chief end'" (Shields, 423), because they did not have a husband whom to financially rely on and have children

with. The discourse around the figure of old maids gained momentum, so much so that the term 'spinster' became popularized with negative connotations. However, even if old maids were still single women, younger women of the same status were in a much better regard than them: "younger women were conceived of as not yet married – as opposed to never married" (Shields, 423). That belief that even in the same situation, a younger woman was more valuable and still had prospects that she became married was rooted in misogyny and, unfortunately, only made elder single women's situation more unfavorable. Therefore, just like witches, old maids were usually condemned by male authors, who portrayed them as evil and hideous among other negative qualities. They also urged young single women to marry in order not to end up becoming old maids: John Gregory does this in *Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1797) because he considers that old maids are tainted with "chagrin and peevishness" (Gregory, 1797). Critic Monica Chojnacka argued that "when they had no man to control them, women were perceived as dangerous. The single state, then, was an undesirable condition for [Venetian] women." (Chojnacka, 217)

Richard Allestree published *Ladies Calling* in 1673 and compared old maids to "the most calamitous Creature in Nature" (qtd. in Lanser, 298) and stated that becoming one is the worse curse that could down upon anyone. Moreover, Allestree insinuated that if single women would behave correctly, "with Gravity and Reservedness, addict themselves to the strictest Virtue and Piety" (qtd. in Lanser, 298), they would not struggle to find a partner that loved them, essentially blaming elder women for not fitting society's standards. What he does, which other authors do not, is acknowledge the struggle of women who earn the title of Old Maid, but instead of criticizing this stereotypical and harmful image of women, he blames them for not being worthy enough for a man to marry them, resulting in the same misogynistic discourse as the one about the figure of the witch.

In 1697, John Dunton published *The Challenge, … Or, The Female War* (1697), in which he debated women's characteristics that were "disputable" (qtd. in Lanser, 299) through a series of letters. Dunton depicted single women as "envious, malicious, loquacious, ugly, deceitful, odoriferous, and vain 'Lump[s] of Diseases' with 'terrible Fangs' who resemble 'She-Cannibals', 'Man-Catchers', and 'Flesh-Crows'" (qtd. in Lanser, 299).

In 1713, a misogynist and anonymous poem, the *Satyr Upon Old Maids*, appeared in London. At that time, satirical poems about women were prevalent, but this one did not target women in general and rather focused on single women and old maids. The author qualified them of "odious" and "impure", called them "Antiquated Maids" and "Pestilence" on earth, "nasty, rank, rammy, filthy Sluts" (qtd. in Lanser, 297) who would stick with the "vilest" marriage if it meant they would avoid being "piss'd on with Contempt" (qtd. in Lanser, 297) because of their singleness.

Ten years later, in 1723, Daniel Defoe's first *Applebee's Journal* entry titled "Satire on Censorious Old Maids" had the same feeling as *Satyr Upon Old Maids* (1713). In it, Defoe described old maids as "Amazonian Cannibals", "the Terror and Aversion of all Mankind" (qtd. in Lanser, 301), and "the foreboder of Diseases and Death" (qtd. in Lanser, 301) and suggested that they had poison within them, so much so that "if an Old-Maid should bite any body, it would certainly be as Mortal, as the Bite of a Mad-Dog." (qtd. in Lanser, 301).

Similarly, *The Citizen of the World* (1764) by Oliver Goldsmith includes two men having a conversation about old maids in which they discuss whether they deserve to be treated with sympathy or not because, from their point of view, these women would have husbands if they deserved to be treated as such, and therefore they come to the conclusion that old maids are prideful and avaricious for not wanting to marry.

These representations, as previously stated, having in common the idea of old maids being physically distasteful and a danger to others (and especially men), were all written by men themselves and they were certainly rooted in misogyny and sexism. Nevertheless, the discourse around old maids was not homogeneous: there was a slight polarity, majorly because other women would come out and defend their collective right to choose whether they wanted to get married or not, eventually seen in the literary works in which they appeared. For example, Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) comes up with a utopian space exclusively made up of women in order to vouch for their wellness and especially assist girls in lower classes in order to be righteous wives. Staying single is also posed as a benefit in *Millenium Hall* (1762) but Scott justifies the decisions of the women who decide to stay single, as if they need a reason that is good enough to justify them resorting to the option of unmarried life, and not because they genuinely want to stay single. This view is not entirely different from the men's representations, because she still frames elder singlewomen as people who have something "wrong" with them as the reason why they are single, and isolates them from the real world, which is still a rather sexist view, but much more progressive if the cultural and literary context are taken into account: "Within this framework, *Millenium Hall*'s most apparently radical gesture is also potentially its most conservative: in clustering unmarried women in a separate, isolated space where they perform the work of reproducing patriarchy, the novel doubly defuses the threat that female affiliation could have posted." (Lanser, 303).

This contrast is also evident when comparing the *Satyr Upon Old Maids* (1713) and *The Virgin Unmask'd* (1724), which were a serious of texts advocating for singleness for women as a legitimate option that consisted of criticizing marriage. Written primarily by other singlewomen, they argued that marriage was a form of oppression and violence towards women because it denied them the possibility of intellectual and spiritual

enrichment due to the fact that they had to obey their husbands and adhere to classic gender roles.

Lastly, other women also wrote about singlewomen and old maids; Mary Astell, in her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1697), addresses singlewomen personally, telling them to stay single if that is what they desire, because it is the *only* option against marriage. Nevertheless, Astell also recognizes the fact that most singlewomen turn to marriage in the end because they are "terrified with the dreadful name of Old Maid, which yet none but fools will reproach her with, nor any wise woman be afraid of" (Astell, 2017), showing how, even if women themselves were in favor of choosing not to marry, the figure of the Old Maid was still under a negative light by women themselves.

1.2. Witchcraft, the Spinster, and the Witch in the Context of Twentieth Century Works

With the turn of the twentieth century, there stopped being as many records of witches as in the previous centuries, because people were not as interested in them anymore (Barker, 1723). Nevertheless, people did not stop telling stories about witches; they rather lost interest for the topic. The group of people who continued writing about witches were women themselves, but the way in which they did differed from the way men in other centuries had done it: now, women's stories about witches and witchcraft were fantasies that helped them to cope with their anxieties around motherhood and housekeeping (Bergman, 2015). The idea that witches were evil, and that witchcraft was an act that pulled them closer to the Devil began decreasing, and instead the idea of the witch as a feminist symbol became more prevalent. For example, in *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), "Cixous's and Clément's witch figures replicate the traces of alterity (illeity, anarchy) in a range of subversive feminine symbols" (Sempruch, 15). However, the twentieth century

texts in which witches appeared (mostly about feminist theory) were extremist, and Sempruch (2008) proposes considering them “as theoretical and narrative forms of spontaneous hysteria, that is, as examples of a revolutionary discourse that carries in itself an inherent division between the methodical, logical, and reasonable on one hand, and the hysterical, that is *eccentric* and out of control, on the other” (Sempruch, 17). Likewise, Purkiss (1996) states that "the radical feminist history of witches often appears to offer a static, finished vision of the witch" (Purkiss, 10). Nevertheless, the "witch" figure, “no matter who she is, or whom she supposedly represents, the "witch" remains a benevolent "wise-woman”” (Sempruch, 12).

Regarding the figure of the Old Maid, it also suffered a change in the way authors portrayed it in their works by the late 1920s. There was a change of attitude towards the gender roles of the Victorian period by women, elicited by the feminist movements such as the “Votes for Women” campaign organized by the Suffragettes (1928) and their other demonstrations to fight for their rights and gender equality, which rose women’s issues to public debates. As a result, the term “New Woman” emerged, and the literary production embraced the term. The concept of the New Woman described women who did not want to adhere to society’s imposed norms, were passionate and wanted to take action for their own lives, and fought for their civil and sexual freedom. The breaking of the Second World War gave spinsters a much better status: they were needed and especially wanted for their singleness, and for the first time they were considered “high-minded, upstanding pillars of the community” (Blount, 87). However, this did not last long, because society started to hypothesize that if they were not married that meant that they were homosexual and “standing outside their conventional gender roles as procreating women” (Blount, 89). Therefore, their representation in literature and other pieces of written works was similar to the ones from previous centuries. This time,

however, female authors began placing more attention to the figure of the spinster, rather than having them as evil, secondary characters: the cases of Miss Mole, Miss Marple, Cassie and Nance show how "ostensibly subjected to the "machine", the spinsters exercise power through their position at the edge, their surveillance, and their rhetorical tactics." (Mezei, 106). Kathy Mezei argues that, through misfocalization, these characters generate empathy for themselves, no matter how problematic they are (Mezei, 107). This was the authoresses' goal: to show their readers that there was nothing wrong with being a spinster by making them sympathize with characters that represented them. Nevertheless, these characters are still described with unfavorable adjectives: For example, Miss Marple is described as a "nasty old cat" (16), "that terrible Miss Marple" (8), "the typical elderly spinster" (51) (qtd. Mezei 107).

2. Analysis of *Lolly Willowes* (1926)

2.1.The Figure of the Spinster and the Witch in *Lolly Willowes* (1926)

The beginning of the novel starts with a traditional depiction of a woman who has no sense of self-agency. Laura does not assert herself during her first years of life, resulting in her family making choices for herself and her having to adhere to gender roles upon women when she does not want to. For example, after her father's death, which affected her deeply, her family wants her to move to London with her elder brother and his wife, and no one asks if she is okay with it. In fact, Caroline simply states "Of course, you will come to us" (Townsend Warner, 3). Her family members do not think of Laura as capable of managing herself, forcing her to move to London with Caroline and Henry, which

shows how dismissed she has been all her life, even by her mother: “They all liked Mrs. Willowes, but they were agreed amongst themselves that she needed bracing up to a sense of her responsibilities, especially her responsibilities about Laura” (Townsend Warner, 12). Laura has always been able to take care of herself thanks to being left alone that much as a child, but even when she grows up, no one seems to notice that quality within her, and they just think of her as someone who needs protection, like it used to happen with singlewomen who were yet to be married. Even in London, Henry and Caroline ignore her: “Laura’s expeditions were secret because no one asked her where she had been. Had they asked, she must have answered” (Townsend Warner, 54). Like critic Kathy Mezei argued, Old Maids were always standing in the sidelines of the action, seeing everything unfold, and that is what happened to Laura (Mezei, 107): She “behaved very well and went about her business, and only cried when alone in the potting-shed, where a pair of old gardening gloves repeated to her the shape of her mother’s hands” (Townsend Warner, 14).

Living all her life in the sidelines and doing what she is asked to do, everyone around her pities her someway. Even when Laura’s nephews grow up, they talk about their aunt as “unenterprising” because she did what her family asked of her: “Look at Aunt Lolly. Grandfather left her five hundred a year, and she was nearly thirty when he died, and yet she could find nothing better to do than to settle down with Mum and Dad, and stay there ever since” (Townsend Warner, 6). The other ladies around town do not like Laura either, not only because of her willingness to learn and spend her time reading books (when women were supposed to be housewives instead of pursuing intellectual enrichment) but it was more due to her singleness. With the explanation of her upbringing, Townsend Warner talks about women’s way of living and how it differed from men’s, because they did not have as many societal pressures as women did. For example, Laura’s

brothers went to school, whilst she did not, and she did not have any women friends of the same age. Moreover, when James announces he is going to get married at thirty-three years old, no one questions his age and he does not feel the pressure of his family hurrying him to marry someone, but that is not the case for Laura.

Moreover, the novel also touches upon the topic of identity erasure, mostly suffered by women still to this day. With Laura not being able to be herself and always adhering to what her family tells her, they stop seeing her as a person of her own, and just "Aunt Lolly", someone who is just there to help with the kids. That is why, when she finally feels free in her cottage at Great Mop and her nephew Titus comes to live with her, she gets reminded of her past and all she had wanted to get away from, resenting him in a way for still seeing her as nothing else than his "Aunt Lolly", stating that "it was odd to be called Aunt Lolly again." (Townsend Warner, 98):

> She walked slowly, for she felt the wright of her chains. Once more they had been fastened upon her. She had worn them for many years, acquiescently, scarcely feeling their weight. Now she felt it. And, with their weight, she felt their familiarity, and the familiarity was worst of all. (Townsend Warner, 103).

Very early on, we see Laura's character as a singlewoman: whilst living with them in London, Caroline and Henry try to introduce Laura to different men, but they are never successful in finding a good match for her. With that, the author discusses the gender roles upon young women by explaining the lack of "coquetry" that Laura has, which "made her insensible to the duty of every marriageable young woman to be charming" (Townsend Warner, 17). Using the word "duty", Townsend Warner is showing how there was great pressure among young girls to possess certain qualities in order to be "marriageable". People around Laura speculate that she has this issue because of her upbringing, but the reader understands that her indifference regarding marriage was because of her father: "this indifference was reinforced by the circumstances which had made her so closely her father's companion" (Townsend Warner, 18). She does not settle

for any man because, having felt the love of her father, she compares it to what other men could give her, and finds them not worthy enough: “There is nothing more endangering to a young woman’s normal inclination towards young men than an intimacy with a man twice her own age. Laura compared with her father all the young men whom otherwise she might have accepted without any comparisons” (Townsend Warner, 18). Moreover, she never feels listened to or understood by these men, but rather looked down upon: “she felt that these clean-shaven men with bristling eyebrows were suavely concealing their doubts of her intelligence and her probity” (Townsend Warner, 36).

Moreover, as time passes by and she gets to observe the relationship between Henry and Caroline closely, she realizes that this is not what she wants her life to become: “Caroline was a good woman and a good wife. She was slightly self-righteous, and fairly rightly so, but she yielded to Henry’s judgement in every dispute, she bowed her good sense to his will and blinkered her wider views in obedience to his prejudices” (Townsend Warner, 35). Moreover, “she fed his vanity, and ministered to his imperiousness” (Townsend Warner, 35). Because of that, Laura does not think of herself as skilled enough to be a housewife like Caroline: “Compared to Caroline she knew herself to be unpractical, unmethodical, lacking in initiative” (Townsend Warner, 33) and “she performed [the tasks Caroline delegated to her] with hampering consciousness that Caroline could do them better than she, and in less time.” (Townsend Warner, 33).

Slowly, Laura realizes that her life has no meaning if she continues to live for others and does not assert herself. The reader begins to understand her thoughts when her character takes a more central position within the narrative frame: at first, the narrator talks about Laura Willowes and the reader cannot read her thoughts, but as she becomes more aware of what her life is coming to, her thoughts seep through the narration, as if she became conscious. When describing her stay in London, Laura thinks of the place as

a prison: “She would become an inmate of the tall house in Apsley Terrace where hitherto she had only been a country sister-in-law on a visit” (Warner, 4) although “London life was very full and exciting” (Townsend Warner, 4), and even if she tries to stay positive and get used to it, she knows she will not because she will miss being in contact with nature: “But in London there would be no greenhouse with a glossy tank, and no apple-room, and no potting-shed, earthy and warm, with bunches of poppy heads hanging from the ceiling, and sunflower seeds in a wooden box, and bulbs in thick paper bags, and hanks of tarred string, and lavender drying on a tea-tray.” (Townsend Warner, 5).

Nature is a very important topic within the novel, and what gives Laura the push she needs to take action for her own life. Laura’s character belongs in the woods because, when she moves to London with her brother and sister-in-law, she constantly feels sick: “As time went on Laura accustomed to this recurrent autumnal fever” (Townsend Warner, 53). When she goes to the flower shop and has the realization that she feels deeply connected with nature, having found her passion for plants and natural remedies, she finally takes matters into her own hands to change her life:

> As Laura stood waiting she felt a great longing. It weighed upon her like the load of ripened fruit upon a tree. She forgot the shop, the other customers, her own errand. She forgot the winter air outside, the people going by on the wet pavements. She forgot that she was in London, she forgot the whole of her London life. She seemed to be standing alone in a darkening orchard, her feet in the grass, her arms stretched up to the pattern of leaves and fruit, her fingers seeking the rounded ovals of the fruit among the pointed ovals of the leaves. the air about her was cool and moist. There was no sound, for the birds had left off singing and the owls had not yet begun to hoot. No sound, except sometimes the soft thud of a ripe plum falling into the grass, to lie there a compact shadow among shadows. (Townsend Warner, 57)

Moreover, when Laura finally reaches Great Mop by herself and takes in the natural landscape, she realizes everything she’d had to endure because of the roles pushed upon her by her family and society as a whole, and how she can finally be free:

> When she walked into the meadow it was bloomed over with cowslips, powdering the grass in variable plenty, here scattered, there clustered, innumerable as the stars in the Milky Way. She knelt down among them and laid her face close to their fragrance. The weight of all her unhappy years seemed for a moment to weigh her

> bosom down to the earth; she trembled, understanding for the first time how miserable she had been; and in another moment she was released. It was all gone, it could never be again, and never had been. Tears of thankfulness ran down her face. With every breath she drew, the scent of the cowslips flowed in and absolved her. She was changed, and knew it. She was humbler, and more simple. She ceased to triumph mentally over her tyrants, and rallied herself no longer with the consciousness that she had outraged them by coming to live at Great Mop. […] There was no question of forgiving them. She had not, in any case, a forgiving nature; and the injury they had done her was not done by them. If she were to start forgiving she must needs forgive Society, the Law, the Church, the History of Europe, the Old Testament, great great-aunt Salome and her prayer book, the Bank of England, Prostitution, the Architect of Apsley Terrace, and half a dozen other useful props of civilization. All she could do was to go on forgetting them. But now she was able to forget them without flouting them by her forgetfulness. (Townsend Warner, 98)

Furthermore, from the beginning of the novel this deep connection is expressed through long and detailed descriptions of her passion for plants, herbs and natural remedies:

> She roved the countryside for herbs and simples, and many were the washes and decoctions that she made from sweet-gale, water purslane, cowslips, and the roots of succory, while her salads gathered in fields and hedges were eaten by Everard, at first in hope and trust, and afterwards with flattering appetite. (Townsend Warner, 21)

Another example is when Laura was still young and her mother was alive: "Botany and brewery she now combined into one pursuit, for at the spur of Nannie's rhyme she turned her attention into the forsaken green byways of the rural pharmacopoeia" (Townsend Warner, 21). These practices are canonically deeply connected with witchcraft and, in fact, nature and witchcraft have a very strong connection within this book as well. Witchcraft is her way to connect with nature; like previously mentioned, Bacon claims in her article that Laura's engage with the natural world happens thanks to witchery, which is "not so much a means of doing 'magic' as if it were scientific methodology" but rather a way for Laura to benefit from the results of her practices, which is to be free (Bacon, 178). This relationship with nature is what makes Laura's life have a purpose, because by being in contact with it, she can be free from society's-imposed gender and social roles. Like she tells Satan in her final speech:

> That's why we become witches: to show our scorn of pretending life's a safe business, to satisfy our passion for adventure. It's not malice, or wickedness—well,

> perhaps it is wickedness, for most women love that—but certainly not malice, not wanting to plague cattle and make horrid children spout up pins and—what is it?—"blight the genial bed. (Townsend Warner, 155)

However, Laura's relationship with witchcraft is described in a way that clearly shows she is not engaging in these practices to harm anyone, but rather because it gives her life purpose.

> One doesn't become a witch to run round being harmful, or to run round being helpful either, a district visitor on a broomstick. It's to escape all that—to have a life of one's own, not an existence doled out to you by others, charitable refuse of their thoughts, so many ounces of stale bread of life a day, the workhouse dietary is scientifically calculated to support life. (Townsend Warner, 156)

Furthermore, her very first contact with potions and broths happens at a young age, and even if the outcome resulted in her brothers being sick, her intention was to help them, showing that her use of witchcraft is not rooted in evil:

> Once long ago, she had made a broth by seething the leaves in boiling water, which she then strained off and gave to Henry and James. But it made them both sick, and Mrs. Willowes had forbidden its further use. Laura felt positive that mugwort tea would not have made her sick. She begged for leave to make trial of it, but to no avail; Nannie's prohibition was as absolute as that of her mistress." (Townsend Warner, 21)

Laura even thinks that the time when she would make broths at Lady Place was because her witchy nature was brewing inside of her, realizing it is her vocation: "She was a witch by vocation. Even in the old days of Lady Place the impulse had stirred in her. What else had set her upon her long solitary walks, her quests for powerful and forgotten herbs, her brews and distillations?" (Townsend Warner, 116).

One thing about Laura's character that is worth mentioning is the fact that she is able to detach herself from her family and society as a whole and move to the mountains thanks to her wealthy background. In the novel, it is explicitly stated that her father would give her an allowance, and even if that money was managed by her brother Henry, it was still hers. At the point in the novel when she reveals that she wants to live in Great Mop, she and Henry have a discussion where he admits having been using her money as he

pleased, and his justification was that: “your capital has always been in my hands, Lolly, and I have administered it as I thought fit” (Townsend Warner, 69). Laura demands an explanation, and eventually receives all her money back. This shows the importance of women’s emancipation, because most women were not as lucky, and they had to continue living in situations where their identities were erased due to the expectations upon them.

Sylvia Townsend Warner’s representation of witches and spinsters was a step further into accepting women who chose not to adhere to gender roles. Starting from a woman does not have self-agency, who does not stand up for herself and whom everyone around her dismisses and criticizes, to a woman who finds her freedom through nature and witchcraft, something deeply criticized in the centuries prior, but with a twist to show that her engagement with the practice is not rooted in evil.

2.2.Differences and Similarities between *Lolly Willowes’* (1926) Spinster and Witch Representation and the Eighteenth Century’s Portrayal

It seems to be that Sylvia Townsend Warner’s goal was to portray Laura as a spinster that took agency upon her own life and detached herself from the gender roles that tied her to a life without freedom, using witchcraft as the means to connect with nature and, ultimately, be free. However, the authoress’ representation is not completely different from other previous works or documents in which old maids and witches were featured in, even if the approach that Townsend Warner took about those characters was totally different from the other authors.

Regarding the figure of the Old Maid, Laura is never described to be malicious, unlike authors of the seventeenth century, like Roberts (1616) and Gregory (1797). However, she is subject to criticism by other men and women, illustrating the reality singlewomen had to face. In *Satyr Upon Old Maids* (1713), women like Laura were

insulted and described with very disagreeable adjectives, but this does not happen in *Lolly Willowes* (1926). Laura is presented as a woman with no self-determination, but as the story goes on, she increasingly asserts herself more until she can speak up about what she thinks is best for her. For example, she feels slightly pressured to join the Sabbath, but she reaches a point where she decides to take agency upon herself and leave, because she does not feel comfortable and does not want to be there anymore. Sylvia Townsend Warner, moreover, gives Laura's character a background which does not revolve around her relationship with men which also explains why Laura chooses not to marry. The previously mentioned authors found justification of their singleness on the fact that something was not right with those women, and that is why they could not marry. Authors like Goldsmith (1764) or Dunton (1697) did not even contemplate the option that women had a choice. Furthermore, Laura is portrayed as someone who can take care of herself from a young age because her mother ignored her quite often, whilst other previous authors would always pity singlewomen because they did not think they could handle their own lives without the help of a husband (Goldsmith, 1764).

Another aspect of Townsend Warner's portrayal that is quite similar to previous portrayals is the description of her physical appearance. Traditionally, old maids and witches have many physical features in common: they are described as old, with messy white hair and chapped lips, etc. All of these adjectives allude to the fact that they are not attractive and that their physical appearance distances itself a lot from canonical beauty standards. Laura's case is similar, because her looks are described to resemble those of a witch from the earlier portrayals, but she is still considered beautiful by some characters. Firstly, when she was young, she was described to have pale cheeks, and when she looked at her own reflection in the greenhouse tank she realized it "showed only a dark shadowy Laura, very dark and smooth like the lady in the old holy painting that hung in the dining-

room and was called the Leonardo." (Townsend Warner, 4). She is compared to the Mona Lisa, whom society deems not canonically beautiful, with her wide "manly" face and a slight double chin. When she moves to London, her appearance is described as the following:

> Laura's hair was black as ever, but it was not so think. She had grown paler from living in London. Her forehead had not a wrinkle, but two downward lines prolonged the drooping corners of her mouth. Her face was beginning to stiffen. It had lost its power of expressiveness, and was more and more dominated by the hook nose and the sharp chin. (Townsend Warner, 38)

Having a hooked nose and a sharp chin are features that the traditional appearance of witches had. One last description of Laura's appearance really shows how people were not particularly fond of her looks: "Such eyes are rare in any face, and rarer still in conjunction with a brown colouring. In Laura's case the effect was too startling to be agreeable. Strangers thought her remarkable-looking, but got no further, and those more accustomed thought her plain." (Warner, 17). However, unlike other stories, Laura is thought to be beautiful by her father and her brother James: "Only Everard and James might have called her pretty, had they been asked for an opinion. […] They had seen her at home, where animation brought colour into her cheeks and spirit into her bearing. Abroad, and in company, she was not animated." (Townsend Warner, 17)

Likewise, Laura's relationship with witchcraft, which is solely to help herself, is also different from what other authors had written about singlewomen beforehand. Witches were written to be evil women who used their powers to hurt others, and they were most likely to be easily swayed by the Devil (Roberts, 1616). For example, the witches in *Hamlet* (1602), or the one in *Hansel and Gretel* (1812) are characters whose sole purpose is to act as the antagonists of the story, to hurt the main characters or lead them through dangerous experiences. However, Laura's purpose is never to hurt anyone. In fact, she feels guilty when she does hurt her brothers by giving them a broth she made.

Moreover, witches were portrayed to be evil, but the first time Laura sees Mr. Saunter, she thinks the following about him: “Laura had rejected the saying that man is the noblest work of nature. Half an hour with Mr. Saunter showed her that the saying was true” (Warner, 87). This demonstrates how Laura, although being a witch, she is able to see the good in people, even when she does not particularly like them. Another characteristic that distinguishes her from traditional witches is the fact that she does not like to engage in Sabbaths: “Even as a witch, it seemed, she was doomed to social failure, and her first Sabbath was not going to open livelier vistas than were opened by her first ball” (Warner, 126). This happens because Laura is only free if she is not tied to any community, likewise previously mentioned by Knoll in his article (Knoll, 358).

Moreover, Townsend Warner also includes ominous descriptions alluding to death and evil throughout the novel, which is another traditional convention within witch stories. For example, the moon looking down at Laura: “The moon seemed to have torn the leaves from the trees that it might stare at her more imperiously” (Townsend Warner, 52); bats and darkness: “bats flickered in the little courtyard, and shadows moved across the yellow blinds.” (Townsend Warner, 60); or Laura’s mind being clouded by ominous imagery:

> Her mind was groping after something that eluded her experience, a something that was shadowy and menacing, and yet in some way congenial; a something that lurked in waste places, that was hinted at by the sound of water gurgling through deep channels and by the voices of birds of ill-omen. Loneliness, dreariness, aptness for arousing a sense of fear, a kind of ungodly hallowedness- these were the things that called her thoughts away from the comfortable fireside. (Townsend Warner, 52)

Furthermore, the foreshadow that shows that the Devil is approaching her is also menacing: “Loud, separate, and abrupt, each pant of the engine trampled down her wits. The wind and the moon and the ranging cloud pack were not the only hunters abroad that night: something else was hunting among the hills, hunting slowly, deliberately, sure of its quarry. (Townsend Warner, 88)

The first contact Laura has with the Devil is through the cat that sneaks inside of her house, her familiar. In European folklore, familiars were thought to be spirits that guarded and protected witches. Laura's cat does exactly this: it appears when Titus is living with her at Great Mop, and it disturbs him until he finally leaves with the help of the Devil. The cat is black and is totally independent, only appearing when Laura needs its help, just like the canonical representations of witches. When she meets the cat for the first time, though, instead of being frightening and imposing for being the Devil's messenger, she feels compassion for it, showing the strong bonds witches had with their familiars: "Strange that anything so small and weak should be the Devil's Officer, plenipotentiary of such a power." (Townsend Warner, 114)

The Devil, on the other hand, is much more different than its traditional representation. Traditionally, the Devil is portrayed as the epitome of evil, an entity that does not have compassion nor empathy for anyone, and who does not care nor wish for anyone's well-being. He is an entity who likes destruction and death, but Sylvia Townsend Warner's portrayal goes beyond that. The author characterizes the Devil and makes him have conversations with Laura, in which the reader sees how he is a much more compassionate being as he is thought to be: "Satan had at last taken pity upon her bewilderment, leading her by the hand into the flower-shop in the Moscow Road; but from the moment of her arrival there he had never been far off." (Townsend Warner, 117). Satan makes sure that Laura does not fear her, and that is why he adopts multiple shapes when he approaches her: "When he came out of the wood, dressed like a gamekeeper, and speaking so quietly and simply, Satan had come to renew his promise and to reassure her. He had put on this shape that she might not fear him" (Townsend Warner, 136). Furthermore, Satan and his familiar only want to help Laura reach her freedom by making Titus leave Great Mop, so they play tricks on him to annoy him, hurting him slightly in

the process, but never enough for him to die: “Titus was not feeling at his best. He hated small bothers, and of late he had been seethed alive in them. Every day something went wrong, some fiddle-faddle little thing” (Townsend Warner, 138).

In the last conversation between Satan and Laura, after Titus has left and they are alone in the forest, she admits that she “came here to be in the country, and to escape being an aunt.’ (Townsend Warner, 151), to which Satan replies: “no servant of mine can feel remorse, or doubt, or surprise. You may be quite easy, Laura: you will never escape me, for you can never wish to.” (Townsend Warner, 152). She is comfortable enough with Satan to open her heart to him, and he listens attentively to her concerns and her thoughts on women. Whilst Satan listens to Laura’s final speech, in which the purpose of the book and the reason why she became a witch are explained, “not a blade of grass was signed, not a clover-leaf blasted, and the rampion flower was withering quite naturally; yet he who had sat there was Satan, the author of all evil, whose thoughts were a darkness, whose roots went down into the pit” (Townsend Warner, 159). The epitome of evil and destruction did not make the flowers die, showing that Laura could feel safe with him, witchcraft, and nature. This is almost an opposite representation from the traditional portrayal of the Devil.

3. Conclusion

The figure of the Old Maid or Spinster in earlier centuries reflected the misogyny that elder single women had to face, always deemed to be undesirable, evil and with something wrong that prevented them from having a husband. Spinsters were also the ones accused of witchcraft the most, ultimately being persecuted when the Witch Hunts took place. The representations of old maids and witches were generally unfavorable, partially due to the irrational fear society had of black magic and other unconventional

practices from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth. However, not all depictions of witches and old maids were the same: some women writers began writing about single women to defend their stance and shed light on the fact that some of them did not want to get married, as opposed to not being able to.

Sylvia Townsend Warner includes traditional conventions of old maids in her novel, in terms of appearance (in traditional representations, old maids were ugly-looking and old) and in terms of personality (for example, witches and old maids were depicted as solitary people) to describe Laura. Moreover, through Laura's storyline, in which she gets agency over her life, using witchcraft as a means to fulfill her connection with nature, where she feels free, Townsend Warner wants to demonstrate to her readers that women do not have to adhere to social norms if that is not what fulfills them. Laura spends her life doing what she is told, standing on the sidelines like other representations of old maids (like Miss Mole or Miss Marple), being disregarded by her family members from a very young age. Even Laura's brother uses her money as he pleases, and during that time she realizes how no man will make her happy, how marriage is not something she would want from looking at the way Henry and Caroline behave. Sylvia Townsend Warner provides a lot of reasons why Laura wants to leave her family and live in Great Mop by herself, contrary to other representations of old maids, in which authors implied that their reason for not marrying was because they were evil or unattractive.

Regarding the representation of witches, Sylvia Townsend Warner also follows conventions in terms of looks (having pointy noses and chins) and other features like having a familiar (a black cat) and being in contact with the Devil, yet the author does it in a different way than previous centuries' works: Townsend Warner portrays Satan as an understanding and caring figure; although dangerous for being the God of death, he never makes Laura fear him, and he takes into consideration her feelings, listens to her and gives

her advice. Their relationship is not corrupted by evil nor has a sexual nature in any way. Moreover, Laura is not an evil person who turns to witchcraft to hurt others; in fact, she does it to help herself be free, as it is explicitly said by her on her last speech.

In conclusion, *Lolly Willowes* (1926), taking inspiration from older representations of spinsters and witches from previous centuries, is the story of how a woman singled out by people around her, and defined by her singleness takes agency over her own life and decides to live in the woods by herself, using witchcraft as a means to achieve her goal, in order to be free from societal norms and gender roles. As the analysis has showcased, I believe that Sylvia Townsend Warner wrote this novel and turned the negative stereotypes of old maids and witches into something positive. Although it is only applicable to wealthy women like Laura, it entailed a step forward regarding the representation of women who did not adhere to gender roles, and that is why this novel is worth discussing.

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