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Cogent Arts & Humanities (2016), 3: 1147403



Received: 19 October 2015
Accepted: 25 January 2016
Published: 17 February 2016

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Female body—male body: The valiant Hungarian women of Eger and Szigetvár from the 16th century in historiography, literature, and art

Julia Papp^{1*}

Abstract: The question of whether the characteristics of the genders are determined by anatomical, biological, or physiological factors or influenced by society and culture (or perhaps a mixture of the two), in other words whether the masculine and feminine personality traits are inherent or they are shaped by our education and the expectations of our society, is still debated in psychology, sociology, anthropology or, for example, among the researchers of the anatomy of the male and female brains. Throughout history, the theological, philosophical, and historiographical schools had different beliefs about whether the differences or the similarities between the genders are more significant. Both sides used biblical (Old Testament) texts to prove their opinion: that Eve was made from Adam's rib is proof of the secondary role of women, however, the fact that humans (both male and female) were created in the image and likeness of God means that they are inherently equal. The egalitarian philosophy of the Age of Enlightenment also denied the psychological differences between men and women, claiming that the soul has no gender.

Subjects: Cultural Sexuality; European History; Literary History; Military & Naval History; Social History of Art; Women's & Gender history

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Júlia Papp, art historian, research fellow Awarded University Doctor's Degree *summa cum laude* in 1989 followed by PhD Graduation in 1997. Since 2009 works in the Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Art History.

2007: Publication of a book on the beginnings of artwork photography in Hungary.

During the computer cataloguing of Engraving Collection of the University Library of Budapest discovered 12 vintage photographs by Roger Fenton, the pioneer of English photography. (Photographs of Roger Fenton—Photographs Rediscovered. Exhibition in the University Library of Eötvös Loránd University. Budapest, 2008.)

2012: Oeuvre catalogue of Johann Blaschke (1770—1833), a book illustrator in the Austrian Empire.

2014: curator of the exhibition in the Petőfi Literary Museum in Budapest titled Chapters from the history of the education of Hungarian women. Working as editor on the handbook which presents Hungarian fine arts in the 19th century.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The paper presents the literary and historical mentions of Hungarian women who fought in battle against the Ottomans in the 16th century both in Eger in 1522 and in Szigetvár in 1566. They are the most well-known Hungarian examples of warrior women, a trope that can be traced back to biblical, mythological and classical historical sources. While the story of the women fighting in Eger shows up first in the works of foreign historiographers, the women of Szigetvár based on a Hungarian epic poem made soon after the siege, appeared first in Hungarian, and later in Italian humanist poetry and historiography. The motif was also popular in Hungarian art during the 19th century. The paper casts light on how the patriarchal society not only accepted but also praised the women's cruelty and will to fight in extreme circumstances, even though these attributes were usually condemned. The trope of female heroism is an important part of modern gender studies.

Keywords: warrior woman; Hungary; 16th century; role reversal; gender studies; historiography; literature; art

1. Introduction

In a study written by Erich Fromm titled *Man-Woman* (published in 1951), he emphasizes that even though the biological differences between the two sexes lead to differences in their personalities which cannot be ignored, these are significantly influenced and altered by societal factors, meaning that the characteristics of the men and women of a given society are defined by which roles they are told to fulfill, their place in society, and the expectations regarding their behavior. The field of gender studies, which has its origins in the feminist philosophy of the last third of the 20th century, focuses more on societal and cultural influences than on biological factors, trying to move away from those approaches which either consider only men or only women, instead examining the complex history of not only the relations between genders but also of gender identities.

This study—focusing on the 16–17th centuries—wishes to answer the question of how much the behavior of women was allowed to deviate from the socially expected ways in situations different from the normal (for example, during a war where their lives and freedom was directly threatened), how these circumstances temporarily altered the societal expectations, and how this led to women being allowed to act in certain masculine ways. It must be emphasized that during this time gender roles were much stronger and stricter; therefore, it happened less often and was less accepted to behave unlike expected from one's gender than in the period starting from the beginning of the 20th century up to now. Crossing the borders between the genders could be accepted only in extreme circumstances. In the early modern period, a woman wearing men's clothes meant that they were basically seen as having a male body and a male identity the way we define them today. For example, in Shakespeare's plays the women who are dressed like men are treated as men by the other characters, while nowadays a short-haired woman wearing pants and a necktie could only be seen as a woman.

The authors of the descriptions in this study who wrote about the women participating in the war against the Ottomans in the 16–17th centuries, using weapons and occasionally wearing armor—which at that time meant men's clothes—emphasized how these women abandoned some of their characteristics which were considered to be traditionally feminine, such as being controlled by their emotions and thus being unable to fight, instead they ignored their grief, sorrow, and fear during the battle. Participating in the public sphere at least on a micro level, performing masculine tasks, such as fighting with weapons or encouraging and inspiring their fellow soldiers also linked them to the world of men. Of course, it must be emphasized that in these examples we are not talking about what is today known as a transgender identity, but rather about a temporary alteration of one's appearance and behavior in extreme circumstances in ways that go against the gendered expectations of society.

The importance of the texts shown later is increased by the fact that even though until the 19th century the women appearing in historiographical works were almost exclusively rulers, famous or infamous women, the main characters of the descriptions in this study were common women who became part of the chronicles and historiographical texts not because of their rank or their relationship with a famous man, but in their own right, because of their own deeds. These texts contrasted the misogyny often appearing in European historiography, theology (for example in the witch-hunts), and literature, since the bravery, determination, and stalwartness of the women fighting in a battle for a noble goal was often shown by the (male) authors to be not only an example for the men fighting alongside them, but their deeds are also encouraging the men and women of the coming generations to be patriotic and loyal.

Even though in the Middle Ages and early modern period the Old Testament prohibition of women wearing men's clothes was still very much alive, in some circumstances society not only tolerated but actually encouraged the female body to temporarily become a male body both in function and

appearance. Women who fought for their countries in men's clothes and armor were a peculiar case of such a role reversal. The subject of this study, the topos of valiant Hungarian women from the 16th century is one of the examples.

Recently, researchers of the history of gender have focused their attention on how women as a gender were historically depicted in literature,¹ arts and philosophy, and how women's role in society was determined.² They highlighted that the "anthropology" of women, such as their qualities and characteristics, were first examined in detail in Western Europe during the 15th century. Even though in these tractates, which were often based on the theories of antique philosophers, most typically Plato, we can find both views that emphasized the subordination of women and views that claimed that the two genders were essentially the same, the authors at that time did not fundamentally question the traditional gender roles.³ But in the medieval and early modern period there are examples of real and fictional crossing of gender boundaries and role reversals.⁴ For example, it was accepted when female saints dressed in men's clothes to protect their chastity. But cross-dressing in medieval society, even in extreme circumstances, was not indisputably accepted; one of the theological arguments against Jeanne d'Arc was that she dressed in clothing and armor typically worn by men, which was forbidden by the Bible.⁵

The canon of the strong warrior women was developed in Western Europe during the 14th–15th centuries. The female version of the Nine Worthies in literature and arts was called the Nine Worthy Women (*Les Neuf Preuses*). It was a less standard, occasionally varying list of names first primarily containing ancient heroines from the Theban Cycle or amazon queens (Sinope, Lampeto, Penthesilea) and a Scythian empress called Tomyris,⁶ who defeated Cyrus the Great. In the woodcut series by Hans Burgkmair from the 16th century, there are depictions of three Pagan, three Biblical (Esther, Judith, Jahel), and three Christian "heroines," one of whom was St. Elisabeth of Hungary.⁷ The amazons were important participants in the medieval trope of strong, valiant women, together with the biblical female figures who fulfilled God's will, and thus an unequivocally positive attitude was maintained towards them. However, the opinion about the amazons was ambivalent partly because their actions and habits contradicted the accepted patterns of female behavior, and thus opposed the order of the world created by God. The disdain was based on the notion of the cruel and immoral, promiscuous amazons, though a parallel trend also existed, which has been passed down to us in the Troy and Alexander Romances (*Alexanderroman*), and presented the characters of the brave Penthesilea with her virgin sisters in arms who gave help to Troy, the amazon queen Thalestris or the valiant and virtuous Camilla of the Volsci in the *Aeneid* the Latin equivalent of the Greek Penthesilea, whom Enea Silvio Piccolomini compared to Jeanne d'Arc.⁸

Though women in the Renaissance played a more significant role in the intellectual and political life than previously, many authors had the opinion that they could only exceptionally become exemplary heroines, "viragoes" comparable to men. Most of these cases involved crossing the border between the two genders, which could manifest in wearing men's clothing, accomplishing brave deeds and having traits typically attributed to men; virtues like extraordinary physical or mental strength, skills to exercise power.⁹ The strong, warlike woman (*femme forte*) was an important type of the exemplary woman. There were several exhibitions and publications that presented pictorial and textual depictions of this ideal.¹⁰ Such exhibitions were organized at the Kunstmuseum in Dusseldorf in 1995, at the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt titled *Die Galerie der Starken Frauen* in 1996,¹¹ and at the Klingenmuseum in Solingen titled *Schwert in Frauenhand*.¹² The exhibition in 1995 displayed French and Italian paintings, engravings and drawings from the 17th century and presented mythological, biblical, legendary, and historical heroines and queens.

In the last quarter of the 16th century during the time of the Counter-Reformation, the topos of the *femme forte*, which had been part of the Marian iconography, became more nuanced: the strong women¹³ depicted in the engravings and paintings became antique goddesses, amazons, and other characters from legends and history. They defended their virtue or faith and personified marital fidelity, patriotism, perseverance, and sacrifice.¹⁴ Illustrated moral philosophical tractates from the

17th century¹⁵ were also displayed at the exhibition, which presented the exemplary lives of noted women, among them some strong ones, and occasionally drew parallels between the deeds of heroic men and famed women.¹⁶

2. Women in Hungarian literature in the 16th–17th centuries

Similarly, the opinions about the qualities and abilities of women in Hungary in the previous centuries often moved between extremes. The views that emphasized the unpredictable nature and inherently wicked character of women were supported by biblical traditions (remember the role of Eve in the original sin). At the same time, the appreciative attitudes toward women also had religious roots (the cult of the Virgin Mary, the respect of the female saints). *The Evil Women*, written by Kristof Armbrust (Ormprust) around 1550, is an early Hungarian example of the negative opinions written about women.¹⁷ Another “misogynous” text published in Lőcse in 1653 pretended to be an educational book, a mirror for women in which the author emphasized the erroneous ways of women (laziness, gluttony, hypocrisy), and compared them to animals (pigs, snakes, donkeys, weasels, dragons) though he used earlier works as sources.¹⁸

On the other hand, writings that emphasized the positive characteristics of women also became popular during the revival of the antique literary and artistic traditions beginning in the Renaissance period, which mentioned famous antique exemplary women to be considered models. Using the story of the Greek historian Plutarch, Miklós Bogáti Fazekas published his work *Szép História. Az tökéletes Asszony állatokról... (On the Perfect Women)* in Kolozsvár in 1577. In another writing titled *Aspasia asszony dolga és az jó erkölcsű asszonyoknak tüköre (Lady Aspasia's Deed and the Mirror of Virtuous Women)* (1587), which was published in the same town in 1591, he told the story of Aspasia, the lover of the Persian king Cyrus.

Some Hungarian authors also regarded female courage and heroism as valuable attributes. István Kolosi Török, a Unitarian minister in the 17th century, praised women in several poems and gave many biblical and antique examples of female virtues and mentioned the valiance of women, which can be as important for one's country as the bravery of men.¹⁹ Kristóf Paskó praised female heroism in his poem in 1662 about the siege of the Transylvanian town Nagyvárad, adopting the topos of the amazons from Greek mythology. He writes that the women of Nagyvárad helped the male defenders when they had become exhausted. One of the women whose left breast was ripped off by a cannonball dressed the wound with her shawl then returned to the fight and killed a valiant bey with her dagger. The author compared the women of Nagyvárad to the glorious Penthesilea and her fellow warrior women.²⁰

3. The valiant women at the siege of Eger (1552)

The literary mentions and artistic depictions of the valiant Hungarian woman first appear during the Middle Ages. Part of the legend of Saint Ladislaus I, a Hungarian king who lived in the 11th century, is the brave girl who wounded a Cuman warrior fighting against Ladislaus in both his leg and neck in the Battle of Kerlés in 1068. The scene is depicted in several murals from the Middle Ages. In the Unitarian church of Homoródkarácsonyfalva, (today part of Romania) is a mural made in the 14th–15th centuries, which shows the girl holding a halbert and a sword.

The valiant Hungarian warrior woman was also a popular theme in Western European historiography and literature. It was undoubtedly connected to the trope called *Propugnaculum et antemurale Christianitatis*, that is the “shield and bastion of Christianity,” which in the European public consciousness was related to Hungarians fighting against the Ottomans since the middle of the 16th century. The sufferings of the country, personified as a female figure called Hungaria, at the hands of the pagan Ottomans, and the heroism of the Hungarian soldiers fighting against the Turks spread thanks to innumerable pamphlets, duplicated graphic works, and reports of ambassadors, partially in hopes of gaining financial and military support for the war against the Ottomans.²¹

Even though several Hungarian literary and historical works have commemorated the victory of Eger in 1552 ever since the year of the siege, during which a small group of Hungarian defenders successfully repelled the attacks of the vast Ottoman army, the story of the women of Eger appears first in the works of foreign historiographers. The Italian historiographer reporting on the Ottoman siege of Eger in 1552, Ascanio Centorio degli Hortensi presented two episodes to illustrate the valiance and heroism of the women of Eger.²² The author emphasizes the heroic deeds of two of the women fighting like lionesses. One young girl, whose mother had just died from being hit by a huge rock, instead of crying killed two Turks with the blood-soaked rock, then wounded several more with her sword. Another woman was asked by her mother to mourn for her husband who had been killed in battle, but the woman said that there is no time to grieve while her husband has yet to be avenged. She killed three Ottomans, and only then did she pay her last respect to her husband. During the description of the deeds of the valiant women of Eger, Centorio mentioned as an analogy, therefore he must have known it well, the legend of the ancient Greek amazons and the Spartan women defending their city. Similarly, his German contemporary, the humanist Melchior Junius from Wittenberg, compared in his Cicero publication the bravery of the women fighting during the siege of Eger to the heroism of the Spartan women described by Pausanias.²³

By describing the heroic deeds of the women of Eger for half of the complete siege report, and the last sentence of the description claiming that their heroism “shows everyone” the strength of patriotism, Centorio put such a significant emphasis on them that their story could become an exemplum. In Boccaccio’s mentioned collection of women’s bibliography, the enlarged edition made in 1596 by Francesco Serdonati, the chapter titled *Donne Vngare* is about the heroic deeds of the two women of Eger. It is after the mention of the valiant Hungarian woman who cuts off the heads of two Turks with one swipe of her scythe during the siege of Székesfehérvár in 1543.²⁴

It also contributed to the foreign spread of the stories about the valiant women of Eger that they were in the popular publication of Hieronymus Ortelius (Oertl) of Augsburg in the 17th century, illustrated with maps and engravings.²⁵ The heroic deeds of the two amazons of Eger can also be read in several foreign historical works²⁶ and they also appeared in rhetorical literature too.²⁷ Johann von Hellenbach of Körmöcbánya compared the heroism of the women of Eger to the men’s in his lecture called *Oratio pro Hungarica* at the Wittenberg Academy in 1656.²⁸

4. The valiant women at the siege of Szigetvár (1566) in Hungarian historiography

The siege and capture of the fortress of Szigetvár by the Ottomans got the greatest international attention during the Ottoman–Hungarian Wars in the 16th century besides the earlier capture of the city of Buda in 1541 and the successful defense of the castle of Eger. Suleiman the Magnificent, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire started the siege of Szigetvár in the August of 1566; the fortress was defended by a small garrison under the command of Miklós Zrínyi. The old Sultan died at dawn on September 6 but the Turkish troops continued the siege. Zrínyi and his remaining soldiers emerged from the burning fortress in a final sortie and died a heroic death fighting the Turks. Miklós Zrínyi, who was later referred to as the Hungarian Leonidas, became not only a Croatian and Hungarian hero who was a defender of European civilization but his cult was also kept alive by the Hapsburg Empire; his self-sacrificing heroism was published in a collection of biographies by the Austrian historian Joseph von Hormayr at the beginning of the 19th century.²⁹

A historical song (rhyme chronicle, lay) written in Hungarian of *the Loss of Szigetvár* created by an anonymous author in the year of the fall of the fortress (1566) mentions that the valiant soldiers killed their wives and brides or had them killed by their friends before the last siege to prevent their falling into the hands of the pagans. A young soldier, who had married a short while before, couldn’t bring himself to kill his wife so he asked his friend to commit the terrible deed for him. Because of the wife’s begging, the friend allowed her to talk to her husband one last time. She asked him to let her fight against the pagans rather than be killed by her own husband. She talks about her wish to accept the danger just like the men do: “If I don’t fight, kill me, and don’t call me your wife either,” she says. The husband, hearing the woman’s arguments, gave her armor, weapon, and a horse so they

can fight together against the Ottomans. The author describes in detail the bravery of the woman fighting against the Turks, who wanted to capture her alive no matter what. After she killed several Ottomans, she died a heroic death with her husband.

The bravery of the woman fighting in Szigetvár in men's clothes was also immortalized by the Transylvanian Saxon writer Christian Schesaeus in his main work titled *Ruina Pannonica (Pannonische Trümmer, Ruins of Pannonia)*, certain parts of which were published in 1571.³⁰ The educated humanist writer gave a detailed description of the motives behind the desperate act of the soldiers: they killed their wives and fiancées because they did not want them to be dishonored by the Turks, or, which was considered even more important, to prevent them converting from their Christian faith to the superstitious religion of the pagans after their capture. Schesaeus details the woman's reproaches to her husband: at their engagement and wedding ceremony he promised to protect her life from all, even at the cost of his own, yet now he is the one who wants to slaughter her like an animal while "forgetting faith and throwing heroic virtue away." She asks her husband to give her a sword, a helm, an armor and a horse so she can fight as his comrade against the Ottomans:

"Let me throw my life away daringly for heroic glory,
And stand against the storm of peril on the battlefield."

The husband fulfills her request and the armored wife bravely attacks the enemy, leading her husband and the other warriors and killing many Turks before her heroic death.

In Schesaeus' story, the woman becomes the main character and the hero, who not only fights alongside the men but charges into battle before them. Not just her bravery and fighting spirit but her motivation too is connected to masculinity: she accepts death for the glory of battle. Part of her heroism is modesty and purity, an important element of the trope of strong women: wanting to protect her virtue and her fidelity to her husband even at the cost of her own life. Her way of achieving it, however, is completely masculine.

The motif of the valiant woman of Szigetvár can also be found in the album titled *De Sigetho, Hungariae propugnaculo*, written in Latin and published in Wittenberg in 1587, which contains writings and poems: its Hungarian compilers wanted to immortalize and popularize the patriotism and bravery of Miklós Zrínyi and the heroes of Szigetvár in other countries. The writers of the late humanist publication were from different nationalities (Hungarian, Slovakian, Croatian, and German) and religions, among them the Christian Schesaeus who included the story of the valiant woman of Szigetvár in his epic poem. In the album about Zrínyi, the story of the heroic deed of the valiant woman of Szigetvár is written by the famous historiographer Ferenc Forgách. Even though Schesaeus had good relations with the Forgách family since he partially dedicated his work titled *Ruina Pannonica* to Ferenc Forgách, there are no certain data about whether they borrowed the motif from each other or from another source, perhaps from the previously mentioned anonymous writer's poem, (written in Hungarian). Nevertheless, the fact that Forgách left out the episodic parts based on oral tradition (among them the story of the valiant woman of Szigetvár) of his long historical summarizing work shows his critical approach.

Giovanni Michele Bruto, who was born in Venice, worked in Transylvania and Poland as the court historiographer of István Báthory in 1570–80. Even though his manuscript, describing the history of Hungary, survived only the first part dealing with the events until 1552, the study of the sources showed that in the lost part was the story of the valiant woman of Szigetvár too. Its description is known from a Transylvanian historical work from the 17th century in which the source of the scene is given as Bruto's at the time not yet destroyed manuscript.³¹ If we compare Bruto's description with the texts of the anonymous chronicler, Ferenc Forgách and Schesaeus, we can see not only the similarity of the main motif but also an important difference: while in the other stories there is one valiant woman who fights in men's clothes with her husband against the Ottomans, in Bruto's work

there are several noble women, among them many mothers. It is likely that Bruto took the motif of the warrior woman of Szigetvár either from the anonymous chronicler, Forgách or Schesaeus, however, the Italian historiographer changed the story. Bruto likely used antique authors' works to expand the scene, such as the texts of Titus Livius or Plutarch about the Battle of Vercellae in 101 BC between the Germanic tribe of Cimbri and the Romans, during which the Cimbri women killed their children, so they won't become slaves of the attacking Romans and then killed themselves. Another possible antique source is the speech of Elazar at Masada in AD 74 in Josephus Flavius's work titled *Bellum Iudaicum*, in which Elazar encourages the defenders to kill their wives, children, and themselves, so they can die as free men. Some rhetoric phrases of Brutus' description, however, such as the desperate and reproachful questions of the wives to their husbands, are similar to Schesaeus' epic.

A scene resembling the story of the woman of Szigetvár is shown in the Roman marble group called "Gaul Killing Himself and His Wife," which is now in the Museo Nazionale di Roma, and depicts a Gaul warrior killing his wife with his sword before committing suicide. This motif wasn't unknown in Hungarian history either: Mihály Dobozi—according to the historiographer Miklós Istvánffy –, tried to flee with his wife from the Ottomans on horseback after the Battle of Mohács in 1526, which ended with the catastrophic defeat of the Hungarian army. When he realized that their pursuers will undoubtedly reach them, he stabbed his beloved wife so she won't be captured by the enemy before he fought against the Turks until his heroic death.

The motif of the brave warrior woman, though significantly altered, is also part of the epic about the siege of Szigetvár titled *Obsidio Szigetiana*, which was written in Hungarian by Miklós Zrínyi, the great-grandchild of the hero of Szigetvár, and first printed in 1651. One character's wife, here given a name which is Borbála, goes to the Turkish camp dressed in armor and with a weapon to rescue her husband.

5. The valiant women at the siege of Szigetvár in European historiography (17th–19th centuries)

The story of the valiant woman of Szigetvár soon became part of foreign historiography and literature too. The story in the album about Zrínyi by Ferenc Forgách, was used almost verbatim in Nicolaus Reusner's work, which was written in Latin and published in 1603.³² This was the source of a chronicle in Nuremberg in 1664, which contained not only the Latin text but also its German translation.³³

The story of the valiant woman of Szigetvár is also part of a collection of women's biography by the Jesuit Pierre Le Moyne, published in Paris in the middle of the 17th century and dedicated to Anne of Austria who ruled as regent for her underage son, Louis XIV of France.³⁴ To each of the biographies of twenty brave and strong women, such as Deborah and Judith from the Bible, the antique Zenobia and Portia, the medieval Isabella First of Castile and Jeanne d'Arc, the author added as an analogy and example the story of a famous woman from a later time. After the story of Monime, the beautiful and clever wife of Mithridates of Pontus, he wrote, using the title *La brave Hongroise*, about the woman who died heroically at Szigetvár, who convinced her husband to let her fight with him instead of killing her before the battle. The work's illustrations were based on the drawings of Claude Vignon showing the twelve "heroines;" therefore, the brave Hungarian woman's picture was not among them.

The main motif of Le Moyne's tale is the jealousy of the husband, which overcomes him so much that he kills his wife rather than letting her be captured by enemy men. Therefore, Le Moyne considers the wife's virtue to be her selfless willingness to accept death rather than making her husband jealous by staying alive.

In a February issue of the Parisian *Mercure de France* in 1749, an anonymous poet under the pseudonym "un élève d' Apollon" also wrote about the heroism of the Hungarian women, using the example of the wife who died heroically at Szigetvár.³⁵

The motif of the valiant woman of Szigetvár also appears during the Age of Enlightenment in dramas and novels written in German. The poet and playwright Friedrich August Clemens Werthes published a tragedy in three acts in 1790 about the siege of Szigetvár.³⁶ In the play, the women in the fortress talk about the hopeless future before the final battle. “We will show them,” one of them said, “that there is no difference neither in the mind nor in the heart between men and women: we will die just as gloriously as the men! We shall be given weapons too!” The scene adds to the centuries-old debate about the anthropological similarities or differences between the two genders. The author used the idea that “the soul has no gender,” which is based on the ideology of the Enlightenment.³⁷ In the play, the women of Szigetvár use their children as shields during the battle, a motif which was already part of the description of the humanist Michael Brutus.

The influence of Werthes can be shown in *Zriny*, the five-act drama of German writer Theodor Körner, played first in Wien in 1812 and commissioned to be translated into Hungarian in 1818 by a women’s organization in Pest-Buda. This drama also contains the motif of the soldier killing his wife: Zrínyi’s daughter Heléna asks her fiancé to kill her before the final battle. An even more direct parallel with the valiant woman of Szigetvár is in Johann Friedrich Kind’s novel about the siege of Szigetvár, published in 1808. At the beginning of the romantic love story, Miklós Zrínyi is against the marriage of one of his soldiers, Lőrinc Juranics and his love, Stefánia, still they wed in secret. During the siege Stefánia, praying in her room, reads about the tragedy of Iréne, the Greek Christian woman who, after the fall of Constantinople, became the lover of the Turkish sultan and then was murdered. Learning from the tale, Stefánia asks her husband to kill her, however he is unable to do so and thus they both participate in the final fight and die together heroically.

6. The valiant women of Eger and Szigetvár in informative and youth literature in the 18th–19th centuries

The story of the valiant woman of Eger and Szigetvár also appeared in the journalist and informative literature in the 18th–19th century. While in the historical works the story was usually a small and curious detail, the scene occasionally—beginning already in the 17th century as seen in Le Moyne’s book—functioned independently as an exemplum. The popularity of the trope of the brave Hungarian woman in the 18th–19th centuries is showed by the fact that it appears in several journals and informative publication written in German and Hungarian, together with another popular example of Hungarian female heroism: the women fighting during the siege of Eger. Friedrich Heinrich Wilhelm Martini wrote in his journal in Berlin in 1773 only about the heroism of the women of Eger.³⁸ However, the Viennese journal titled *Allernädigst privilegierte Anzeigen*, which was started by Hungarian writers and editors in 1771, includes the heroic deeds of both the women of Eger and Szigetvár.³⁹

The tale of the women of both Eger and Szigetvár can be found in the *Ungrisches Magazin* in Bratislava in 1781, and the two stories also appear in several Viennese youth publications, for example in the books of Leopold Chimani.⁴⁰ In the description of Chimani, the emphasis is on the masculine qualities of the female character: the brave woman of Szigetvár did not lose her courage after seeing her husband’s death, instead attacked the enemy with newfound strength and fury.

The Hungarian translation of the stories was published in 1816 as part of the exemplary deeds column of a youth publication.⁴¹ The story of the valiant woman of Szigetvár can also be found in the Hungarian literary journal titled *Regélő* in 1833.⁴²

7. Valiant Hungarian Women in art in the 19th century in Hungary

Publications for women at the beginning of the 19th century in Hungary aimed to strengthen women’s self-awareness and their sense of duty. A part of this was the introduction of famous historical women—among them warrior women. A kind of national female “heroic” pantheon starts to take shape in the literature and art of the era; its members were not only historical figures but also fictional literary characters. On a book illustration, for example, we can see an image of Cecilia Rozgonyi, who lived in the 15th century and fought against the Ottoman Empire under King Sigismund of Hungary at Golubac fortress in 1428, commanding her own ship. (Figure 1.) When the

**Figure 1. József Ágost Schöff—
Johann Blaschke, Cecilia
Rozgonyi. Engraving. In: Károly
Kisfaludy, *Aurora* (3) 1824,
Buda.**



Hungarian army was retreating, Sigismund was attacked by the Turks, however, Cecilia intervened and saved the life of the Hungarian king.⁴³ Another book illustration shows Mária Széchy,⁴⁴ the eccentric Hungarian noblewoman living in the 17th century, who enjoyed fencing, wearing men's clothes and riding the horse like a man: in the picture (Figure 2.) she has an armor, a helm, and a sword. According to the interpretation in the 19th century, the previously mentioned wife of Mihály Dobozi herself asked her husband to kill her so she won't be captured by the Turks. (Figure 3.) A fictional female figure is the "Hungarian amazon" from the 17th century in Endre Horvát's poem titled *Heléna*, published in 1825 in the journal *Aurora*, who lead the Hungarian soldiers into battle against the Turks and—just like the valiant woman of Szigetvár—wished to die in battle rather than be captured by the Ottomans. (Figure 4)

Since the 17th century, the iconographical depictions of the siege of Szigetvár show most often the final attack of Miklós Zrínyi and his soldiers. The valiant woman of Szigetvár first appears in art in 1825. On the lithograph of Joseph Kriehuber, which is based on the drawing of the Austrian Moritz von Schwind, we can see among the Hungarian soldiers a woman wearing a helm and her husband next to her who is looking at her with loving gentleness and pity before the final sortie. (Figure 5) This lithograph prefigured a cover of an informative journal published in 1837,⁴⁵ on which there is also a female figure wearing a helm similar to the heroine's on the lithograph, but on this picture the woman is the one looking at the bearded and mustached man standing next to her, hinting at a relationship between the two. (Figure 6)

The pictures about the siege of Eger, however, usually—just like for example on an engraving from the 17th century (Figure 7)—depict the valiant women. The warrior women were also emphasized in a lithograph made in 1860 by Béla Vízkelety.

Figure 2. Johann Mezler—Ignaz Krepp, Mária Szécsi. Engraving.
In: Mihály Kovacsóczy,
Nefelejts, (2) 1833, Kassa.



One of the most famous paintings of Bertalan Székely, made in 1867, is *The Women of Eger*, which can be traced back to the mentioned historical sources from the 16th century.⁴⁶ As the surviving sketches in the Hungarian National Gallery reveal, Bertalan Székely first experimented with depicting the two famous episodes. The center of the final composition, in accord with the historical sources, features the woman revenging her husband's death, but the story of the mother and daughter was changed: the sketches show a collapsing mother and a girl throwing the stone, while in the completed painting the two are fighting side by side against the Turks. (Figure 8) Unlike the image of pugnacious, masculine, sometimes cruel and blood-thirsty women prevalent in the 16th-century historical and literary sources, Székely's women are more feminine, following the social expectations and concept of women in the 19th century.

Bertalan Székely also painted the siege of Szigetvár between 1879 and 1884. (Figure 9) In this painting too the women had an important role: we can see wives and children saying goodbye to the soldiers as well as a female figure holding a sword. A comment written on one of his surviving sketches shows that Székely was already considering this topic in 1863. However, here the women are not yet the most significant parts of the picture, which were instead a priest giving the last anointment and the farewells to a dying person.⁴⁷

It is possible that the change in the composition, that is the focus being not on the priest giving the last anointment and the farewells to a dying person but instead on the women and children, happened partly because István Szamosközy's historical work from the beginning of the 17th century, which was published in Latin in 1876 in Budapest. Using the previously mentioned Giovanni Michele Bruto's work, Szamosközy gave a detailed description of the women's anguished crying on

**Figure 3. Martin Schürmer—
Johann Blaschke, Mihály Dobozi
and his wife. Engraving. In:
Károly Kisfaludy, Aurora 1822,
Pest.**



**Figure 4. Michael Hofmann,
Magyar Amazon [The
Hungarian Amazon] Engraving.
In: Károly Kisfaludy, Aurora (4)
1825.**



A Magyar Amazon.

Figure 5. Moritz Schwind—Josef Kriehuber, Siege of Szigetvár. 1825. Lithograph.



Figure 6. Siege of Szigetvár. Lithograph. In: Új oktató és mulattató Fillér-kalendárium. 1837. Frontispiz.

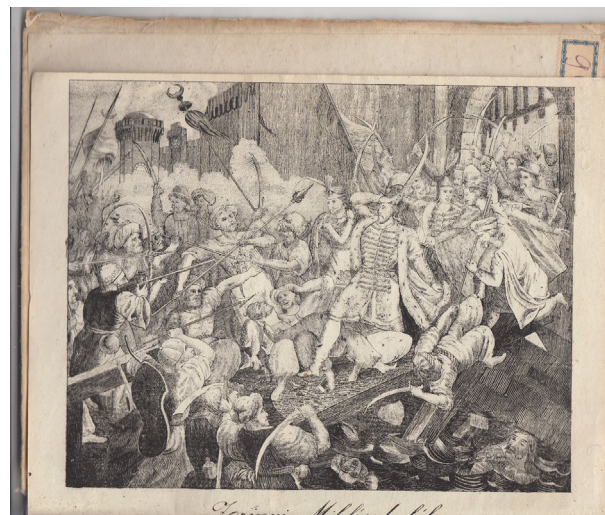


Figure 7. Siege of Eger. Engraving. In: Hungarisch-Türkische Chronick ... Nürnberg, 1685. 128–129.



Figure 8. Bertalan Székely, Women of Eger. 1867. Oil, canvas. Budapest, Magyar Nemzeti Galéria.

Source: reproduced with permission of Magyar Nemzeti Galéria - Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest (Hungarian National Gallery - Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest).



their knees, begging their husband to let them fight against the Turks during the siege of Szigetvár.⁴⁸ Székely, however, did not use the brutal scene when the women fought while holding their children in front of them like shields. Just as Székely was consciously trying to portray the woman revenging her husband's death in a way that she could "remain feminine" in his painting titled *The Women of Eger*, on his other painting about Zrínyi's sortie he shows only the pain of the goodbye: the wife on her knees clinging to her husband with the child, the mother desperately shouting after the husband already going to the battle and the two children embracing her. The motif of the valiant woman also appears here, however: on the center of the composition is a woman holding a sword, ready for the fight. But the painter does not show the slaughter of the women, as that would go against the mindset of the era.

Incidentally, such euphemistic depictions weren't exclusive in the paintings of the era. While Székely consciously avoided showing the cruelty of women, which was not only legitimized but even

Figure 9. Bertalan Székely: Siege of Szigetvár. 1879–1884. Oil, canvas, Debrecen, Déri Múzeum.

Source: reproduced with permission of the Déri Múzeum, Debrecen, (Déri Museum, Debrecen).



painted as an example by the historiographers in the desperate times when they had to defend their homeland, his tutor, Karl Rahl (1812–1865), professor of the Academy of Fine Arts in Wien, ruthlessly painted the women killing their children to avoid them getting captured as slaves, then committing suicide in his painting titled *Cimbernschlacht*,⁴⁹ made around 1865, which depicts the previously mentioned Battle of Vercallae in BC 101 between the Romans and the tribe of Cimabri.

8. Conclusion

The trope of valiant warrior women, which in Europe includes since the early modern era the heroism of Hungarian women, adds to the still ongoing centuries-old philosophical debate—with different views based on the era, the country or even the author—about whether or not there are specifically female and male characteristics, and if yes, whether these differences between the genders are anatomical, biological, and psychical or rather they exist because of social and cultural factors, such as education or the need to follow the norms of the community.

The trope of the valiant Hungarian women illuminates the role reversal and crossing of borders between genders as well as a particular way of the female body temporarily playing a male role in certain circumstances. In the extreme circumstances of fighting for higher moral principles (such as homeland, faith, female virtue) women, even though according to the stereotypes of patriarchal society they are weak, in need of support, and vulnerable to their emotions, show traits and competences considered masculine, such as strength, the pursuit of victory, cruelty, and the ability to push fear to the back of one's mind. In such extreme situation, it is considered to be deserving of glory that the fighting women behaved as the opposite of the behavior patterns expected of them (understanding, sensitivity, pliancy, humility, and forgiveness), meaning in masculine and norm-breaking ways: they fought ruthlessly against the enemy. The (male) historiographers also praised that the valiant women moved out of the traditionally feminine private sphere—even if only temporarily—and into one of the important parts of the public sphere dominated by men, the world of the “*theatrum belli*,” that is the battleground.

The opinions on warrior women in historiography and fine arts had changed significantly during the centuries. In the 16–18th centuries, both in historiography and in painting—for example, the paintings of the Italian female painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653) depicting the story of Judith or Jael from the Bible with a shocking brutality—the cruelty of the women fighting for their home, faith, and virtue was considered to be necessary and valuable. However, in the 19th century, as a result of the middle-class female ideal becoming more gentle and “civilized,” the depictions of valiant women from earlier times in literature and art no longer show such explicit brutality, but rather the emotions that motivated the women to fight are emphasized, such as the love they felt for their fallen husband or the desire to protect their faith.

Translated by Rebeka Szaló.

Funding

The study was supported by frame of the project [project number NKFIH K 116270].

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Citation information

Cite this article as: Female body—male body: The valiant Hungarian women of Eger and Szigetvár from the 16th century in historiography, literature, and art, Julia Papp, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2016), 3: 1147403.

Cover image

Source: Engraving from Károly Kisfaludy, *Aurora* 1822, Pest.

Notes

1. Giovanni Boccaccio *De mulieribus claris* (*De claris mulieribus*) 1360–1370; Christine de Pisan: *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405) etc. The popularity of Boccaccio's book is proved by more than a hundred manuscripts (some of them magnificently illuminated codices) and the fact that it was translated into several languages in the 15th century. Parts of the collection of biography were printed at first in 1473 in Ulm, while the whole text was printed in 1539 in Bern. Giuseppe Betussi published the Italian translation of Boccaccio's work in 1547 in Venice, adding the biography of the author. (*Libro di M. Gio. Boccaccio delle Donne illustri, Tradotto per Messer Giuseppe Betussi... In Venetia 1547.*) In 1596, an edition was published which, along with

- the previous biographies, also included the description of famous women of Francesco Serdonati from Florence. (Libro di M. Giovanni Boccaccio Delle Donne Illustri. Tradotto di Latino in Volgare per M. Giuseppe Betussi, con una giunta fatta dal medesimo, D'altre Donne Famose. E vn'altra nuoua giunta fatta per M. Francesco Serdonati. d'altre Donne Illustri. Antiche e moderne. Con due tauole vna de nomi, e l'altra delle cose più, In Fiorenza, Per Filippo Giunti. 1596.)
2. Kuhn and Lundt (1997) Gaebel and Kartschocke (2001); Pascal (2003); Bonnet and Schellewald (2004) etc.
 3. Berndt (1996), p. 277.
 4. Segler-Messner (2004) Domanski (2004) Irmgard Osols-Wehden (2004).
 5. Domanski (2004, p. 37).
 6. Reinle (2000, p. 36).
 7. Miklautsch (2010).
 8. Reinle (2000).
 9. Reinle (2000).
 10. DeJean (2003), Keller and Kragl (2010), and Marwyck (2010) etc.
 11. Baumgärtel and Neysters (1995)
 12. Frohnhaus, Grotkamp-Schepers, and Philipp (1998) See: Gerlinde Volland: Schwert in Frauenhand. Eine Ausstellung im Solinger Klängenmuseum, 22.11.1998–7.2.1999 und das zugehörige Katalogbuch. <http://www.fkw-journal.de/index.php/fkw/article/view/708/705>
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 14. Schrodi-Grimm (2009).
 15. La Galerie des femmes fortes par le Pere Le Moyne. Paris, 1647; Jacques Du Bosc, La Femme Héroïque ou les Héroïnes comparées avec les Héros en toute Sorte de Vertus, et Plusieurs Reflexions Morales a la Fin de Chaque Comparaison. Paris, 1645. I-II.; Les Femmes Heroïques, Comparées Avec Les Heros. Ensemble les Moralitez à la fin de chaque Histoire. Entichies de tres-belles Figures. Par le R. P. Du Bosc. A Paris, ... 1669. I-II. etc.
 16. Berndt (1996).
 17. Gonoz azzonyembereknek erkelchekroel vallo aenek, kit zerze zebeni Ormprust Christoff egij kopot ebagnenek bozzusagara, kit oztan egij baratia keressere magijar nielure fordita, Viennoe Austriae, [1550–1551].
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 23. Resolvtio Brevis Orationvm M. T. Ciceronis Secvndvm Cavsarvm Genera, Orationvm partes, materias, in Eloqvntiae Stvdiosorvm ... Avtore Melchior Ivnio ... [Wittenberg], 1594, 328.
 24. Libro di M. Giovanni Boccaccio Delle Donne Illustri. Tradotto di Latino in Volgare per M. Giuseppe Betussi, con una giunta fatta dal medesimo, D'altre Donne Famose. E vn'altra nuoua giunta fatta per M. Francesco Serdonati. d'altre Donne Illustri. Antiche e moderne. Con due tauole vna de nomi, e l'altra delle cose più, In Fiorenza, Per Filippo Giunti. 1596. 605–606.
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 26. Gaspere Ens, *Rerum Hungaricarum historia, novem libris comprehensa...* Coloniae Agrippinae, 1604, p. 223.; Thuanus (Jacques-Auguste de Thou), *Historiae Sui Temporis*. Paris, 1606. Tomus 1. Liber X. 293.; *Ortelius redivivus et continuatus* oder der Ungarischen Kriegs-Empörungen historische Beschreibung... Von dem 1395 bis in das 1607 Jahr... Durch den berühmten Herrn Hieronymum *Ortelium* Augustanum... Mit einer Continuation von dem 1607 bis an das 1665 Jahr vermehret durch Martin Meyern, Frankfurt am Main, 1665. 87.; *Hungarische / Siebenbürgische / Moldau- Wallach- Türk- Tartar- Persian- und Venetianische Chronica, oder Außführlich / Wahrhaftige Beschreibung / deß Königreichs Hungarn...* Aus vielen bewehrten Scribenten zusammen getragen und hervor gegeben durch Johannem Gradelehnium. Franckfurt am Mayn... 1665. 156–157.
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