

WHY WITCHES ARE WOMEN

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Abstract: Analyses concerning the gender of the witches in Europe in the 15th–18th centuries show an unanimous female dominance. According to European statistics – as much as it can be reconstructed from the records of the trials – the percentage of men accused of witchcraft was 80–85%. The question “why witches are women” cannot be answered with a simple explanation based on a single factor. The witch-accusations were not homogeneous at all, and, what is more, the concept of the witch was made up of several components in the background of the different witch-types. There are many kinds of social conflicts and ideological clashes acting as factors inducing witch-accusations. These factors emphasize the female side of the witch-stereotype and increase the number of female reputed witches. Thus, in connection with the different types of Early Modern rural witchcraft, the answer to our question is briefly the following: the majority of the witches was woman because the majority of the accusations was based on conflicts that could develop in the female spheres of private and communal life. Another important point is that the accusations were supported by a “female” witch-ideology and mythology: with certain kinds of conflicts and certain witch-types, this female mythology could become in itself a factor inducing witch-accusations. These two “female” factors – the social and ideological incentives of the witch-accusations – could function hand in hand and thus inevitably lead to the female dominance in witch-accusations. The joint functioning of these factors – and their reinforcing effect on each other – resulted in the far higher proportion of female witches.

Keywords: gender of the witches, witch-accusations, witch-stereotype, social conflicts, witch-mythology

In early modern Europe the misfortune-explaining and conflict-resolving institution of village witchcraft was flourishing. We have abundant data concerning this institution in the records of witch-persecution: from these we can establish the particulars, and in lucky cases the social background of those accused of witchcraft in all of Europe except for the Eastern and Southeastern regions where witch-persecution was unknown. The statistics show that during the four centuries of persecution in average 80–85% of the accused persons were women (see Fig. 1). The persecuted witch is naturally not always the same as the person who is regarded as a witch by his or her community, yet this percentage applies to the proportion of sexes in those cases as well, because the accused were not selected from above by the persecution led by either secular or ecclesiastical authorities; they were in fact brought to justice by an initiative coming from below. This means that the people who were tried were generally those who were brought in as witches by the members of their community, and, what is even more important, against whom measures had been taken on their own authority, for example inside the autonomous system of village witchcraft, using

its traditional devices. This course of action can be reconstructed with the help of the records of the trials, as it has been done by many English, French, German, Hungarian and other researchers, following the first English analysis by Alan Macfarlane of the Essex villages in the Tudor and Stuart periods.¹ Thus the general and local features of witchcraft as a social institution in the early modern age are beginning to become distinct on the map of Europe, from the emergence of suspicion of maleficium through the identification of the witch to the actions taken against the witch. All these data can be reconstructed mainly from the confessions of the witches brought to the court and from the evidence given by the witnesses: this evidence recalls exactly the antecedents of the trials, the ways in which the traditional rural institution operated independently from official witchcraft-persecution, the legal mechanism of the elite culture and the demonological doctrines.

This institution is nowhere as alive in 20th century Europe as it was in the 15th–18th centuries, the age of witch-persecution. Therefore it is more appropriate to raise such fundamental problems as the gender of the witches from the viewpoint of the early modern age and to try to answer them on the evidence of the documents of the trials than to deduce from present day witch-beliefs deprived of their original functions. Naturally, the popular institution cannot be completely separated neither from the official system of persecution, nor from the ideological influence of the Church demonology. Our questions can only be answered through the examination of their interactions. This is especially important with the problem of the gender of the witches, because the female nature of witches was an important element of the stereotypical image that was developed by demonology placed in the service of persecution. The features of the female witch were even more emphasized during the culmination of persecution at the turn of the 17th–18th centuries, and this presumably had its impact on popular witch-ideology, the popular stereotype in the background of the rural institution, and through this on the functioning of the rural institution; specifically on the preference to women in the identification of witches; at least this is what we may presume from the statistics in which there is a slight increase in the proportion of female suspects during the high point of persecution.

Or e.g. Karlsen,² examining the trials in New England traces a significant female dominance in times of panic. A similar phenomenon is the increase of female dominance as a result of a long persecution in the given area: according to Heikkinen's and Kervinen's data from Finland "the number of women tends to increase the longer the witch-hunt in a given area lasts. The longer the traditions of persecution, the higher the percentage of women..."³ – which the authors attribute to the influence of the female witch-stereotype (as opposed to the local traditions concerning male sorcerers).

¹ See for example, MACFARLANE 1970, THOMAS 1971, MONTER 1976, MUCHEMBLED 1978a, UNVERHAU 1980, WUNDER 1983, KLANICZAY 1990, LABOUVIE 1991.

² KARLSEN 1989: 48–51.

³ HEIKKINEN–KERVINEN 1990: 322.

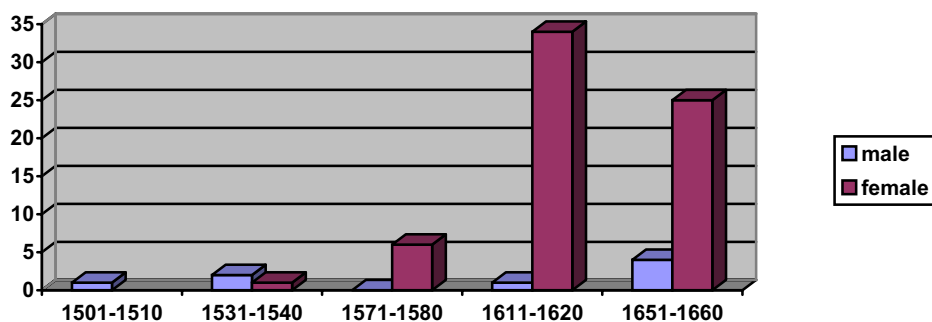


Fig. 1. The proportion of men and women accused with witchcraft in Northern Flandria between 1501 and 1700 (after Muchembled 1978a: 176)

One of the roots of demonology's witch-stereotype is the theory appearing already at Aristotle, most clearly elaborated by St. Thomas of Aquino and remaining influential through the Middle Ages about the subordination of women, their weakness of faith after the Fall, their failure in the capability of resisting evil.⁴ The view that ever since the Fall women are the vessels of sin, and especially of the "female" sexual crimes appears already in the first anti-witchcraft tracts (e.g. the "Formicarius" of Nider, 1435–1437). Geiler von Kaisersberg in his Lenten sermon in 1508 raises the question "why the female sex is more prone to witchcraft than the male". His answer: it is due to the weakness of women and their susceptibility to influence. Women, who more easily succumb to satanic temptation are attracted above all by specifically female sexual crimes (adultery, love potion, etc.⁵). The woman-hatred of the Christian church, as it has been often noted from theological speculations, is primarily directed against sexuality⁶. Biedermann called attention to the fact that the anti-sexism of the witch-persecutors is, or rather a continuation, although now with reversed values, of the anti-sexism of the heretics (Cathars) who were persecuted before the witches.⁷

Another important precedent of the theological, and demonological mysogyny – again with reversed sign – was traced by Gábor Klaniczay in his study of medieval women saints; the ambivalent views of the charismatic and mystical powers of the influential female saints may also have led to women being regarded as witches (e.g. in their relationship to satanic temptation the saint and the witch may represent the opposite poles of the same "magical universe"⁸).

⁴ About the theological views concerning the subordination of women: SCHORMANN 1981: 117–118, BIEDERMANN 1987: 216, SEGL 1988, FRANK 1988, BURGHARTZ 1988: 57–74. Summaries and texts of the most important demonological literature see: HANSEN 1901.

⁵ BURGHARTZ 1988: 57.

⁶ HANSEN 1900: 232, 485–487, DELUMEAU 1978: 450, BURGHARTZ 1988: 57.

⁷ BIEDERMANN 1987: 213–214.

⁸ KLANICZAY 1990/91: 242–251.

The ultimate expression of the anti-women views of the demonology of the witch-persecutors was put down in the *Malleus Maleficarum*⁹ which became famous for its opinions on this question as well, and which provides a rich and impressive list of sexual crimes committed by the witches and the Devil. A major part of the witches' crimes, as listed by the *Malleus Maleficarum* is connected with fertility, health, diseases, children, death – that is, with the female sphere of social and private life. In addition, there are specifically female sexual crimes, such as adultery. Besides sins of the flesh the *Malleus* regarded the “sins of the tongue” as specifically female crimes. According to the book all these together with their weakness in faith result in women's greater proneness to maleficium, that is, to witchcraft.¹⁰

Karlsen calls attention to another demonological tract, containing strikingly anti-feministic views but less-known than the *Malleus Maleficarum*: the “*Tractato de las Superstitiones y Hechierias*”, the work of the Spanish Martin de Castanega published in 1529. The author of the tract makes a further differentiation about the crimes of women who are in sexual relationship with the Devil; according to him old women are more likely to become witches in this way, since real men are no longer interested in them.¹¹ This brings on the completion of the circle: it becomes possible to construct the stereotype of the solitary old woman as a witch solely from the sexual crimes.

The female character of the witch-stereotype of official demonology had mythological roots as well; these are related to the mythical antecedents of European witch-beliefs, the ancient and medieval belief in female demons (*strigae*, *lamiae*), the cult of pagan goddesses (Diana, Holda, etc.), the female nature of the “nightwitch” traditions. Starting from Regino of Prüm in 906, medieval clerical sources often mention the female cults and female worshippers of such goddesses as Diana, Holda, Herodias. These women, as it has been pointed out by Norman Cohn, and Carlo Ginzburg among others, were important ancestors of witches in the European belief-systems. The mythical ancestors of German witches are also feminine: *Hagzissa/Hagazussa* (from which the word *Hexe* is derived) as well as *Unholde* and *Drude* were all names of female demons.¹²

The demonological tracts also contain a negative approach towards the ancient and medieval sorceresses. These sorceresses, who specialized in love magic, prophecy, communications with the dead and healing, and who can be seen to a certain extent as the “ancestors” of the European witch are presented definitely as poisoners, as female poisoners in fact.¹³ According to Reginald Scot female witches are the

⁹ INSTITORIS–SPRENGER 1487.

¹⁰ On the mysogyny of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and its author, Institoris see MONTER 1977: 129, SEGL 1988, DIENST 1987a: 176, BURGHARTZ 1988: 60.

¹¹ KARLSEN 1989: 155.

¹² On the “night witch” tradition see: CARO BAROJA 1967: 83, COHN 1975: 206–218, LECOUTEUX 1985, BIEDERMANN 1987: 212–214, GINZBURG 1990: 96–104.

¹³ This is a natural result of their ambivalent activity. See more on this below. – HANSEN 1900, SCHORMANN 1981: 116–117, BIEDERMANN 1987: 219, ENNEN 1988: 7–10.

inventors and practitioners of poisoning; moreover, they are “people of ill natures, of a wicked disposition, and spitefully malicious”.¹⁴ As Burghartz indicates,¹⁵ already in medieval penances we can find that magic was the only area where women, or at least female crimes were mentioned specifically.

The new concept of witches that developed in the 15th–16th centuries in the service of persecutions was based on these views; this new stereotype presents witches as persons in alliance with Satan, going to Sabbaths, that is, to meetings where they worship Satan.¹⁶ This stereotype defines witches as female again, but not exclusively and necessarily as women; among the causes of persecution no specifically female characteristic of witches is mentioned; the rejection of Christianity, the worship of Satan, the alliance with Satan are supposedly possible for men as well, although, as it has been mentioned above, according to the anti-feministic demonological tracts, the sexual crimes committed with the Devil were among the “cardinal sins” of women. The persecution cannot be regarded as directed against woman, but rather as an action aimed at the liquidation of heretics of either sex. The witch being a woman in the stereotype of demonology is more typically a consequence of the theological views and mythological features mentioned above and of the actual practice of sorceresses and their mythical context. This concept of witches in fact represented much from the actual social role of witches and from their popular belief-system; it was built upon these roles and beliefs, it complemented them with new elements, with the “mythological stilization” of magic, as Labouvie¹⁷ puts it. As Macfarlane emphasizes, the actual role of witches is also predominantly a female role. This is why theologians were tempted to build upon it the accusation of women as people who are weaker in faith and who are more likely to succumb to the influence of Satan.¹⁸

The actual influence of the witch stereotype of demonology on the concrete witchcraft-accusations is problematic. Discrepancies between the stereotype and reality can be found in the demonological works themselves: when specifying the female sexual crimes of witches, Nider refers to a number of male witches among his examples. On the other hand while the above-mentioned Finnish research apparently shows that in Finland the increase of the number of women accused with witchcraft was the result of the female demonological stereotype, yet in Stiria, the Austrian land, near Tyrol, where the *Malleus Maleficarum* was written, the number of male witches seems to be quite high at certain periods. An exclusive influence prevailing in all circumstances cannot be inferred in this problem. Burghartz’s research in Switzerland is rather significant in this respect: in Lucerne as well as in Lausanne only women were accused with alliance or sexual contact with the Devil,

¹⁴ KITTREDGE 1928: 136–138; the quotation: p. 137.

¹⁵ BURGHARTZ 1988: 58.

¹⁶ On the Sabbath and the Devil’s pact as essential components of the new demonology see: TREVOR-ROPER 1969: 118, THOMAS 1971: 438, COHN 1975: 100–102, KIECKHEFER 1976: 22–31, 71–80.

¹⁷ LABOUVIE 1987: 77.

¹⁸ MACFARLANE 1970: 678.

while during the same period (1438–1498) the proportion of men accused in Lausanne is 62%!¹⁹

After the stereotypes let us examine reality, the actual roles of witches, as much as it can be reconstructed from the records of the trials. According to the European statistics the lowest percentage of men accused of witchcraft was 5–8% (e.g. in certain parts of the Jura-region, in Essex, in the county of Namur in the Netherlands). The percentage of men reaches or borders on 50% in some parts of France, in Westfalia, in some areas of Stiria and in Finland. As mentioned above, in Switzerland the proportion of men sometimes exceeded women's. At any rate, the proportion of women showed an increasing tendency compared with the 14th–15th centuries, where in some regions more men were accused with witchcraft than women.

Table 1
Data on the European and North American witch-persecution in the 15th–17th centuries
(after Klaniczay 1986)

Area	date	male%	total number of the accused	death sentences
Republic Geneva	1527–1681	24	319	69
Jura-region	1537–1683	28.7	1374	836
Inquisition Venice	1552–1722	22	549	
Inquisition Castille	1540–1685	29	436	
North-France	1351–1790	18	226	161
County Namur	1509–1646	8	270	144
Parliament of Paris	1564–1639	50	1119	578
Duchy Luxemburg	1505–1685	16	547	358
Franche-Comté	1599–1667	24	203	62
England,				
Home Circuit	1560–1700	7	513	112
Scotland	1560–1750	14	1891	599
Norway	1561–1760	20	730	277
Sweden	1471–1677	15	1151	
Finland	1520–1699	49.3	710	115
New England				
(without Salem)	1638–1697	20	114	16
SW Germany	1562–1670	18	3229	
Braunschweig, Wolfenbüttel	1557–1670	9.3	225	88

The percentages given here concern the 16th–17th centuries, the times of the great waves of persecution.²⁰ The proportion of men accused compared to women is,

¹⁹ BURGHARTZ 1988: 59–68.

²⁰ Some other statistics: LARNER 1981: 91, SCHORMANN 1981: 118, VALENTINITSCH 1987a: 306.

on the average, 20%. The fluctuations and changes of proportions do not form consistent areas, the differences are gradual and small. These areas do not coincide with areas outlined in statistic maps of other specific features of witch-persecution, for instance with the typical divergences of centres and peripheries (peripheries meaning areas with later waves of persecutions, less trials, less death sentences²¹). Therefore it is obvious that there must be an independent chain of causes for the divergences of men–women proportions, different from the causes of other phenomena. Such coincidences as in the case of the Saar-region, where the proportion of women is 9% higher among the Protestant population than in the neighbouring Catholic region²² seem accidental or unique. Differences of creed do not seem to have any impact on the proportion. (According to the calculations of Klaniczay in Hungary the percentage of men is around 9%, but there are certain areas – as for instance in Debrecen, according to Kristóf – where it is only 6.8%.²³) These statistic variances – with which no other variances are in correlation – suggest that, as Labouvie states,²⁴ the sex of witches is a secondary factor. That as a secondary factor it still plays a part if the rise of witchcraft-accusations is again a suggestion derived from the statistics, namely from the geographical differences between the proportions, and from the fact that in many cases of smaller local districts a relative permanence can be seen in the proportions of sexes; therefore there may exist locally and periodically effective factors among the inductors of witchcraft-accusations connected with the sex of witches.

The primary factors, on the other hand, affect both sexes. The theory of woman-hatred or war against women cannot be considered a global explanation; why should an antiwomen movement bring to justice men in 5–50% of the cases (and for the same primary reasons as the women of the same community)? The remarkably high proportion of women can obviously lead to exaggerated views. Without wishing to go into details about witchcraft- and persecution-studies taking a feminist approach, I would just like to remark that these studies are based on two preconceptions: the first one is that the witch-persecutors and the persecuted both saw the persecutions as directed against women or as wars of the sexes; the second one says that the fundamental cause of the persecutions was the hostility towards women in patriarchal societies.²⁵ The assumption of sex war is supported by the fact that, as Larnier writes:²⁶ “The witch-persecutions are certainly the first time that women appear as criminals in any large numbers”, since up to that time in actual fact “in criminal law the women did not exist”. Witchcraft was the most important capital crime for

²¹ BEHRINGER 1989: 622–628.

²² LABOUVIE 1987: 71.

²³ KRISTÓF 1990: 441.

²⁴ LABOUVIE 1987: 172.

²⁵ For a general summary of feminist studies of witchcraft (Honegger, Bovenschen, Graichen-Wisslinck, Ehrenreich–English, etc.) see: SCHORMANN 1981: 116–122, UNVERHAU 1990: 241, DIENST-HÖRNADNER 1987.

²⁶ LARNER 1981: 51.

women, the only other female crime that carried death sentence was infanticide.²⁷

As for the non-feminist historians who examined the witch-hunt-provoking effect of social tensions, their explanation for the persecution of women is related to their social status, or more precisely their marginal position. When we examine the statistics of the accused, almost everywhere we can find a type of accusation that is directed against the weak, the poor, the people living on the margin of society. And as Macfarlane says: "This aspect of the trials is more plausibly explained by economic and social considerations, for it was the women who were the most dependent members of the community and thus the most vulnerable to accusations."²⁸ However, this is only one type of accusation and one type of witch, and this type is in the minority in Central Europe including Hungary, and it does not give a full explanation for the "woman-hatred" of the trials and the question why the accusations were focused on women. We can neither accept what Monter says, probably speaking on the basis of one-sided evidence: "...we can argue that witchcraft-accusations can best be understood as projections of patriarchal social fears onto atypical women, those who lived apart from the direct male control of husbands or fathers."²⁹ Although the echoes of the theory of "the witch on the margin of society" can be found in the works of some historians,³⁰ the lonely witch, free of social control is not typical, and it is never a primary accusation-inducing phenomenon; most of the researches show that women, or at least the majority of witches is not in a marginal position; in fact they live in a network of relationships in the village-communities. Those historians who study the social context of the rural institution of witchcraft often emphasize that although witches are frequently unmarried, and sometimes they live alone, yet they are not in marginal positions; they actually live deep inside their community: in all of Europe the greatest part of the accusations connects persons who were in close social contact (e.g. people inside the family, neighbours, house-sharers, colleagues, employer and employee, etc.). According to several exact statistics even the unmarried are not typical, only frequent; there are always more married witches than widows or girls.³¹ Nevertheless, it is exactly the great number of unmarried and widow witches that Midelfort based his global explanation upon for the huge wave of witch-hunt in Southwestern Germany; according to him the most fundamental cause was the new marriage-system introduced preceding the accusations and consequently the greater proportion of unmarried and widowed persons. Yet he cannot support his theory with actual witchcraft-accusations.³²

²⁷ MONTER 1977: 133.

²⁸ MACFARLANE 1970: 678.

²⁹ MONTER 1976: 122, 124.

³⁰ MACFARLANE 1970: 678, MIDELFORT 1972, HEINEMANN 1986: 99, UNVERHAU 1987: 243, MONTER 1976: 122, 1977: 133–134, BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI 1990: 107, 123.

³¹ LARNER 1981: 90–101, NAESS 1983: 171, UNVERHAU 1987: 259, LABOUVIE 1987: 173–176, KRISTÓF 1992: 88–89. E.g. BURGHARTZ's 1988: 65 detailed research in which she compared witchcraft-accusations in two Swiss cantons shows that of all the accused only 1/3 and 1/6 respectively were old and widowed women.

³² MIDELFORT 1972. The importance of the changes in the model of marriage is stressed by MONTER 1977: 133 as well.

The analyses of English anthropologists (Macfarlane, Thomas) made it first clear that the appearance of witchcraft-accusations is related to the inner tensions of local societies above all;³³ from these studies Cohn could define the “research stereotype” of the early modern witch: “witches were above all people who harmed their neighbours by occult means; and they were almost always women”.³⁴ A similar conclusion was drawn by Macfarlane from his research on Essex: according to him the main inducing factor of witchcraft-accusations was the violation of the norms of neighbourhood. As Thomas writes (mainly deriving from Macfarlane’s experiences): “It was... the prior involvement of the victim in a hostile relationship which made contemporaries invoke witchcraft as the explanation of a misfortune”.³⁵ But the aspect of “female or male” is subordinate to the conflict of neighbours. In other words: the majority of witches were women because the accusations are rooted in neighbourhood conflicts which can develop in the female spheres of private and community life.

Witchcraft-accusations could involve people of either sex and of any age, either as accusers or accused if they were members of households being in neighbour’s or other kinds of close relationship with each other. But the majority of the cases and accusations of maleficium were connected with the female sphere of everyday life: bearing and raising children, love, marriage, illness. Beside Macfarlane’s work in Essex we may also mention Labouvie’s relevant results in the Saar-region, some Austrian and Swiss researches as well as my analysis in Sopron county.³⁶

Robert Muchembled came to the conclusion that the greater percentage of women becoming suspects of witchcraft is due to the fact that the female spheres of everyday life, such as childbirth, motherhood, love, marriage and the magic of rites de passage are the potential sources of witchcraft-conflicts through the analysis of trial-records in a Flemish village.³⁷

As indicated by Heide Dienst, the female roles prevailing in the female sphere of everyday life might have justified and motivated the theological doctrine according to which “women are the preservers of a superstitious, pagan world-view”.³⁸ Karl- sen’s conclusions are also related to female roles. In his study on New England he stresses the role of the transgression of social standards and the violation of female norms of behaviour in the emergence of witchcraft-accusations: in a way witches incarnated the negative model of behaviour, they were the “wicked women”, in contrast to whom the model of “Puritan femininity” of the 17th century New England could be constructed.³⁹ Burghartz in his Swiss research also stresses the importance

³³ MACFARLANE 1970, THOMAS 1971.

³⁴ COHN 1975: 251.

³⁵ THOMAS 1971: 669.

³⁶ MONTER 1976: 121–124, DIENST 1987b: 282, LABOUVIE 1987: 155–202, PÓCS 1994.

³⁷ MUCHEMBLEMED 1981: 187–211. Cf. the similar conclusions drawn by KIECKHEFER 1976: 95, WUNDER 1983: 188–189, BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI 1990: 110–112, 142–143.

³⁸ DIENST 1990: 175.

³⁹ KARLSEN 1989: 117, 160–182.

of the violation of female norms of behaviour.⁴⁰ The violation of female norms of behaviour, the negative realization of the female roles, the embodiment of the “negative model” are primarily connected with sexual behaviour; the majority of “female crimes” such as infanticide, love poisoning, adultery and seduction of men are related to sex.⁴¹ In addition, Blumenfeld-Kosinski⁴² calls attention to the fact that ever since the antiquity certain types of maleficium (poisoning, love magic and the making of contraceptives) have been connected with women. The actual role of these sex-orientated crimes in the emergence of witchcraft-accusations varies, but is never prevailing. It is without doubt present behind the increase of witchcraft-accusations against women, but certainly not to such an extent as it is suggested by the negative female image of demonology. What seems to be more important is the role of the violation of the norms of communal solidarity and neighbourly relations within the female sphere of everyday life; to such an extent that neighbours’ conflicts and the role of the female sphere within them gives one kind of explanation to the question of “why the women”. This explanation is more or less valid for all of Europe, and, as Macfarlane shows, it is related to the socio-economic interdependence of early modern self-supporting peasant households. In this respect the reason why witches were women is that the members of a community were dependent upon each other even more in the female sphere of everyday life, and thus it was easier for women to violate the ethical norms of communal solidarity. A typical early modern Central European maleficium-inducing neighbour’s conflict, patterned like this: “my neighbour wanted to borrow my tub of flour, I didn’t give it to her because I needed it myself, then she started to scold me and she bewitched my child at night”, does not necessarily and exclusively arise only among women, but it is far more likely to do so. Since Macfarlane’s research in Essex the importance of this type of witchcraft-accusations has been pointed out in several regions of Central and Western Europe.⁴³ As e.g. Burghartz points out in his study on the canton of Lucerne, this evidently could not play such an important role in towns or in isolated farm settlements. But in any kind of community, even among villagers living in the greatest possible interdependence of neighbours, this is only one type of the witchcraft-accusations: one aspect of European witchcraft, related to the communal conflict-resolving function of village witchcraft. Among early modern peasantry the other important role of witchcraft was to serve as an explanation for the unexpected misfortunes of the individual. The mechanism usually operates in the following way: I accuse the person I had a conflict with of witchcraft, and then the remedy will vent and canalize the tension created or indicated by the conflict; on the other hand: I accuse someone of maleficium – that is, I select someone for the role of the witch to explain my unexpected misfortune –, a person who may for some reason be suspected of maleficium. This reason is the witch-ideology, the attributes of witches which the accused presumably possesses, the

⁴⁰ BURGHARTZ 1988: 66–69.

⁴¹ See the relevant data of KARLSEN 1989: 136–141 and BURGHARTZ 1988: 70.

⁴² BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI 1990: 111–112.

⁴³ Approximately 30% of the accusations in Hungarian maleficium-trials belong to this type.

“occult means” by which he or she can cause misfortune. These people of witch-reputation are usually the magical specialists of the community, sorcerers, fortune-tellers, healers, midwives.

Numerous studies⁴⁴ examine the process of sorcerers and healers “becoming witches”, integrating into the system of witchcraft. This process is inevitable: those who possess the tools of magic, however positive and useful their practice is, can easily become suspected of supposedly evil magic at the time of the intensive functioning of witchcraft and in an atmosphere of repeated accusations; and the suspicion of evil magic is itself witchcraft-accusation. The hazardous outcome of the practice of sorcerers and healers as well as the ambiguous nature of magic also contributes to this process. The results of healing and delivery were always uncertain, and if the baby was born dead or died in infancy, the simplest thing to do was to accuse the midwife with murder. On the other hand we should bear in mind that contraception and aborticide were also under the control of midwives, and these practices, besides being a menace to the family, were again parts of the “female sphere” connected with sexuality, which was, as indicated above, an essential component of the theological witch-stereotype. Moreover, midwifery could induce the charge of heresy as well. On his study on the iconography of Cesarian operation Blumenfeld-Kosinski notes that a frequent witchcraft-accusation against midwives was that they let the children die without baptizing them (they did not perform “midwives’ christening” before the child’s death). Thus certain aspects of midwifery as an exclusively female profession seem to have played a significant role in the emergence of witchcraft-accusations. Although witch-persecution was not the war of male doctors against midwives and female healers (as it has been suggested by some feminist researchers⁴⁵), the instability of the midwives’ position did increase with the growing number of male doctors; in some areas this process did discredit and marginalize the practice of healers and midwives to some extent.⁴⁶ Blumenfeld-Kosinski detected this tendency in the history of Cesarian operation the most convincingly: concerning obstetrics, this operation was the first to be taken over by professional male doctors.⁴⁷

According to almost all concrete researches the charges against midwives and healers were among the most frequent witchcraft-accusations, especially in village communities.⁴⁸ This could be one explanation for the female dominance, since the people accused of witchcraft were, if midwives, exclusively, and if healers, predominantly women. However, this factor is by no means absolute. In some village communities many women were accused with various types of crimes of “the female sphere”; yet there are hardly any midwives and healers among them.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ MACFARLANE 1970: 677, KIECKHEFER 1976: 46, HORSLEY 1979, UNVERHAU 1980: 80; LARNER 1981: 114, LABOUVIE 1987: 49–76, ENNEN 1988, DIENST 1990: 194, KLANICZAY 1990, LAGERLÖF-GÉNÉTAY 1990, KRISTÓF 1990, Pócs 1995.

⁴⁵ E.g. HEINSOHN-STEIGER 1985, MICHELET 1862: 31–38.

⁴⁶ DIENST-HÖRANDNER 1987: 391–393, KARLSEN 1989: 142, UNVERHAU 1990: 241–256.

⁴⁷ BLUMENFELD-KOSINSKI 1990: 117.

⁴⁸ SCHORMANN 1981: 108, VALENTINITSCH 1987b: 309–310.

⁴⁹ BURGHARTZ 1988: 67.

Analyses concerning sorcerers becoming witches show an unanimous female dominance. We cannot definitely say that this means that there were more female sorcerers than males, but what is certain is that female sorcerers integrated in much greater numbers into the system of witchcraft at almost all places where statistics were made about this phenomenon. For instance this was the result of Kramer's research⁵⁰ on his material from 16th–17th century Holstein: here the “Töwersche” or female sorcerer always becomes part of the witchcraft-system, while the “Töwener” or male sorcerer very seldom does – he is able to remain a sorcerer throughout the period of witchcraft-persecutions, he is not accused of witchcraft. We have similar experiences from Sweden, Austria⁵¹ and Hungary (on the latter see e.g. Kristóf's research on Debrecen and mine on Sopron⁵²). Heide Dienst's study investigates the question whether women's connection with harmful magic was as close in reality as it is suggested by the *Malleus Maleficarum*: whether there was a female dominance in black magic or not. Her answer is negative; for instance weather-sorcery was more often attributed to men. On the other hand it is interesting to note that in the Alp region positive weather-sorcery was attributed to men, while the witchcraft-accusation of “making hailstorms” was usually brought up against women!⁵³ At any rate this shows the influence of the witch-stereotype of theology, as opposed to the actual magical practices in the given area. Again this is not because witchcraft-persecution was directed against women, but rather because female sorcerers, healers, midwives and the female specialists of magic worked in the social context of narrower community which was a potential source of witchcraft-accusations.⁵⁴ Men, for example weather sorcerers, being sorcerers of the whole community, were less likely to become originators of conflicts inside the community;⁵⁵ female magic was practised in a more personal network of relationships. The observations of English anthropologists – Thomas, Macfarlane – are again relevant in this respect. Thomas says that in those cases where misfortunes cannot be explained by personal relationships, e.g. epidemics or fires – the suspicion of witchcraft does not appear.⁵⁶ On the other hand, in the areas where the number of male witches periodically exceeded the average percentage – as in certain parts of Stiria – we occasionally find the increasing importance of male sorcerers, and also that the traditional sectors of sorceress – in the case of Stiria weather magic – was temporarily regarded as belonging to the witches' activity.⁵⁷ In Finland, another area of male dominance, it was found that during the 17th century an increasing number of male sorcerers were accused of witchcraft, and by 1690 their numbers exceed those of the women – that is, here too

⁵⁰ KRAMER 1983: 222–223, 238–239.

⁵¹ LAGERLÖF-GÉNETAY 1990, VALENTINITSCH 1987b: 308.

⁵² KRISTÓF 1990, 1998, PÓCS 1995.

⁵³ DIENST 1987a: 191–192.

⁵⁴ DIENST 1987a: 174, 183–194, BIEDERMANN 1987: 110.

⁵⁵ COHN 1975, 239–14, KIECKHEFER 1976, 62, and WUNDER 1983, 201 draw similar conclusions.

⁵⁶ THOMAS 1971: 665. The importance of personal conflicts is stressed by all detailed researches e.g. COHN 1975: 246–247, KIECKHEFER 1976: 62, LAGERLÖF-GÉNETAY 1990: 60, LABOUIE 1991: 189–191.

⁵⁷ SCHÖNLEITNER 1986/87, VALENTINITSCH 1987b: 314.

the sudden increase of the dominating sex was caused by the accusation of sorcerers, but now this happened to the opposite sex.⁵⁸ This similar process into the opposite direction suggests that the sex of the sorcerers and the roles connected to their sex as secondary factors play an important role in the changes of the proportions of the sexes. We can say that the female roles of female sorcerers generally, although not in all cases had a dominance over the male roles, and they had a great effect on the extremely high proportions of female witches.

The sorcerers, healers and all kinds of practitioners of magic, as they were integrated into the village system of witchcraft brought with them their specific belief-system and mythologies. One example is the role of the fairy-sorcerers that is sorcerers in contact with fairies in Eastern-Southeastern Europe whose fairy-mythology, as the Hungarian trial-records show us, went through a minimal transformation when they became witches.⁵⁹ The situation is similar in the case of Southeastern European witches who preserved their beliefs about their “nether world” and its snake goddess,⁶⁰ or with the shamanistic ancestors of European witches studied by Ginzburg: or to be more exact, with the female branch of these sorcerers, the female *benandanti* of the Alp region, who could see the dead and find hidden treasure and who were the “initiates” of the “goddesses” Holda, Perchta, etc., leaders of the host of the dead.⁶¹ The mythology of the sorcerers as “witch-ancestors” – as it has already been mentioned – was predominantly a female mythology. Due to their black, underworld, deathly connotations these female mythologies quickly found their way to the belief-system of witchcraft, they easily became parts of the local popular witch-stereotypes, and they formed the different European variants of what Cohn calls “the night witch”.⁶²

The expansion of the witch-stereotypes with female mythologies of sorcerers strengthened the tendency to suspect evil magic by female healers and sorcerers in case of actual misfortune, and to accuse the “reputed witch” possessing a female sorcerer-mythology. Thus one reason why women were selected to the role of witches is that the known stereotype was a female one. The official stereotype of the witchcraft-prosecutors also contained these elements of female mythologies – countless references are known in medieval ecclesiastic sources to strigae, to Holda, to Diana as witches, or queen of witches.⁶³ Where and when the stereotypes of the prosecutors could exercise an influence on the local belief-systems, finding similar elements in the other the two could strengthen each other. Norman Cohn, who analyzed elite and popular stereotypes, described such processes, and stated that: “the ancient tradition of night-flying female cannibals or strigae gradually merged with the originally separate tradition of the malevolent sorcerers or malefica who could harm men or beast through magical herbs and spells”.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ HEIKKINEN–KERVINEN 1990: 278.

⁵⁹ PÓCS 1989, 1995.

⁶⁰ PÓCS 1993.

⁶¹ GINZBURG 1990: 96–104.

⁶² COHN 1975: 206–218, CARO BAROJA 1967: 83, BIEDERMANN 1987: 212.

⁶³ For the relevant medieval sources see: LEA 1939: I. 170–198.59.

⁶⁴ COHN 1965: 17.

What we have said so far makes it clear that the question “why witches are women” cannot be answered with a simple explanation based on a single factor. The witch-accusations were not homogeneous at all, and, what is more, the concept of the witch was made up of several components in the background of the different witch-types. In my analysis of the 16th–18th century witch-trials in Sopron county in the Western part of Hungary I examined the roles of the above-mentioned factors separately and together. I managed to identify the three basic types of accusations and witches. These correspond to the three types specified e.g. by Larner (i.e. the “social witch” induced by neighbourhood conflicts, the sorcerer witch, and in connection with the second type the reputed witch possessing a witch-mythology).⁶⁵ In all three cases there existed a more gender-specific secondary factor: the female role in the community, the chiefly female sphere of everyday life and a woman-centric witch-mythology. These factors emphasize the female side of the witch-stereotype and increase the number of female reputed witches. Thus, in connection with the different types of Early Modern rural witchcraft, the answer to our question is briefly the following: the majority of the witches were women because the majority of the accusations were based on conflicts that could develop in the female spheres of private and communal life. Another important point is that the accusations were supported by a “female” witch-ideology and mythology: with certain kinds of conflicts and certain witch-types, this female mythology could become in itself a factor inducing witch-accusations. These two “female” factors – the social and ideological incentives of the witch-accusations – could function hand in hand and thus inevitably lead to the female dominance in witch-accusations. The joint functioning of these factors – and their reinforcing effect on each other – resulted in the far higher proportion of female witches. These women did not fight a “sex war” against men, and yet, with the accomplishment of their female roles in everyday life, with their specifically female means and knowledge – and with the partial support of special “witch-deities” – they succeeded in surpassing men: in a sad statistics, the statistics of witch-burnings.

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⁶⁵ LARNER 1981: 114, PÓCS 1994.

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