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The Witchfinder (2022): The Influence of the
Past and the Present in the Representation of
Matthew Hopkins

Autor/es

Elena Pueyo Edmondson

Director/es

Sonia Baelo Allué

Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
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Abstract

Witch hunts comprise an important part of history. In England, the most well-known witchfinder was the Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins, who was responsible for a large number of executions. In spite of his renown, he rarely appears in popular media depicting witches or witch hunts, as many series and films favour the Salem witch trials of the New England colonies. *The Witchfinder* (2022) provides one of the few recent representations of Hopkins in popular media. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to analyse how both past and present influence the depiction of Hopkins in the series. Many beliefs about witchcraft coming from historical texts like King James I's *Daemonologie* (1597) and Matthew Hopkins' *The Discovery of Witches* (1647) are explored in this dissertation since they are used but also questioned and presented as absurd in *The Witchfinder* (2022). Women are awarded an agency that can be best explained by the role of current events such as women's rights movements and Brexit, which have influenced the production of the series. Furthermore, the three characters that represent Hopkins are faithful to the historical figure but also makes him more human and complex, highlighting the absurdity of his character from a contemporary perspective. The way past and present intertwine in this most recent depiction of the historical figure of Matthew Hopkins will be explored in this dissertation.

Resumen

Las cazas de brujas forman una parte importante de la historia. En Inglaterra, el cazador de brujas más conocido fue el General Cazador de Brujas Matthew Hopkins, que fue responsable de un gran número de ejecuciones. A pesar de su renombre, apenas aparece en obras no académicas centradas en brujas o la caza de brujas, ya que muchas series y películas se decantan por la cacería de brujas de Salem en las colonias norteamericanas. *The Witchfinder* (2022) presenta una de las pocas representaciones recientes de Hopkins en obras no académicas. Así, el objetivo de esta tesis es analizar como el pasado y el presente influyen en la representación de Hopkins en la serie. En esta tesis se exploran muchas creencias sobre brujería provenientes de textos históricos como *Daemonologie* (1597) del rey James I y *The Discovery of Witches* (1647) de Matthew Hopkins, pues son utilizados, además de cuestionados y presentados como absurdos en *The Witchfinder* (2022). La voluntad propia que se les otorga a las mujeres puede ser explicado mejor por la función de eventos actuales como la lucha por los derechos de la mujer y el Brexit, lo cuales han influido en la producción de la serie. Además, los tres personajes que representan a Hopkins no solo son fieles a la figura histórica, sino que también le hacen más humano y complejo, resaltando lo absurdo de su personaje desde un punto de vista contemporáneo. La forma en la que se entrelazan el pasado y el presente en esta representación reciente de la figura histórica de Matthew Hopkins será explorada en esta tesis.

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1. Introduction

Popular media is full of representations of witches. They are usually confined to the fantasy and horror genres in which magic is the main feature, although not exclusively. The most famous example of witches in British media is the *Harry Potter* series (1997) by J. K. Rowling and its popular film adaptations, in which witch hunts are mentioned but do not play a prominent role. The popular BBC series *Doctor Who* (2005) also includes depictions of witches as stereotypical hags in episode 2 of season 3 “The Shakespeare Code” and as innocent victims of a witch hunt in episode 8 of season 11 “The Witchfinders”. The historical Lancashire witches, who are among the most famous in British history, appear in episode 5 of season 2 of the non-fiction Netflix documentary series *Secrets of Great British Castles* (2015), as the accused were held in Lancashire castle as they awaited trial. In American media, L. J. Smith’s *The Secret Circle* (1992), which was later made into a series, follows a group of teenagers who are hunted for being witches. In recent American horror series, Season 8 of *American Horror Story: Apocalypse* (2018) and *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018) stand out. *Charmed* (1998), a series featuring three witch sisters, was rebooted in 2018. Another example is episode 6 of season 9 “In The Blood” of *Criminal Minds*, which presents a serial killer who believes he is killing witches.

However, Matthew Hopkins, a key figure in witch hunting known as the Witchfinder General, rarely makes an appearance in fiction in spite of his historical importance, as the Salem witch trials take precedent. His role in British and East Anglian witch hunts was enormous, instigating fear of witchcraft and profiting off it. This makes his appearance in the BBC series *The Witchfinder* (Rob and Neil Gibbons 2022) notable. As a recent series, it offers a contemporary perspective on topics such as women’s

rights and pandemics. It does so by taking a unique approach to the topic by creating a comedy that focuses on both the perpetrators and the accused, giving Gooch (a woman accused of being a witch played by Daisy May Cooper) the important role of debunking the witch-hunter's arguments and giving a voice to victims while showcasing the absurdity of witch hunts. Although the genre suggests an abundance of laughter, the series does not make light of the deadly nature of the witch craze it portrays, instead making the topic more accessible than it is in the period horror film *Witchfinder General* (Michael Reeves 1968), which portrays Matthew Hopkins in a more terrifying light. Through comedy, the series revisits the beliefs about witchcraft that originated from King James I's *Daemonologie* (1597) and Hopkins' *The Discovery of Witches* (1647), illustrating them in the context of COVID-19, Brexit, the #MeToo movement and women's rights. This essay explores how these influences merge to deconstruct and criticise Matthew Hopkins by representing him in the BBC's *The Witchfinder* (2022) as three different characters who represent his doubts and his need for money and fame.

1.1 Witch hunts in the world and England

To understand the events that take place in the BBC series, it is necessary to realise that the existence of witches was a source of fear for the population of Europe during the early modern period. However, the true scale of witch-trials has been exaggerated, as they were relatively rare (Gaskill, "Witchcraft, Politics" 290). Gaskill sets the estimates for all trials in this period at 90,000 to 100,000 in Europe, Scandinavia and America combined (*Witchcraft* 69). In those trials approximately 110,000 people were tried and 40,000 to 60,000 executed (Wallenfeldt). Although this number is significant, it should be noted that these trials happened over a 400-year period, which sets the number of

people executed at 100 per year. Additionally, these numbers correspond to two continents, therefore it becomes clear that the number of executed witches has been largely exaggerated in the common consciousness.

Schoeneman claims that witch hunts in Europe “were preceded by and included in a long period of nearly continuous change” (541), which caused discord within cultures. One such strain was the rise of individualism that came with the appearance of market economy. The charity of village neighbours came into conflict with the new market and the rejection of petitions for help translated into accusations of *maleficium* whenever misfortune struck (Hall 255). Gaskill includes other events, such as “war, plague, and harvest failure, though not necessarily at exactly the same time” (*Witchcraft* 71), which also changed the way in which neighbours interacted. The continuous change that Schoeneman referred to challenged everyday life and caused uncertainty, which caused rifts between neighbours that led to conflict.

One of the concerns of the early modern period that instigated witch-hunts was the “growing concern about female conduct” (Gaskill, *Witchcraft* 32). Therefore, it is not surprising that the widespread stereotype of witches as poor and elderly women is historically accurate (Horsley 689), as accused witches often fell into those categories. Furthermore, the accused were marginal individuals when it came to “social or economic position, sexual behavior, or possibly religious attitude” (Hall 279-80), and it was their confrontational nature against their neighbours that preceded accusations of witchcraft.

Although witch trials were not homogeneous, in his study on witchcraft in the American Colonies, Drake analyses the different forms of evidence acquisition which also reflect preceding trials in Europe. There were three ways of acquiring evidence of witchcraft, of which the first two were individually considered enough proof to lead to automatic execution: confession, a witchmark, and testimonies (Drake 710). Of these, the witchmark was the only accepted physical evidence, although the mark itself could sometimes be invisible. The only method of proving the existence of a witchmark was pricking the desensitised marks, a common practice in Scotland (Neill 206).

In the case of England, the number of witch hunts increased whenever the Protestants and Catholics had a major conflict, therefore “the peaks coincided with the Civil War (1642-1648) and the Restoration (1660)” (Schoeneman 545). The estimated number of people executed in England is 500, with the last execution taking place in 1685 (“Witchcraft” *UK Parliament*). However, it was not until 1736 that the statute of James I against witchcraft, which was enacted in 1604, was repealed (Kittredge 2-4).

1.2 Witch hunts in East Anglia and Matthew Hopkins

Of all the English witch hunts, the Lancashire witches and Matthew Hopkins’ are the most well-known in the present day. In East Anglia, the witch craze took place between 1645 and 1647 and was headed by Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne (Kittredge 4). Although it shared many traits with witch hunts in Europe and England, the presence of a sucking familiar was unique to this period and location, as it was only found in England and exclusively south of Lancashire (Murray 104). As Murray states, this

sucking familiar was believed to be a demon animal that sucked blood from a third insensitive nipple on the witch's body (104).

The Court of Assizes, a travelling court that arrived at select places throughout England, took over responsibility for cases of witchcraft from the Canterbury church courts in the 1570s, as the lack of a contemporary police force made implementing laws a complicated ordeal (Gaskill, *Witchcraft* 63). Matthew Hopkins, previously a lawyer, exploited the situation of the Civil War to turn himself into the Witchfinder General while the power of the law was fragile. As a lawyer, Hopkins had a unique insight into the justice system, which enabled him to succeed in trials. During his time working as a witchfinder, Hopkins was responsible for approximately 100 executions, which was one fifth of the executions for witchcraft in England during the period (Gaskill, *Witchcraft* 83). As Hopkins himself explained in *Discovery of Witches* (1647), this included his discovery of witches in Manningtree in 1644, from which his new career developed (11). Although Hopkins highlighted the importance of experience in his ability to find witches, he largely followed the methods outlined by King James I in his *Daemonologie* (1597), such as pricking and “by tying them, and heaving them into the water” (Hopkins 19). His success in finding witches increased fear of witchcraft in England, which translated into more witch trials. But it also brought to light the “evidentiary weakness of confession” (Gaskill, “Witchcraft, Politics” 306) to judges, who stopped allowing it as exclusive proof of witchcraft. Matthew Hopkins' success also brought criticism, as he published *The Discovery of Witches*, in which he defended his actions as a witchfinder.

1.3 The influence of Matthew Hopkins

As a major figure in witch hunting, it is no surprise that Hopkins' methods continued even after his death. The witch trials in the New England colonies, which took place later than in England, shared many similarities with the ones in England despite the distance between them. New England magistrates adopted methods used by Matthew Hopkins, such as the "search for familiars, witchmarks and imps" in their own trials (Drake 712). However, the colonies were not known for persecuting witches until 1692 in Salem, when nineteen people were hanged for being witches. The unique aspect of Salem is that "only people refusing to confess were executed; those who, in effect, perjured themselves were spared" (Gaskill, *Witchcraft* 90-91). Therefore, those who died had not admitted to witchcraft, while confessed witches were allowed to live, something which would not have been allowed in England.

Although in common consciousness witch trials came to an end in the 18th century and are no longer a reality, they do exist in the present. In 2008, a young Nigerian girl was abandoned after a priest claimed she was a witch (Harrison). The following year, Amnesty International revealed that 1,000 people in Gambia were taken from their villages by armed guards due to accusations of witchcraft ("The Gambia" Amnesty International). Despite most examples of contemporary witch trials taking place on continents other than Europe, a poll taken in 2005 found that 13% of people in the UK believed in witches (Schons).

2. *The Witchfinder* (2022)

The BBC series *The Witchfinder* (2022) is testament to the influence Matthew Hopkins had in his time, as his name is still recognisable four centuries after his death. The six-part series was created by the Gibbons brothers, Neil and Rob. Although it stars well-known British comedians such as Daisy May Cooper as Thomasine Gooch and Tim Key as Gideon Bannister, it has not been renewed for a second season. This series presents witchfinders in a comical way through the character of Gideon Bannister, a witchfinder who wishes to follow in the footsteps of the famous Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins (Reece Shearsmith). When Stearne (Joblin Sibtain), Hopkins' right-hand man, is found dead in the same town in which Bannister is trying a witch, Bannister takes the opportunity to present himself as a replacement. To do so, he ventures through a war-ridden East Anglia with accused witch Thomasine Gooch to present her to trial at the Court of Assize. They encounter many obstacles along the way. In episode 2, Bannister and Gooch take a detour because Gooch's horse allergy makes a woman believe she has the plague, which leads them to an encounter with Cavaliers stationed at Bannister's parents' home. In episode 3, they hitchhike with a boy who also finds witches and once in Dedham Vale they witness a witch being condemned. Episode 4 shows Bannister and Gooch pretending to be a couple to ensure Gooch will not be killed without a trial. As they approach their destination, in episode 5, Bannister is tricked into helping a conman, Dennis (Julian Barratt), who is pretending to be Matthew Hopkins to swindle villagers. However, upon meeting the real Matthew Hopkins in episode 6, Bannister's determination to submit Gooch to trial falters and he defends her in court, leading to her escape.

Over half a century before *The Witchfinder* (2022), the film *Witchfinder General* (1968) was produced. Both of them show a witchfinder travelling through East Anglia during the Civil War to submit accused witches to trial, featuring Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne. The basic aspects are similar, as they are both influenced by the same sources from the past. However, they are vastly different pieces as the influences from their current time create very different end-products even with all their commonalities. Because their basic premise is so similar, it allows to highlight the differences between them and how unique *The Witchfinder* (2022) is.

The most glaring difference between the two is the genre. The aim of comedy according to Golden is to “chastise [...] the inferior and incongruous behaviour of individuals” (284). Although the BBC series does not aim to modify the behaviour from the past, it uses comedy to highlight the ridiculousness of it. Additionally, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines comedy as “a genre of dramatic literature dealing with [...] the serious in a light or satirical manner”. This definition can be seen in Jessica Hynes’ description of the series, in which she says that “we make light of it, but it amounted to a kind of gender genocide” (“Gender Politics of the 1600s”). The comedy deals with a heavy topic by making it entertaining, while also exposing the ridiculousness of people’s behaviour. This can be seen when Bannister, a witchfinder, constantly does things that would be considered proof in a witch trial, such as floating in the river and talking to a horse in episode 5, and commanding a swarm of bees in episode 6. Meanwhile, *Witchfinder General* (1968) is classified as a horror film. As Gaskill notes, the proliferation of horror films from the 1960s was influenced by Montague Summers, who believed satanists were a danger to society in the 20th century as much as they were in the 17th century (“The Pursuit” 1074). Therefore, it is no surprise that a film about

witchcraft was produced during this period in this genre. However, it is interesting to note that the villain is not a witch but the witchfinder.

2.1 Influences

The Witchfinder (2022) is influenced by the past, but also the present. The context of the series accurately represents Hopkins' time period, but two historical texts also affect the belief system surrounding witches in the series. These texts are King James I's *Daemonologie* (1597) and Hopkins' *The Discovery of Witches* (1647). The influence of the present can be observed in the way in which topics such as women's rights and pandemics are treated and criticised through Gooch's character. As we will see, past and present intertwine, as the depiction of Matthew Hopkins is faithful to the historical figure but is also depicted from a contemporary perspective.

2.1.1 The Past

The BBC series is set in the 1640s, therefore it is undoubtedly influenced by the past, since it is, at least to some extent, accurate in its representation of the time. As it is set in East Anglia during the events of the Civil War, in episode 2 there are mentions of Cavaliers and Puritans fighting for power, such as "keep an eye out for the Cavaliers. The King's men don't take kindly to Puritans". Bannister and Gooch also travel through or mention places in East Anglia, many of them connected to Matthew Hopkins or sites of witch trials, such as Chelmsford and Dedham Vale.

The Witchfinder (2022) is also largely influenced by a number of texts about witchcraft. One such text is King James I's *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue, Divided into*

three Bookes (1597). King James I's text shared many aspects with the well-known *Malleus Maleficarum*, written in 1486 by a German priest and used as the main source of information on witchcraft for European witchfinders (Kramer). Due to their similarities, *Daemonologie* is the most relevant text when it comes to England, since it was written by its King and included his own ideas, which made their way into English beliefs about witchcraft and the series itself. However, due to their importance, both texts are mentioned in *The Witchfinder* (2022) in episode 3, when a young witchfinder boy claims to have read all the important witchfinder texts. Another important text worth exploring when dealing with witchfinders in England is Matthew Hopkins' book *The Discovery of Witches* (1647), in which he compiled questions he was asked about his witch-finding job and answered them. Hopkins' methods were influenced by King James I's text, therefore there are similarities between the two. Although both texts were written as serious handbooks, the series criticises the information in them by including aspects of them in absurd situations.

Daemonologie's first argument is on the importance of scripture, as it is "proven by the Scripture, that these vnlawfull artes in *genere*, haue bene and may be put in practise" (4), therefore witchcraft cannot be denied. Bannister makes use of scripture all throughout the series to defend the usefulness of witchfinders and argue that the accused is a witch. This can be seen in episode 5, in which a man asks "where in the Bible does it say that?" to the conman who said a girl's eyes were wicked and so she was a witch. When the conman does not have a reply, Bannister recites a passage from the Bible to support the claim, which it then accepted as a truth.

Daemonologie explains that the reason for the common assumption that witches are women is that “that sexe is frailer then man is” and that in the Bible this is shown by the snake deceiving Eve (35). This reference to Eve also makes an appearance in the series in episode 5, as Gooch takes an apple while another accused witch’s husband is unlocking the cart for them. Gooch taking the apple causes the man to leave them inside because he considers that Gooch was stealing from him even though he dumped the apples. It is not the act of eating the apple that doomed Eve and Gooch, but the opposition to a man. Throughout the series, Gooch is presented as a clashing force against men because she questions what men tell her. This scene presents Gooch as a parallel to Eve, showing that men’s opinions on women have not changed since the events in the garden of Eden. Additionally, the husband explains the law to Gooch although he does not understand it and also refuses to question whether it makes sense. This appears to reference what is currently known as *mansplaining*, as Gooch seems to understand more than him yet is told that she does not.

In the same chapter, there is a mention of “pictures of waxe or clay: that by the roasting thereof, the persones that they beare the name of, may be continuallie melted or dried awaie by continuall sicknesse” (36), which makes its appearance in three occasions during the series. The first occasion is when Bannister’s assistant, Myers (Jessica Hynes), pulls out a witchfinder puppet, which she got from a puppet theatre, and claims Gooch used it to hex John Stearne, who they had just found dead in episode 1. However, the second instance in which the same puppet is used, is in episode 5, in which the conman pretending to be Matthew Hopkins claims that puppet is Bannister’s and pretends to be affected by it, as he claims it is a representation of him. Another instance can be found in episode 2, in which Bannister claims that the twigs Gooch is

holding are a puppet so the Cavaliers will allow him to pass. In all these instances, a puppet is used arbitrarily to claim someone is a witch with no proof other than the existence of the puppet itself. The puppet that Bannister kept as evidence against Gooch was easily used as evidence against him. This showcases and criticises how evidence could be created by interested parties and how difficult it was to disprove it once it was believed, as Bannister was imprisoned on account of the puppet.

In Book 3 Chapter 4 of the *Daemonologie*, the possessed are described as speaking in an “uncouth and hollowe voice, and al the time of his speaking, a greater motion being in his breast then in his mouth” (55). Gooch makes use of this description in episode 2 to stop the Cavalier soldiers from beating Bannister, shouting “feed me your hair” in a deep voice. Gooch’s acting mocks the beliefs of the time, as she presents herself as a caricature of what people believe a witch to be and is presumed to truly be possessed by the Cavaliers. This shows how gullible other characters are. According to *Daemonologie*, a sign of the possessed is “the speaking of sundrie languages, which the patient is knowen by them that were acquainte with him neuer to haue learned” (55). However, this does not happen in *The Witchfinder* (2022) because Gooch is only pretending to be a witch, therefore she cannot speak a language which she does not already know.

In *The Discovery of Witches* (1647), Hopkins admits that torture by sleep deprivation “was not only thought fitting, but enjoyned in Essex and Suffolke by the Magistrates” (17). But he also claims that witches did not complain and did not sleep of their own volition, even when offered the opportunity. He also says sleep deprivation was prohibited once a witch bashed her head in. However, throughout this entire passage he

does not mention whether he used the method or not. In his commentary about forcing witches to walk until their feet blistered, however, he does claim that it “could never be proved against this Discoverer to have a hand in it, or consent to it; and hath likewise been un-used by him and others, ever since the time they were kept from sleepe” (Hopkins 18). Although these methods of torture do not appear in the series, in episode 1 Gooch is waterboarded in a barrel with the expectation that she will admit to being a witch to end the torture. While the method of torture varies, its use is represented in the series due to its importance in the context of witch hunts. In *Witchfinder General* (1968), torture is much more explicit, as the audience witnesses accused witches being beaten and pricked. This creates a darker tone than in the BBC series and limits the target audience, which explains why the same methods were not represented in the comedy, which takes a more light-hearted approach.

In query 10, Hopkins once again claims that it was the witches who volunteered for the water trial, and those who were innocent sunk while witches floated. However, he claims that “it was never brought in against any of them at their tryals as any evidence” (19), but does not say why it was allowed in the first place if it was of no consequence and the innocent die, while the guilty live. Hopkins quotes King James I in his reasoning for why witches floated, saying that “witches deny their baptisme when they Covenant with the Devil [...], and therefore saith he, when they be heaved into the water, the water refuseth to receive them into her bosome [...], and suffers them to float” (19). However, in *The Witchfinder*, Bannister floats the same way as Gooch does because contrary to King James I and Matthew Hopkins, humans do float in the water. Furthermore, in *Daemonologie*, King James I claims that “it is as great a crime to condemne the innocent, as to let the guiltie escape free” (61). The water trial, by

definition, does not abide by this claim, since the innocent die. And witchfinders would accuse innocent people to earn more money. In the same way, in the BBC series, Bannister takes Gooch to trial without truly believing that she is a witch and Stearne threatens the barmaid, among other instances. Although Bannister eventually defends Gooch at her trial, it is clear that innocence is irrelevant to witchfinders. When Gooch discovers this information, she is outraged because Bannister is using her to get a promotion rather than taking her to trial because he believes she is a witch.

Hopkins mentions the familiars of a Manningtree witch as a source of his knowledge. The five familiars, which took the shape of diverse animals, were apparently shared between different witches, who had “the same Markes [...], the same number, and in the same place, and the like confessions from them of the same Imps” (12). The BBC series does not mention witchmarks and witches are presented as individuals rather than covens, but imps do make an appearance. In episode 1, Bannister claims Gooch’s chicken, called Brown Peter, is an imp, “a demon in animal form approaching [her] dwelling to suckle at [her] teat”, and they then show a woman shoving a Bible towards the animal while telling it to leave. This scene is comical because the audience is aware that the chicken is just an animal and therefore the Bible will have no effect on it. However, women were supposed to exist in the domestic sphere and the care of animals required physical labour, which could be seen as Gooch straying from her assigned post. Therefore, her supposed relationship with the chicken would mark her as an outsider. However, in episode 5, after Bannister has consumed the drugged bread, he believes a horse is talking to him, which is a hint towards an imp. Although he realises something is wrong, there are no consequences for him and nobody accuses the horse of being his

imp, nor does he think the horse is his imp. As a man, he is not judged the same way Gooch is.

In query 11 in *The Discovery of Witches*, Hopkins claims that most confessions are not admitted, as the witch must confess without being tortured or promised to be able to leave, the confession must be considered honest and the interrogator cannot create the confession for the accused. There are various instances of the opposite in the series, such as Gooch saying “but no, I’m the witch” sarcastically in episode 1 and the magistrate accepting it as a confession, which shows how willing they are to take words out of context. In episode 2, the rival witchfinder Hebble (Daniel Rigby) says “nobody wants to tell us until we make them want to tell us” and threatens to accuse a child of killing John Stearne if he does not claim to have witnessed what he wants. It is clear by this that the series does not consider Hopkins’ claims truthful, as in his book he wrote what he wanted others to believe, but not necessarily the truth.

Much of the BBC series exaggerates or simply shows traits and methods to condemn witches featured in *Daemonologie* (1597) and *The Discovery of Witches* (1647) to show the ridiculousness and arbitrariness of said trials. This can be seen in how Bannister, the main witchfinder character, floats in the water or talks to a horse while drugged, which in a trial would have been an indication that he was a witch. As well as for humour purposes, this is reminiscent of the myth that Hopkins himself died executed as a witch.

2.1.2 The Present

While the past defined the beliefs that could be included in the series, it was the present that determined how those beliefs would be treated. According to Draper, comedy exposes faults so that “we may become fitter for society” (213), therefore it is no coincidence that the chosen topics are those that are still relevant in the present.

Hoak claims that “the extraordinary concurrence of various crises (inflation, disease, war) in the post-Reformation era (1550-1650) created the social conditions of cultural fear. Since the devil could be blamed for these woes, it remained merely to identify his human agents” (1273). At the time of production of *The Witchfinder*, Brexit was still changing the country, causing turmoil as the country politically separated from mainland Europe and the Republic of Ireland. The separation from Europe also caused people to look inward, putting the spotlight on their own historical figures and events. Paired with turmoil, this would put interest onto local witchfinder Matthew Hopkins.

As a series from 2022, the present undoubtedly influences the content of the story that is told. One aspect that is especially relevant today and that has found its way into the series is the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the series was proposed before the pandemic and a plague did exist on-and-off during the 1600s, there are elements of the plague plot in episode 2 that are reminiscent of 2020. This is made possible because filming did not take place until 2021, allowing for changes to be made in that time (FTIA). When Gooch sneezes due to allergies, the woman in the village they want to go through says that they “lost two dozen souls to the plague last March”. Although it is a light reference, the pandemic of 2020 became widespread in Europe in March, so the choice of month was likely influenced by recent events. Additionally, in England,

households could form a bubble with one other household, which allowed them to interact with each other while limiting contact with others. This is also referenced when the woman who denies Gooch entry says that she stayed with her sister, but that “a certain someone was a little less discerning about who he let in than perhaps [she] would have been”. This suggests that he allowed someone inside when he was not allowed due to restrictions.

The most important contemporary influences, however, are ideological. In episode 2, Bannister claims witchfinders are “[men] of reason. Identifying witchery on the basis of evidence, unswayed by interest or sentiment”. This is amusing because contemporary audiences know this claim is not true. Gooch is the character who voices these thoughts by asking about how they are paid, because witchfinders get paid based on how many witches they find, not for a workday. Gooch voices concerns about corruption, but Bannister dismisses it by telling her not to “wonder. That is the system”. Gooch is expected to not question the established order even though reason is about questioning, but she does so anyway. This aspect of Gooch’s personality is very contemporary and cannot be found in *Witchfinder General* (1968) in which the lead female character, Sara, plays a much more submissive role and barely speaks.

Another more prominent contemporary aspect is female autonomy and gender roles. As it is set in the 1600s, most characters follow their assigned gender roles and women are generally more submissive. In Daisy May Cooper’s words, “men are bastards” (“Gender Politics of the 1600s”). However, women’s submissiveness does not apply to Gooch’s character, who embodies contemporary audiences and challenges the beliefs of that time. Gooch is described as “an inquisitive, uncouth woman [with the] ability to prick

[Bannister's] pomposity and ask uncomfortable questions" ("The Witchfinder"). Due to her character, in episode 1 a woman claims Gooch is a witch because "there's something not right about the way [Gooch] is unmarried". Unmarried women were historically more likely to be accused of witchcraft and the interaction highlights the ridiculousness of it. Gooch is also often sceptical over many nonsensical aspects of witch-finding, being the main way in which criticism is delivered. In episode 3, Gooch notes that if women "meet in the woods, must be a coven. Pick flowers, she's making a potion. Swim in a river, why does she float?". Although she is dismissed as not understanding the world, in part because she cannot read and in part because she is a woman, she questions everything that she realises does not make sense. She also challenges those who claim they are correct because they are men and, therefore, know more than her. And she proves how smart she is in episode 3, when Bannister says that "people are frightened. They think the devil walks amongst them! They want certainty. Now, anyone with half a brain would notice that, and would try and fit in, would try and be like other people... but not you" and realises that he does not believe she is a witch. However, despite being deemed inferior by men during the entire series, in episode 6, Gooch tricks Hopkins, the lawyer, into the jail cell, where the women he wanted to put on trial attack him. This ending in the BBC series has a parallel in *Witchfinder General* (1968), in which Hopkins (Vincent Price) tortures Sara (Hilary Heath) in front of Richard (Ian Ogilvy), and ultimately Richard kills him. This similarity is likely due to the myth that Hopkins "at last was hoist with his own petard, and was himself hanged in 1647 as a wizard" ("Witchcraft" *The British Medical Journal* 701). Although there is no evidence that this happened, the claim was popular enough that Hopkins suffers a poetic demise in both pieces. The distinctiveness of the BBC series is that Gooch and the other accused women are active participants in dealing with Hopkins, while in *Witchfinder*

General (1968) Richard is the male hero who avenges the harm done to Sara, the damsel in distress. *The Witchfinder* (2022) allows the female victims to take justice into their own hands, a small difference that highlights the disparity of female autonomy in both times, as Gooch and the other accused witches have agency of their own, that is, they do not depend on a man.

Continuing with gender issues, in episode 1 Bannister says that he would love a trial involving dead children instead of “he said, she said” domestic quarrels. This hints at the #MeToo movement and cases of domestic abuse, commonly known as “he said, she said” cases due to the absence of hard evidence in many cases and the reliance on contrary testimonies. This draws a parallel between witch hunts and domestic violence, in which the victims are also predominantly women.

The present also influences the tone of the series. *The Witchfinder* (2022) is a comedy, even though it deals with a serious topic. As Tim Key says, “it’s funny. But only because we’re not living in it, we’re making a show about it” (“The Witchfinder”). Jessica Hynes adds that “that’s the great fun in the show, it’s just poking fun at the pomposity of these characters” (“Gender Politics of the 1600s”). Gooch is the tool through which the humour surrounding the witchfinders is shown. She questions their actions, often with a matter-of-fact tone that shows the ridiculousness of the other characters. However, Dedham Vale effectively exemplifies the ability of the Gibbons brothers to turn a dark event into a humorous one. In episode 3, Gooch and Bannister enter Dedham Vale, a comedic exaggeration of the witch trials. Although it is an exaggeration, it does show the paranoia at the time. Everyone in the town is a suspect and killed, leading to hundreds of bodies covering every possible surface in the town.

Much of the humour surrounding this town relies on dramatic irony, as Bannister does not see the bodies even when they are obvious to the audience because the people that live there seem charming.

2.2 Matthew Hopkins as three characters

The BBC series is distinctive due to its tone and approach to important topics through a contemporary point of view. However, it also stands out in its representation of Matthew Hopkins. The 1968 film creates a one-dimensional character that can be summarised as the villain. However, *The Witchfinder* (2022) does not limit itself to one character, as it deconstructs the historical person and questions him from the perspective of the 21st century. Gaskill claimed that “the reality of the witchfinders’ mental world is all the more difficult to grasp because they themselves struggled with it” (“The Pursuit” 1079). This accounts for the fragmentation of the historical figure of Matthew Hopkins in the series, as he is divided into three different characters. As a named character he only appears in the last episode of the series. However, he is mentioned by name all throughout, which shows his importance in the witch-finding world. Gideon Bannister is the amateur witchfinder who has knowledge of all the relevant Bible verses and handbooks on witchcraft, and wants to excel in his chosen career, but is still at a crossroads regarding who he will become. Dennis, the man who pretends to be Hopkins, is a conman whose only concern is money and is happy to kill innocent women for it, representing that aspect of Hopkins concerned with earning money. And the last Hopkins character is Matthew Hopkins himself, who is represented as a lawyer with a flair for the dramatic, rather than a true witchfinder.

2.2.1 The Witchfinder: Gideon Bannister

Gideon Bannister is a beginner witchfinder who is very eager to please the lawyer Matthew Hopkins and his right-hand man, Stearne, to improve his career. He considers them role models and is offended when Hebble suggests that Stearne uses drugs to get confessions out of the accused because he believes he has no reason to resort to that. However, he is disillusioned when he discovers that Stearne did do it. He also continuously promises Gooch a fair trial at the Assizes because he believes that she will have one, but is shocked to find that Hopkins does not care about innocence or guilt. Throughout the series, Bannister struggles with what he believes witchfinders are and what they truly are. This, combined with his flourishing relationship with Gooch, makes him question his actions as a witchfinder and ultimately save Gooch. Bannister is also shown failing the tests that are used on accused witches, such as floating on water or having a conversation with an animal. This blurs the line between witch and witchfinder, presenting them both as human. In this way, Bannister represents the more humanised side of Hopkins, as it is unlikely that Hopkins never had doubts about his convictions, as any person would have second thoughts about sending someone to their death (Gaskill, "The Pursuit" 1079). Bannister blindly trusts a system that is corrupt, but ultimately, he chooses humanity.

2.2.2 The Conman: Dennis

Conmen pretending to be witchfinders were not unheard of, and witchfinders who inflated the number of accused for money was not either. A Scottish man tried thirty women in Newcastle, encouraging neighbours to accuse each other, and earned 540 shillings for the twenty-seven he was able to prove were witches by prickling (Neill 210). According to the Bank of England's converter, 540 shillings would be worth

approximately 3,800 pounds today. Of the three that survived, one did so due to lieutenant colonel Hobson, who claimed she was not a witch and demanded that she be pricked again in full view, which resulted in blood flowing out and her being cleared as a witch (Neill 210-1). Neill states that “doubtless a substantial bribe to the operator would, in many cases, secure immunity from the fatal charge of witchcraft”, which is likely how the remaining two accused women were acquitted. However, since most of the accused witches were poor, bribery was not an option for many.

In his *The Discovery of Witches* (1647), Hopkins claims that he does not extort money from the places he travels to, as “he never went anywhere without being called for. He never claimed anyone was a witch until the trial and confession. He is paid 20 pounds per town and keeps 3 horses, sometimes staying there a week” (26). That amount is about 3,000 pounds in today’s currency according to a Bank of England converter. Having to answer a question about whether he was extorting people suggests that it was a common enough perception about his work. Therefore, in the series this makes its appearance by producing a character that represents this aspect of Hopkins.

This conman character is Dennis, who pretends to be Matthew Hopkins along with his partner Cecil (Karl Theobald), who plays Stearne. It is interesting that he pretends to be the Witchfinder General, a household name that was feared and respected. Although using Hopkins’ name diminishes the likelihood of being questioned in regards to being a witchfinder, he runs the risk of being recognised as an imposter by anyone who has seen the real Hopkins. This conman lacks Bannister’s knowledge of the Bible, not being able to quote the passage in which vacant eyes are mentioned, but he buys time by repeating the question and giving non-answers. This mimics *The Discovery of Witches*

(1647), in which Hopkins occasionally avoids the question through repetition and deviating from the question.

The fake Hopkins claims that “only by taking them all to trial can we purge this town of witchery” as his reason for asking the town to accuse as many people as possible. However, he obtains confessions by drugging the bread they feed the accused, masquerading the bread as an act of humanity. However, Bannister is able to see through the act and is able to predict what Dennis’ next move is, saying that he “cannot believe that witchfinders still peddle this shit”, implying that he is aware that witchfinders inflated their rates. It is interesting to note that the fake Hopkins asks for fifteen shillings to take five witches to trial, which according to the Bank of England is approximately 100 pounds. This is a much lower figure than any historical witchfinder is noted to have been paid, but in the series it is still regarded as a lot of money. Although for a poor town it was a substantial amount, the lower fee stands out. However, for a conman who does not do the advertised job, this would be a large fee. Instead of taking the witches to the Assizes as said, Dennis and Cecil imply that they kill the women in towns afraid of witchcraft. This shows that they have no remorse and that their only concern is money, highlighting the aspect of Hopkins that does the job for the large pay.

2.2.3 The Lawyer: Matthew Hopkins

Before he became the Witchfinder General, the historical Matthew Hopkins was a lawyer. This was useful to him in trials, as he had the training and experience necessary to argue his case that someone was a witch. And trials were an important part of witch

finding, as “a lack of trials promoted the feeling that witchcraft was not a problem, just as big trials advertised the opposite” (Gaskill, “The Pursuit” 1082). Therefore, Hopkins had a vested interest in successful trials.

Although Matthew Hopkins is mentioned throughout the series, he does not appear as a named character until the last episode. During Gooch’s trial the lawyer Matthew Hopkins mentions that they are at the “height of human enlightenment”, which is historically accurate. However, the fact takes a humorous turn when he says that if anything cannot be explained it is witchcraft. As a lawyer, it stands to reason that Hopkins would be a man of reason, due to his education. However, the historical Matthew Hopkins left his job as a lawyer to become a witchfinder, although there is clearly no physical evidence that witches exist.

The lawyer Hopkins is presented in a theatrical manner. He makes grand entrances, such as entering the court by walking down an entire hallway with loud shoes. He makes it as dramatic as possible, probably to make the trial entertaining and keep witch finding alive. This show-like character represents the part of the historical Matthew Hopkins that made himself a household name, wrote a book about witch-finding and influenced subsequent witchfinders. He was, in a way, a celebrity of his time.

3. Conclusion

All creative products are influenced by the past and their present. The BBC series *The Witchfinder* (2022) makes use of the most important British historical texts about witchcraft, King James I’s *Daemonologie* (1597) and Matthew Hopkins’ *The Discovery*

of *Witches* (1647), to criticise the absurdity of the beliefs written in them. In the case of *The Witchfinder* (2022), the influence of the present created a series that vastly differs from *Witchfinder General* (1968), a previous film that had similar points but focused on the horror of the events. The tone in which the BBC series deals with a massacre is light-hearted, allowing for it to reach a wider audience. It is also a product of its time due to the agency that it awards women. This is shown through the character of Gooch, who is an active participant in all the events and also questions the same aspects of the series that the audience questions. Moreover, it allows for the exploration of the British historical figure of Matthew Hopkins from a contemporary perspective, as a multifaceted living being who had doubts and desires that caused conflict within himself. This analysis is made possible through his fragmentation into three different characters: a witchfinder with doubts, a conman whose only concern is money, and a showman who seeks fame. In the series, Hopkins is a human being who was corrupted by ambition, but who could have become someone else given the right circumstances. In spite of the series' unique approach to local history and representation of Matthew Hopkins, *The Witchfinder's* (2022) cancellation shows that this concept was not as popular as a fantasy series with a similar premise would have likely been. However, comedy made it possible to broach subjects and criticise the witchfinder's handbooks in a way that any other genre would have been unable to, approaching Matthew Hopkins and his treatment of women from a contemporary perspective that underlines both women's agency and Hopkins' complexity.

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