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The male witch in Poland? Men before the Kleczew's town court**

In May 1693, a townswoman named Sabina was brought before the Kleczew town court. She was accused of witchcraft and quickly interrogated by the judges, at which point she started to name other alleged witches, from both Kleczew and the surrounding villages. Because of her denunciations two more women from Kleczew were quickly put on trial accused of witchcraft: Maruszka Mruczykotka and Kurkowa. It was the beginning of one of the very last great witch trials in the region of Kleczew.

Most of the trial followed a well-worn pattern familiar to Kleczew judges for decades. Both Mruczykotka and Kurkowa denounced other women, and under interrogation and torture, they began to confess to the most hideous crimes: Mruczykotka supposedly flew to Bald Mountain (Ms. 859, f. 115v.), was married with a devil named Jasiek (the Polish derivative of Jan, i.e. John) and had sex with him (though he was supposedly “cold” (Ms 859, f. 115v)). What’s more: she claimed to have killed one or two children by poisoning them (Ms 859, f. 117r) as well as poisoning one peasant (Ms 859, f. 117r). Sabina also supposedly flew to Bald Mountain where she made an apostasy and was married with the devil named Jan (Ms 859, f. 115r), while Kurkowa supposedly made her husband blind with a special powder that she had received from her mother (Ms 859, f. 116v).

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At this point however the familiar pattern of a witchcraft trial began to break down. While describing sabbaths that the three of them allegedly attended they mentioned a few men, whose actions seemed suspicious. One Skotarz of Słaboszewek was alleged to have appeared one day on the sabbath and brought with him a shirt, boots and *żupan* (an outer garment worn by nobles) (Ms 859, f. 117v) of the noble whom he served to (supposedly to bewitch them).

Concerned judges decided to bring these men before the court as their jurisdiction allowed them to. Their suspicions proved to be right – they were not mere passive observers of the events that took place on the sabbaths, nor were they idle musicians. It turned out that these men practiced witchcraft just like the accused women.

During the interrogation under torture one Mateusz Kaczmarek confessed that he supposedly flew to Bald Mountain where he was married to the she-devil named Hanka – to his disappointment the relationship did not evolve well, because Hanka turned out to be cold and unpleasant in direct contact (Ms 859, f. 117r). The same was also true of Teodor (“a boy from Słaboszewek”) who further confessed to abusing his own brother, Jarek – one day he put an ant in his ear which Jarek could not rid himself of or kill in any way, suffering unspeakable torment for a full three days (Ms 859, f. 117v). For their crimes all five of them were burnt at the stake (Ms 859, f. 119r–120r).

The cited trial is one of only three witchcraft cases from the region of Kleczew in which men acted as defendants – a region which in the 17th and early 18th centuries was an arena of one of the largest witch hunts in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In a little over a century, over 50 witch trials occurred there with nearly 120 defendants. The uniqueness of these three trials alone merits a closer look, for through them, we gain a better insight into the qualities that a person who practiced witchcraft was imagined to possess. In this paper, I will also cite numerous examples from other countries, which demonstrate that associating only women with witchcraft (as we so often do) proves false, as all over Europe, men were also accused.

For a very long time the issue of men accused of witchcraft was completely overlooked by Polish and European historiography. It was assumed that, as Polish historian Jacek Wijaczka rightly points out ‘... they took part only in the persecution of women accused of witchcraft – as judges, accusers, executioners and witnesses, and were not themselves accused or tried’ (Wijaczka, 2022, p. 116. See also: Opitz-Belakhal, 2009, p. 90, 96; Stokes, 2009, p. 60). Today we know that such a view was wrong – men accounted for about 20% of European witch hunt victims, and in some areas (such as Muscovy) they even outnumbered the accused women. Nevertheless, the historiography of witchcraft trials for a long time overlooked male victims of the witch hunt, thus subscribing to the claims of Heinrich Kramer, author of the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum*, who also minimized the participation of men in the crime of witchcraft (Herzig, 2010, p. 63. See also: Broedel, 2002, p. 136). For a Dominican raised on anti-heretical texts, who spent most of his clerical life in polemics with the Waldenses, the heresy of witchcraft was a feminine crime as much as the heresy of the Waldensians was a masculine one. Nonetheless, early modern European culture permitted the existence of sorcerers, taking a bloody toll in some areas of Europe.

The first major and meticulously researched study on men accused of witchcraft in Central Europe was a book titled *Man as Witch: Male Witches in Central Europe* by Rolf Schulte (it is

worth noting that Schulte's work, though in theory devoted to the region of Central Europe, in reality concerns only German-speaking lands. In the Early Modern period, this consisted of the Holy Roman Empire – therefore the book ignores not only the vast territories of the Poland-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Hungary, but also those territories that were part of the Empire, but used different languages – e.g. Czech and Slovenia).

In the book, Shulte proposed four main theories regarding who the men accused of witchcraft were and under what circumstances they came before the courts. In this paper I will analyze in detail all four theories presented by Schulte and compare them with Polish archival sources to see to what extent these hypotheses are defensible in relation to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The central points of reference here are the 17th and 18th century criminal records of the town court of Kleczew, supplemented by information gathered in the extensive Polish Witch Trials Database edited by Michael Ostling, as well as papers and books by Małgorzata Pilaszek, Kateryna Dysa and Jacek Wijaczka.

As previously noted, Rolf Schulte proposed in his work four theories about the men accused of witchcraft, and the circumstances that surrounded the accusations. They **are** as follows:

- relationship theory – men who were accused of witchcraft were closely related to women who were accused as witches, and therefore were somewhat “collateral losses” of the witch-hunt process;
- mass-trial theory – men were more often accused in great (mass) trials, which were characterized by a long chain of accusations and denunciations, during which the female-witch stereotype broke down;
- difference theory – men were not accused of the same witchcraft crimes that women were;
- heresy theory – men were accused of witchcraft in those territories, where witchcraft was linked with the crime of heresy rather than harming (Schulte, 2009, p. 3).

Let's begin our elaboration with the mass-trial theory – this is easy enough to verify, since the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth didn't witness as many “great” witch trials as the Holy Roman Empire, described by Schulte and other scholars. In 1972 Erik Midelfort argued that the longer witch trials in certain regions lasted, the more probable it was for men to be accused of witchcraft. According to his claim, the longer the witch trials lasted, the bigger they became, with more people executed as a result. During this process, the stereotype of the witch figure as an old, hideous woman weakened, and as a result, when trials became ‘mass trials’, (Midelfort classified as “mass trials” those with at least 20 executions), local communities began to leave behind old prejudices, instead panicking, accusing and executing anyone who was only slightly suspected of witchcraft (Midelfort, 1972, p. 72-74, 179).

As Schulte claims, the methodology used by Midelfort has three major flaws. Firstly, based only on the criterion of executions, Midelfort classified trials which only resulted in a few deaths as “small, ” even when they started with a great number of accused people. Secondly, the decision to classify some trials as “great”, and others as “independent” or “small” doesn't account for the time perspective. Witch trials were extended in time and though at first some of them might seem to be fully independent from the others, they might be linked by similar or even the very same group of judges. Finally, following the preceding arguments, due to the

remoteness in time and the mechanism of denunciations, it is often very hard to define if this or that trial was linked with others and if it should or should not be counted as part of the same witch-hunt “wave” (Schulte, 2009, p. 77-78). (It is worth noting that in Polish conditions this is even more problematic because of the poverty and dispersion of early modern archival records) (Wyporska, 2013, p. 26)¹.

As aforementioned, one must be extremely cautious while comparing Polish and German witch trials, especially when it concerns the number of accused and executed people. Midelfort’s distinction of witch trials as “small” (1-3 executions), “middle” (or “small witch-panic” – 4-19 executions) and “great” (or “great witch-panic” – 20 and more executions) (Midelfort, 1972, p. 72-74) cannot be used to describe the size of the witch trials outside the borders of the Holy Roman Empire. Meticulous archival research conducted over the years has shown that just over 3800 people were tried for witchcraft in Scotland, of whom sentences are known for 305 – 2/3 of them were executed, which the authors of the study consider to be representative for the rest of the archival sources². As for Hungary we know of about 4300 defendants accused of witchcraft in about 2300 trials (with less than 2 accusations per trial) of whom some 700 were sentenced to death (in the case of the number of people sentenced to death, Hungarian historians point out that the surviving records are often incomplete and often do not contain the verdict sentence) (Klaniczay, Pócs, 2017, p. 5). It is estimated that about 2000 people were tried for witchcraft in England, of whom between 300 and 500 were sentenced to death (Macfarlane, 1999, p. 61-63). In Finland, which was part of Sweden during the 16-18th centuries, there were about 710 trials (Toivo, 2016, p. 13) during which some 109 people were sentenced to death³. What is interesting is that in the latter case, men definitely dominated among those accused and found guilty – it was only at the apogee of Finnish witch trials that the traditional image of the male sorcerer collapsed and the number of women accused of witchcraft increased, but overall never exceeded the number of men brought to trial (Heikkinen, Kervinen, 1993, p. 319-322).

The number of executions assumed by Midelfort for each type of witch trial does not reflect the reality outside of the Holy Roman Empire. I argue that in the case of the Commonwealth as “small” witch trials (and also as the most dominant category), we shall classify the cases in which one to two people were effectively accused of witchcraft (“effectively” meaning here that such people were accused and actually tried); as “middle” trials we can accept those in which three to four people were effectively accused, while every trial with 5 or more effective accusations shall be classified as “great”. As we can see, the difference is not only in absolute numbers – while Midelfort in his distinctions speaks about the number of *executions*, I argue that in the case of the Commonwealth we can use a similar distinction if only we speak about the number of effective *accusations*. As I’ll show in the later part of this article, though the Kleczew town court was seemingly very interested in prosecuting witches (See e.g.: Ostling, 2011), the vast majority of witch trials that occurred there were independent and “small” ones,

¹ Cf.: <http://biblioteka.ptpn.poznan.pl/o-bibliotece/historia/> (access: 28-01-2025).

² <https://www.shca.ed.ac.uk/Research/witches/introduction.html> (access: 15-09-2024).

³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20080632022649/http://www.chronicon.com/noita/kuolemantuomiot.html> (access: 28-01-2025).

with only a few exceptions that we could class as “middle” and “great” (mostly after the Deluge⁴). Included in this number is also the extremely brutal witch-hunting that happened in the region of Kleczew, which without any doubt shall be classified as a “great” case.

But we still must decide by which criteria we will differentiate between independent and dependant trials (that is – whether we shall join them together or not). It is a very difficult question. While considering the cases that occurred before the Kleczew town court, it is clear that we cannot use the time-criterium. In many cases the fact that two or more people were tried over the course of one or several days, doesn't immediately mean that these trials were in any way connected with each other. It was so in the cases of Anna of Dębsko and Brygida Balwierka in 1625 (Ms. 859, f. 9r–15v)⁵ – Brygida was tried the very same day that the case of Anna was concluded. Despite the fact that the trial took place before the very same judges and at nearly the same time, there are no grounds whatsoever to assume that those two cases were connected with each-other in any way – they were two separate cases of witchcraft accusations, that were not connected by the accused (neither Anna, nor Brygida ever spoke of one another), nor by the witnesses, nor by the accusers.

On the other hand, the two trials that occurred a year earlier in the neighbouring villages of Gostomie and Napruszewo (Ms. 859, f. 1v–8v) shall be, as I argue, treated as one case – despite the fact that they were separated by a few days and by location, they were connected by the accused (all three women denounced one another and corroborated each other's testimonies) and the motive (the bad treatment of one of the accused, Anna Kalieczyna, by her landlord). A similar situation repeated during the great witch-hunt, that Wojciech Breza, the landlord of the village Wąsosze, led with the help of the Kleczew court between 1688 and 1691 (See e.g.: Wiślicz, 2004, p. 75–76; Ostling, 2011, p. 61; Hajdrych, 2021b). Breza, convinced that his only son had been killed by witches, quickly became one of the most devoted witch persecutors in the history of Kleczew and its neighborhood. Nearly every witch trial that occurred in these years before the Kleczew town court was connected by the accuser, the accused (very often denouncing each other) and the motivation (the murder of Franciszek Breza).

For the purposes of this article I used the model I borrowed from Midelfort, however I modified it, adjusting it to the Polish reality. I therefore used the distinction of “small”, “middle” and “great” cases, however I determined the number of accused people based on the common motive of the crime or the people who took part in the trial (witnesses and accused). It needs to be stressed here: my values relate to the “cases”, not to “trials” – according to criteria that I used, one “case” could be constituted of two or more “trials”, never however otherwise. I am fully aware that my model isn't ideal, but I believe that it serves much better than Midelfort's model and it allows us to show if men were – as Midelfort once had stated – accused of witchcraft only in the mass trials, during which the stereotype of the old female witch had broken down.

⁴ The Deluge – Polish-Sweden war of 1655–1660. During the first phase of the war (1655–1656) Sweden forces occupied most of the Polish territory. The war led to significant destruction of Poland, especially its western territories (including Greater Poland where Kleczew was located) where the fiercest battles took place.

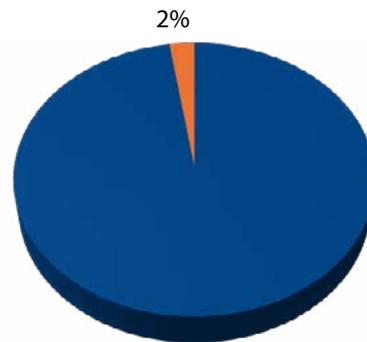
⁵ About Anna's case one can find my article from a few years ago: Hajdrych (2017). To both Anna's and Brygida's case I also devoted large part of my PhD thesis: Hajdrych (2021, p. 35–71).

With such criteria, the situation in the region of Kleczew was as follows: between 1624 and 1738, the Kleczew town court led ca. 42 cases, during which about 123 people were accused of witchcraft (the uncertainty comes from the very bad physical state of the Kleczew records, which makes it impossible to identify some people). Those 42 cases can be divided as follows: 38 “small”, 2 “middle” and 2 “great” cases. As Tomasz Wiślicz once rightly stated, in this number we can count only 3 men effectively accused of witchcraft whom, when we compare them to almost 120 women accused of being witches, could potentially go unnoticed (Wiślicz, 2004, p. 91).

Does this represent a percentage representative for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the time? Definitely not. During an extensive archival search conducted more than fifteen years ago, Małgorzata Pilaszek was able to identify 1316 specific individuals accused of witchcraft, 142 of whom were men (ca. 10.6%) (Pilaszek, 2008, p. 297), a percentage that is lower, but relatively close to that of Western Europe (which ranges between 20% and 25%) (Voltmer, 2009, p. 74; Opitz-Belakhal, 2009, p. 97)⁶.

Despite the very small percentage of men accused of witchcraft in the region of Kleczew, it is important to note what proportion of them were accused during the “great” cases – if we believe the claims of Midelfort, it is exactly where we should find them. And indeed – all three of them were accused during the two “great” cases, which happened just after the great witch persecution that was led by Wojciech Breza.

The percentage of men and women effectively accused of witchcraft



Although the low number of men accused of witchcraft in the region of Kleczew, as well as the overall low number of “great” witchcraft cases, may lead to the danger of underestimation and over-interpretation, it is worth looking more closely at those three accusations – especially since we know only very little about them from other regions of the Commonwealth (Cf.: Wijaczka, 2006, p. 69–85; Pilaszek, 2008, p. 297; Ostling, 2011, p. 35–43)⁷.

⁶ In Moravia the percentage of men accused of witchcraft was also about 20%. For example in Velké Losiny neighborhood there were 10 men accused of witchcraft of the total number of 57, while in the Šumperk district they accounted for 6 out of 25 defendants in total. See: (Petrášková, 2023, p. 31–32). In the early 17th century, during the height of witchcraft trials in Western Europe a major witch hunt took place in the Navarre region. During it 11 people were sentenced to the stake, 4 of whom were men (about 36%). Another 18 defendants vowed to abandon the practice of witchcraft and return to the bosom of the Catholic Church – 6 of them were men (about 33%). See: Echeverria (2014, p. 110).

⁷ Even in the east parts of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth number of men trialed for witchcraft was very small, though the percentage of them was twice as great as in the western parts of this vast country; see: Dysa (2020, p. 46–47).

Firstly, the circumstances that led to those three men being accused of witchcraft and eventually executed at the stake are striking. While in the first case in 1693 both men were accused at a very advanced stage of the trial, and also both were denounced by women who were originally accused of witchcraft in this case (therefore we can see here the similarities with the cases elaborated by Midelfort), the second (1698) had a different character altogether. Kazimierz Ślosarek, who was executed during this case, wasn't accused of witchcraft by previously accused women. The reality was the complete opposite – it was he who was originally accused of witchcraft and it is because of his testimony (which he made under torture) that other people (women) were accused of witchcraft, which quickly turned a “small” case into a “great” one.

When we look at the records from other towns we will clearly see that the mass-trial theory in regard to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth is even weaker than in the case of Kleczew. Indeed, the records show that men were often accused of witchcraft in trials where they were the only defendants. As an example let us consider the cases described by Małgorzata Pilaszek: in 1731 a town court in Grabowiec heard the case of Marcin Strzemecki, who was accused by his master of threatening him with witchcraft and of an armed ambush (Pilaszek, 2009, p. 300). In 1747, beekeepers from the village of Bagnówka near Białystok suspected one of the men in their midst of witchcraft (Pilaszek, 2009, p. 301). In 1654 a town court in Zbąszynek tried a certain Adam Jarpianek from the village of Nowa Wieś – he was accused of giving himself to the devil, using weather magic, and participating in sabbaths (Pilaszek, 2009, p. 304). It is worth mentioning a trial rich in detail from Jarocin, which was discovered a few years ago by Jacek Wijaczka – in this trial the accused sorcerer was said to have caused a lot of problems for the local court, including by using sorcery to throw off and untangle the knots with which the local authorities tried to entangle him for the duration of the trial and thus break free (Wijaczka, 2011, p. 202-207).

These examples can be supplemented by data collected by Michael Ostling – in his database we can find information on dozens of men tried for witchcraft, but most of them stood trial in small or at most medium-sized cases. For example, Grzegorz Jarmuz, who was tried in 1633 in Wola Żarczycka, was accused alongside his wife⁸. Grzegorz Dubeltreyn, accused in 1738 in Wągrowiec, who was subjected to a water ordeal at his own request, resulting in his death, was the only defendant in the case there (Akta Miasta Wągrowiec I/25, p. 75. See also: Moeglich, 2016, p. 49). The same was true of Jan Kort tried in Wągrowiec in 1727 (Akta Miasta Wągrowiec I/25, p. 74-76. See also: Moeglich, 2016, p. 70). Michał Światała who was sentenced to the stake in 1723 by the same court was tried alongside his wife (Akta Miasta Wągrowiec I/25, p. 56-60. See also: Moeglich, 2016, p. 66-67), and Jan Wilczek, tried in 1693 in Rogi and sentenced to a flogging, was the only defendant in the case (Akta samorządu-sądu wsi Rogi 1531-1778, p. 446).

An interesting addition to these examples is the case of a man from the neighbourhood of Kleczew who did not stand trial for witchcraft, but rather for arson, and who denounced his own wife as being a witch in a desperate attempt to dilute responsibility for the crime he committed (Ms. 859, f. 266-268).

Men who were accused in the great witch trials are much harder to find – above I mentioned two such cases from the region of Kleczew. Among the men accused in great trials was

⁸ The private collection of Józef Półciwiartek in Rzeszów, item #173.

Jan Szczecina who was accused before the town court in Turek along with five women – all six were found guilty, but only Jan was sentenced to banishment; all five women were burned at the stake (Akta miasta Turek I/30, f. 14v–21v).

As we can see then, it wasn't always necessarily the case that men were only accused during the "great" witchcraft cases – sometimes they could be accused during the "small" cases (sometimes even originally being the only accused), which might then, though not always, evolve into "middle" or "great" trials.

The difference theory outlined by Schulte can be partially supported by the source material from Kleczew, but not in the exact sense that Shulte argues. Though men's testimonies in the cases of witchcraft are scarce it is clear that local communities imagined the magical activities of male and female witches in a similar way. When interrogated under torture, Theodor, „chłopiec z Słaboszewka” (“a boy from the village of Słaboszewek”) (Ms. 859, f. 117v), testified that he had used a magic poison to kill his own brother (Ms. 859, f. 117v) and to attack another person by putting in his ear a living ant, which caused painful headaches: “Bez trzy dni nie mógł i okrutni bol głowi cierpiał” (“for three days he was unable to do anything and he suffered terrible headaches”). Another accused male witch, Mateusz, testified that with the help of his demonic she-lover he had destroyed the crops in the fields (Ms. 859, f. 117v). And lastly, Kazimierz Ślosarek, whose testimonies and denunciations had started the “great” witchcraft case in 1698 – though he didn't admit to practicing *maleficium*, he was accused of being a male witch by the woman who was previously denounced by him and with this label he was eventually executed at the stake. Jacek Wijaczka argues that Joachim Guttejahr and Jan Dirickens, who were tried for witchcraft, were accused of similar crimes as female witches: destroying crops, sending down weeds onto fields etc. (Wijaczka, 2022, p. 124–125). Western historians also come to similar conclusions noting that it was not uncommon for men accused of witchcraft to be “feminized” in the eyes of judges and accusers, and to be treated less like men and more like women.

There was, however, one striking difference between men and women accused of witchcraft – men described imagined events during sabbaths in vastly different ways from female witches and this is the place where the difference theory can to some extent be applied. One of the main elements of imagined sabbaths both in Poland and in Kleczew, were supposedly orgiastic sexual relationships between humans and devils or demons. This formed a solid element of Polish beliefs when it came to the motive of sabbaths, one of the components of the so-called “cumulative concept of witchcraft” (Opitz-Belakhal, 2009, p. 97). No matter what the supposed cause of one's participation in such a meeting, he or she was automatically suspected of sexual intercourse with male (in the case of women) or female devils (the case of men).

It is striking however that women were always much more restrained in admitting such guilt than men. A few years ago, Michael Ostling stressed this issue when addressing Polish witch-trial testimonies involving the narratives about sex with devils: “when Polish accused witches, under torture, confessed relatively quickly to the crimes of witchcraft, but made every attempt to deny the accusation of diabolical sex or, if that failed, to make clear that it was unwilling, undesired, and painful, they were staking their claim to a partial share of the honour they had lost through the process of the trial. At the point in the proceedings when such

confessions were made, there was usually no possibility at all that the accused would escape death at the stake; they could still, however, avoid declaring themselves to be whores" (Ostling, 2011, p. 220. See also: Roper, 1994, p. 204, 216, 221).

It was so with women from Kleczew and its neighbour villages. Sexual intercourse with the devil, if it was mentioned at all, appeared only in the very advanced stages of the case. Even then, however, these descriptions were very brief and often conditional – women interrogated under torture sometimes admitted that they had intercourse with the devil, but quickly caveated their descriptions with the statement that they took no pleasure in it or that they were married to this or that devil by other witches and that they only had sexual intercourse with him in the manner in which a wife is inclined to have sexual intercourse with her husband (See: Ostling, 2011, p. 214-220). The examples are numerous. Tried in 1646, Zofia from the village of Kownaty, confessed to the judges that she had sexual intercourse with the devil named Rokitka, who supposedly had forced her to renounce God and obliged her to harm other people. But when her story turned to the actual intercourse with the devil (perhaps influenced by questions asked by the judges), Zofia suddenly denied that she ever had sex with him: „chciał ten djabeł ze mną leżeć, ale ja nie chciała” (“this devil wished to sleep with me, but I didn't want it”) (Ms. 859, f. 230v). One *Żołnierka*, questioned in the same year in the village of Nieborzyn, reluctantly admitted under torture that she had sexual contact with the devil, stressing however that the instances were sparse („Był u mnie Diabeł raz albo trzy, gdy meża nie było doma...” “The devil was in my house once or thrice, while my husband was absent...” (Ms. 859, f. 237v)) and that she was involved in the relationship with him „jako z mężem” (“like with a husband”) (Ms. 859, f. 237v). In 1646, Agnieszka Bałatka stated during torture that she supposedly had had a devil husband, with whom she had used to sleep behind the oven, when her real husband left the house – the devil however appeared to be very picky and while she grew old, he supposedly didn't want to sleep with her anymore (Ms. 859, f. 241r) (could this be a depiction of her actual relationship with her human husband, but told within the demonological discourse?). A truly exceptional testimony was given by Maryna Janowa during her trial in 1668 in the village of Roztoka – her story involved not only her very reluctant attitude towards sex with the devil, but also bore to this day very explicit birthmark of the raping her by five men, retold within the demonological discourse. Maryna supposedly became a witch taken from her house by five devils who forced her to renounce God. After that, Maryna stated, she was severely beaten by them and forced numerous times to have intercourse with all of them together (Ms. 859, f. 36v). This, as well as the type of witchcraft allegedly practiced by the men, contradicted the claims of Kramer who was unable to admit the thought of a potential sexual relationship between a man and a demon or demoness at all (Herzig, 2010, p. 69).

It wasn't the case however, when it came to the testimonies of male witches and sorcerers. Nowhere in the Polish records can we find evidence that men argued that their sexual relationships were unpleasant or painful, nor that they were forced to have sex with female demons. On the contrary, for men sex with the she-devils was often recorded as pleasant and satisfying. I know of only one record in which a man testifies that his devil lover was “cold”, but even he never complained beyond that (Ms. 859, f. 117v).

These findings clearly show that the difference between male and female witches didn't lie in their imagined magical activities, but in their attitude towards sexual intercourse. Women accused of practicing witchcraft, when it came to testimonies about sexual intercourse with devils, tried to do everything to preserve their good name – since women's honour was strictly linked with their sexuality (Cf. Ostling, 2011, p. 209–224; Roper, 1994, p. 54–79; Ferber, 2009, p. 221; Korczak-Siedlecka, 2021, p. 179–214). Even during interrogation, accused of witchcraft and the most horrible abominations, they mostly stated that they didn't willingly give themselves to the devils, and even when they did, they stressed that they did it only out of marital obligation.

The analysis of these two theories leads us directly to the relationship theory. As was already stated, none of the three men from the region of Kleczew effectively accused of witchcraft were in any way related to other witches. For the rest of the Polish lands the results are not much higher. As of January 2025, I was able to find only a handful of such accusations in Michaels Ostling's database. One of them was that of Michał Maximowicz, accused and tried in 1706 in Kowel along with his wife, whose name is unknown to us today – both were acquitted (Dysa, 2020, p. 108). The second case is the aforementioned Jan Szczecina whose wife Jadwiga was accused of witchcraft in the same case (Akta miasta Turek I/30, f. 14v–21v). The third and the last case of this type I found was that of one Wawrzyniec, co-accused of witchcraft in Poznań in 1669 with his mother Zofia Papierniczanka (Akta Miasta Poznania, I/643, f. 137, 148, 153–165).

But what's even more important – as I pointed out before, in Kleczew's crime register there were also men that were related to female witches who supposedly went to sabbaths, and who sometimes were seen to support their wives nefarious activities but were NOT effectively accused of witchcraft (See: Ms. 859, f. 134r, 158r) and were not punished in any way, and the only prerequisite for not bringing them to the court was their supposed bewitching by female witches.

Unfortunately, we don't have enough examples from Poland to verify the heresy theory – though we know of a few cases of men accused of witchcraft in western parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (i.e. where many Protestant confessions and religious conflicts were the strongest), there are too little of them to draw a decisive conclusion. It is still worth noting, however, that a similar situation could be observed in 16th–18th century eastern voivodships of the Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth, which were equally (if not more) diverse in terms of confessions than Greater Poland (Szady, 2010, p. 183–206).

Does the above lack of application of Shulte's and Midelfort's hypotheses (which were supposed to concern Central and Eastern Europe) to the Polish material necessarily mean that the case of Polish men accused of witchcraft in the early modern period had no equivalent anywhere else in Europe? Not necessarily. For there are other models, sometimes applied to Western Europe, which may even fit the Polish reality better than those created on the basis of records from the eastern and central lands of the Holy Roman Empire. The phenomenon of men accused of witchcraft was approached in a multifaceted manner by Rita Voltmer who focused her study on the region delineated by the Rhine, Meuse and Moselle rivers in today's German-Luxembourg-French borderlands.

As in the case of Poland presented in this chapter, Voltmer also found that the association between people accused of witchcraft increased the chances of prosecution only slightly – too little to make it a rule. What's more, Voltmer points out that if such a relationship caused more

people to be brought before the court (relatives, household members, servants) then from a gender perspective it worked both ways – it was just as well that a woman (wife, mother, daughter) could stand trial accused of being a witch because of her close relationship with a tried or convicted sorcerer as it was for a man because of his close relationship with a woman accused of witchcraft (Voltmer, 2009, p. 84). This seems to fit Poland much better than the hypotheses made by Schulte and Midelfort.

As a second group of men accused of witchcraft, Voltmer points to young men, often boys (including shepherds but also sons of rich peasants) attending sabbaths, often because they were supposedly kidnapped by witches (Voltmer, 2009, p. 84–85). This group also fits much better with the Polish records than the proposals of Schulte and Midelfort – the example here would be the two young boys from Ślaboszewek mentioned above who were tried by the Kleczew town court and were the alleged husbands of two devils. It seems that among the men who were supposed to participate in the alleged sabbaths, only those who were outside of the jurisdiction of this or that court were not tried in Poland⁹. In the case of Kleczew there are many such cases, especially from the time of the great witch hunt organised in the late 1680s and early 1690s by Wojciech Breza (Ms. 859, f. 148v–150r).

In the Rhine-Meuse-Mosel region men who posed some degree of economic threat to their fellow beekeepers were also accused of witchcraft (Voltmer, 2009, p. 87). This again corresponds with the examples cited above, including the beekeepers of Bagnówka who in the mid-18th century accused one of the men in their circle of helping himself to bees with witchcraft.

The fourth category singled out by Voltmer consisted of men who were known for their non-normative behaviour – especially sexual ones such as adultery, sodomy, bestiality and incest. This group is absent in Kleczew's records because these crimes were tried under separate legal articles and the suggestion of witchcraft never appeared in them. Examples include the case of Jan Panasek who was tried for bestiality and that of Franciszek or Łukasz Foremny who committed bigamy by assuming a second name and taking a second wife in Drobnin, then conceiving a son with her (Akta miasta Kleczew I/4, p. 99–100). While the latter case did not go to trial due to the accused's flight from Drobnin in an unknown direction there is no suggestion in the correspondence between the authorities of the two towns that the accused might be considered a sorcerer.

The last two groups of men accused of witchcraft singled out by Rita Voltmer were directly related to Jesuit missions in the villages and include priests who kept concubines or engaged in superstitious activities. I am not aware of any such cases either from Kleczew or from any other Polish courts. Perhaps this should be put down to the lower level of confessionalization of the Polish lands and the general superficiality of Christianity among the Polish people (Cf.: T. Wiślicz, 2009, p. 31–42).

It seems therefore that the “typical” man accused of witchcraft in Poland is far from the figure presented by Schulte and Midelfort. More often he was not associated with women accused of witchcraft than he was. Not only did he not appear exclusively in large witch trials, but he even appeared in them less frequently than in small and medium ones, where he appeared

⁹ About the problems with the court jurisdiction in Poland see e.g.: Ostling (2011, p. 97–101).

as the only one or one of the few defendants with whom the whole case began. Once he stood accused of witchcraft it was imagined that his activities were no different from those of female witches – as in the case of women, men were believed to be equally destructive and focused on tormenting people and depriving them of their health. The only differences between women and men accused of witchcraft in Poland seemed to run solely along the lines of how representatives of both sexes approached the issue of describing sexual intercourse with the devil imposed on them by the demonological discourse – women approached the subject cautiously, masking themselves and hiding the fact that they did, admittedly, mate, with the devil, but did so only as a result of their marital duties, while men, whose honour was less connected with sexuality, had no need to make similar reservations. Finally, such men often came from the countryside and were alleged to be musicians at Sabbaths, or were accused by fellow artisans (e.g. other craftsmen) of using sorcery in their work to improve performance (which meant that their own production and profits were diminished due to the logic of limited goods, which was common in the thinking of the time).

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The male witch in Poland? Men before the Kleczew's town court

Summary

The article focuses on the phenomenon of men accused of witchcraft before Polish courts, with particular attention to the region of Kleczew in the eastern part of Greater Poland – one of the principal centers of witch hunting in early modern Poland. I demonstrate that men accused of witchcraft were typically not associated with female witches, and – contrary to some prevailing theories – the figure of the male witch did not appear exclusively during large-scale witch trials or periods of widespread panic. Rather, men also appeared as defendants in small- and medium-sized trials. Once accused, the male witch was imagined to possess the same attributes and capacities as his female counterpart. Like women, men were believed to be capable of inflicting harm, spreading illness, and undermining the health and well-being of others. I argue that the only consistent distinction between male and female witches in early modern Poland lay in their respective narratives regarding sexual intercourse with the devil – an element often imposed by the demonological discourse. While both genders were subject to this narrative framework, the way it was articulated and negotiated by male and female suspects followed gendered patterns shaped by broader cultural expectations.

Słowa kluczowe: czary, procesy czarownic, czarownica, wczesnonowożytna Polska, wczesnonowożytna Europa, historia

Key words: witchcraft, witch trials, male witch, early modern Poland, early modern Europe, history