

*Maria Bogucka*

## THE CENTRE AND PERIPHERY OF WITCHCRAZE

On the book: *Early Modern European Witchcraft. Centres and Peripheries*. Ed. by Bengt Ankarloo and Gustav Henningsen, Oxford 1990, Clarendon Press 477 p., bibl., index of persons, geographical names and subjects.

The subject of witchcraft persecution has been fascinating researchers for over 100 years and an enormous literature has developed around it. J. Michelet's *La Sorcière*, published in 1862, opens an extremely long list of works<sup>1</sup>. Over 70 years ago the English researcher Margaret Murray presented an anthropological version of the subject, going on the assumption that witches and their sabbaths existed in fact and were a continuation of pagan practices and beliefs in superficially Christianized societies of the 16th–17th c.<sup>2</sup> Very severely criticized and sometimes even ridiculed for several decades, in recent research Murray enjoys a certain rehabilitation. For the last 25 years the witcheraze of 16th–17th century has been one of the most frequently discussed issues of the early–modern period. This stage of discussion was opened by two significant works by Hugh Trevor-Roper<sup>3</sup> that present the problem in its wide geographical scope, from Scotland up to Transylvania, but place the persecutions only in the context of “learned”, “high” culture and combine the psychosis of witchcraft with Aristotelianism, Platonism, the Reformation and scientific “revolution” of those years. Both works are burdened by the fact that their author consciously distances himself from popular and mass culture, from the analysis of thoughts and emotions of the country folk world where the tragedy most often took place. H. Trevor-Roper published his studies at the close of the 1960s. It was precisely those years as well as the 1970s that brought new currents in historiography that postulated to write history “from below”,

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<sup>1</sup> J. Michelet, *La Sorcière*, Paris 1962.

<sup>2</sup> M. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, Oxford 1921.

<sup>3</sup> H. Trevor-Roper, *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change*, London 1967; the same author, *The European Witch-craze of the XVIth and XVIIth Centuries*, Harmondsworth 1969.

from the perspective of the common people. The problem of witchcraft psychosis was taken up anew within the framework of those currents and also again in its anthropological aspect by such outstanding researchers as C. Ginzburg<sup>4</sup>, A. Macfarlane<sup>5</sup>, K. Thomas<sup>6</sup>, B. Ankarloo<sup>7</sup>, H. C. Midelfort<sup>8</sup>, P. Boyer<sup>9</sup>, S. Nissenbaum<sup>10</sup>, E. W. Monter<sup>11</sup>, R. Muchembled<sup>12</sup>. Their works are linked by the fact that they are in a large measure focussed on the world of ideas and fears of simple country folk. The use, wherever it was possible, of modern quantitative methods taken from mathematics enabled the authors to provide a better-grounded documentation of the theses they develop. The hitherto approaches (among other that by Trevor-Roper), as excessively monolithic, were questioned thanks to the focus on local contexts as well as the attempt to create a map of trials in time and space. Above all, however, the authors succeeded in building two "models" of persecution: the English and continental one. Both K. Thomas as well as Macfarlane came to the conclusion that accusations of witchcraft in the early modern times were part of country life, a more endemic than epidemic phenomenon. They resulted from conflicts within country communes, and their number grew in the 16th–17th c. as a result of the socio-economic transformation of the countryside, entailing changes in the organization of charity. The English stereotype of a witch is a poor old woman; accusations concern mainly *maleficium* and not a pact with the devil, the notion of sabbath appears less frequently than in the trials on the Continent. On the other hand the "continental" model is based on the prevalence of elements of "learned" culture over the popular one: the core of the accusations concerns the heresy of making a pact with the devil, in the records of lawsuits the pictures of sabbath are very rich and participation in it is the main point of the indictments. Hence the verdicts were more severe on the continent and there were more executions than on the British Isles.

<sup>4</sup> C. Ginzburg, *The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the XVIth and XVIIth Centuries*, London 1983 (1st Italian edition: 1966).

<sup>5</sup> A. Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, London 1970.

<sup>6</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, London 1971.

<sup>7</sup> B. Ankarloo, *Trolldomsprocesserna i Sverige*, Lund 1971.

<sup>8</sup> H. C. Midelfort, *Witch-hunting in South-western Germany 1562–1684*, Stanford 1972.

<sup>9</sup> P. Boyer, S. Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, Cambridge, Mass., 1974.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> E. W. Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, Ithaca–London 1976.

<sup>12</sup> R. Muchembled, *Sorcières du Cambrèsis: L'Acculturation du monde rural aux XVIe et XVIIe ss*, in: Marie-Sylvie Dupont-Bouchat, Willem Frijhoff and Robert Muchembled, *Prophéties et sorcières dans le Pays-Bas*, Paris 1978; R. Muchembled, *La Sorcière au village (XVIe au XVIIe ss)*, Paris 1979.

In the works of some researchers concerning particular countries the Continental "model" gained a special profile due to the introduction of additional elements. Thus H. C. M i d e l f o r t, while studying big hunts in South-Western Germany, states that their rapid halting at the end of the 17th c. was not connected to the scientific "revolution", but rather to psychological reactions to the wave of accusations which became more and more indiscriminate and threatened ever wider social circles. Christina L a r n e r in her work on Scotland<sup>13</sup>, while presenting the accumulation of trials in the 17th c. which she terms as "a moral panic", places this phenomenon in socio-psychological context underlying, i.e. the authorities' need for "legitimization". The socio-political background of events is perceived, too, by P. B o y e r and S. N i s s e n b a u m, who say that the differentiation into adherents and adversaries to the trials at Salem corresponded with the father-group division in this town. The French researcher R. M u c h e m - b l e d connects the trials with the acculturation of the French countryside in the 16th-17th c., when society was subjected to strict discipline according to the needs of the early modern state powers. Another French historian, Robert M a n d r o u, also emphasizes the issue of political and social structures, showing the role of bureaucracy in the arrangement and execution of trials<sup>14</sup>. A separate current consists of works, since the 1980s very numerous, that analyse witchcraft persecution from the point of view of a woman's situation and gender relations in the early modern era. Side by side with the interesting analyses of the effects on women of social and mental transformations<sup>15</sup> we often have to deal here with works that develop extreme and anachronistic theses; e.g. the authoresses perceive in the trials exclusively symptoms of misogyny and the results of war between the sexes<sup>16</sup> and in the witches the first advocates of women's rights fighting against the Church and state<sup>17</sup>. Also the explanation of the trials by male-

<sup>13</sup> Ch. Larnier, *Enemies of God. The Witch-hunt in Scotland*, Oxford 1983.

<sup>14</sup> R. Mandrou, *Magistrats et sorciers en France au XVIIe s.*, Paris 1968.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. W. E. Monter, *The Pedestal and the Stake. Courtly Love and Witchcraft*, in: R. Bridenthal, C. Koonz (hrsg.), *Becoming Visible. Women in European History*, Boston 1977, pp. 121-136; S. Clark, *Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft*, Past and Present 87/1980/, pp. 98-127.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. D. Unverhau, "Ich bin eine Hexe". *Frauenbewegung und historische Hexenverfolgung*, "Kieler Blätter zur Volkskunde" 18/1986/, p. 61 and foll., also *Frauenbewegung und historische Hexenverfolgung*, in: A. Blauerl, (hrsg.), *Ketzer, Zauberer, Hexen. Die Anfänge der europäischen Hexenverfolgung*, Frankfurt/M 1990, pp. 241-283; P. Shuttle, P. Redgrove, *Die weisse Wunde Menstruation*, Frankfurt an Main. 1982, esp. pp. 212 and 234.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. D. Unverhau, *Frauenbewegung*, as above.



female competition in medicine and a wish of men–doctors to get rid of women–midwives seems to be simplified and ill–directed<sup>18</sup>.

Most witchcraft trial studies have for a long time been focussed on the chosen countries of Western Europe (Germany, France, England). Carl G i n z b u r g, while discovering the practices of the so–called *benandanti* in Northern Italy (Friuli) and their counterparts at the close of the 17th c. in Livonia, drew attention to the important position of “peripheral” regions of Europe in the witchcraft trials. Here, according to him, various archaic practices that lay at the start of many trials survived the longest. In the middle of the 1980s special conference was organized in Stockholm which was to analyse comparatively, according to the model once proposed by I. W a l l e r s t e i n, against the most extensive possible background, the problem of those peripheries. The book under discussion is in a large measure an aftermath of this conference. It first appeared in Swedish under the title *Häxornas Europa 1400–1700: Historiska och antropologiska studier*. Rättshistoriska studier 13, Lund 1987. It is composed of 18 studies by authors from various countries; they have been arranged in four parts: I. *Witchcraft, Law and Theology* (pp. 19–20); II. *Origins of Witches' Sabbath* (pp. 121–218); III. *Witch–Hunting in Scandinavia and other Peripheries* (pp. 219–424); IV. *Conclusions* (pp. 425–442).

The first part, discussing the phenomenon of witchcraft trials against the background of legal systems and theology, contains three studies touching on general questions. The Spaniard Julio Carlo B a r o j a (*Witchcraft and Catholic Theology*, pp. 19–44) presents in dashing manner, beginning with Antiquity, the development of Catholic demonological literature whose influence on the ideas of the judges and the defendants in witchcraft trials was enormous. He presents the transformations of the figures of the witch and images of the devil; the latter changes with years from a figure slighted in the early Middle Ages into a powerful demon, while a belief in the reality of the diabolical deeds ascribed to the witches is at same time established. Those types of visions were finally formulated in the 13th c. in the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas. A further development of fear and belief in the reality of the symptoms of Satanism occurred in the 14th and 15th cc., and the apogee of those phenomena came in the 16th c. The author presents the most important treaties born in the countries of the whole “civilized” Europe as well as papal bulls, however, he does not analyse their social and political context. The social aspects of the issue are emphasized more in the next study, by the Englishman Stuart C l a r k (*Protestant Demonology: Sin,*

<sup>18</sup> B. Ehrenreich, D. English, *Hexen, Hebammen und Krankenschwester*, München 1975, p. 17.

*Superstition and Society, c. 1520—c. 1630*, pp. 45–82). The article presents the Protestant demonological literature whose authors were, as the writer rightly states, neither jurists nor philosophers (as it happened in the case of Catholics), but common pastors. Clark maintains that the Protestant literature was also more interested in the technical side of magic than in the general matter of witchcraft and that its important part was a criticism and even opposition to witch-hunting. However, the author does not analyse the attitude to this problem taken by the great creators of Protestantism — Luther, Calvin, Zwingli — what leads to some impoverishment of his reflections. The third article, by the American John T e d e s c h i (*Inquisitorial Law and the Witch*, pp. 83–120) presents the legal background of witchcraft trials and analyses the respective legal procedures. The author mainly concentrates on Italy, describing the dealings of the Inquisition Courts, and reaches the conclusion that they were much more lenient to the accused than the procedures taking place in secular courts, that investigated the cases of witchcraft in France or in Germany (the witnesses were sworn in, the accused might prepare in advance a list of enemies that is persons suspected of partiality, the use of torture was limited, the verdicts were not so severe, etc.). This pioneering study, abolishing the earlier convictions of the sinister role of the Inquisition in witchcraft trials, deserves to be given special attention in further research.

Part II is devoted to a general problem that is frequently discussed in historiography — the origin and legend of the sabbaths. The well-known Italian researcher into popular culture, Carlo Ginzburg, in his study entitled *Deciphering the Sabbath* (pp. 121–138) associates the rise of representations of sabbath with the combination of two images: one born within “learned” culture, a result of the conviction of the existence of a devilish sect, and second one existing for ages in folklore and connected with the belief in the existence of persons endowed with special supernatural abilities who could travel in a trance to the kingdom of the dead. According to Ginzburg the image of sabbath was finally formed in the 14th c. in the regions west of the Alps and was connected with the marginalization of certain groups in the European society (Jews, heretics, lepers, witches). The stereotype of sabbath contained elements derived from the layers of folklore going far back in chronology (flight in the air, assuming animal forms), so it cannot be solely attributed to the imagination of the judges appearing at the trials, as some researchers, e.g. Norman C o h n, maintain<sup>19</sup>. Thus some observations made over 70 years ago by Margaret Murray find confirmation in recent studies

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<sup>19</sup> Norman C o h n, *Europe's Inner Demons*, London 1975.

(especially that concerning the so-called *benandanti* and their Finnish counterparts).

The French historian Robert Muchembled in his essay *Satanic Myths and Cultural Reality* (pp. 139–160), according to his earlier theses<sup>20</sup> develops the problem in the context of social acculturation and contrary to Ginzburg views the sabbath as a myth created by theologians whose ideas ruled the “learned” culture of the late Middle Ages and early modern times. He admits, however, at the same time that the descriptions of demonologists caused “a diabolization” of the practices and customs that had existed for ages in popular culture, especially the peasant one. Muchembled associates the persecution of witches with the action of acculturating rural areas taken by the political and religious elites within the framework of “disciplining” the society of early modern era.

A very interesting study is presented by the Englishman Robert Rowland (*Fantastical and Devilish Persons: European Witch-Belief in Comparative Perspective*, pp. 161–190). He opens his deliberations with a “model” of the witch in the 16th–17th cc., on the basis of an analysis of records of legal proceedings in various parts of Europe. They show an amazing consistency in the traits attributed to the witch and her behaviour. The contemporaries regarded it as a result of real Satanic plot by the witches, the 19th c. historians as the consequence of torture applied during trials. Rowland emphasizes that according to those images the transformation into a witch resulted from a person’s breach with society and the Church (a *sui generis rite de passage*) that led to the participation in the sabbath — a *sui generis* anti-world. The comparison of the European witch with the witch-doctors from primitive African societies, made successfully by K. Thomas and A. Macfarlane seems to Rowland uncorrected in the case of England precisely because of the theological aspect of European witchcraft. The realization of the differences in the forms of magic (the English one also differed from the Continental one) allows one to associate it closer with the social context and to understand better the background from which this phenomenon stemmed in each case.

The next study by the Swede Gustav Henningsen (*The Ladies from Outside: A Archaic Pattern of the Witches’ Sabbath*, pp. 190–215) presents slightly different roots as well as a different explanation of the idea of sabbath. The Henningsen sabbath is a diabolization of archaic myths (here the value of M. Murray’s old thesis is recognized again) which he shows by the example of transformations of the Sicilian cult of the fairies (believers

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<sup>20</sup> R. Muchembled, *Culture populaire et culture des élites, XVe — XVIIIe siècles*, Paris 1978.



were supposed to take part in orgiastic meetings in a trance-like state). The black sabbath of the witches is a negative version of this white sabbath, widespread in the popular beliefs of the Mediterranean basin. Richly documented, based on hitherto unknown sources (case materials), Henning-sen's article throws new light on the problem of mental transformations surrounding the witchcraft trials.

The most significant one in the book is part III, embracing nine studies devoted to the "peripheries" of Europe, little known in this respect. It presents in turn: Hungary (Gabor Klaniczay: *The Accusation and the Universe of Popular Magic*, pp. 219–256), Estonia (two articles: Maia Madar, *Estonia I: Werewolves and Poisoners*, pp. 257–272 and Juhan Khak, *Estonia II: The Crusade Against Idolatry*, pp. 273–284), Sweden (Bengt Ankarloo, *Sweden: The Mass Burnings 1668–1676*, pp. 285–317), Finland (Antero Heikkinen and Timo Kervinen, *Finland: The Male Domination*, pp. 319–337), Denmark (Jens Christian V. Johansen, *Denmark: The Sociology of Accusation*, pp. 338–365), Norway (Hans Eyvind Naess, *Norway: The Criminological Context*, pp. 367–382), Iceland (Kirsten Hastrup, *Iceland: Sorcerers and Paganism*, pp. 383–401), Portugal (Francisco Bettencourt, *Portugal: A Scrupulous Inquisition*, pp. 403–422). The volume is closed by part IV where we find two recapitulating essays: E. William Monter, *Scandinavian Witchcraft in Anglo-American Perspective*, (pp. 425–434) tries to characterize the peculiarities as well as the basis correspondence of the Scandinavia trials with the course of events on the British Isles and in New England (Salem). Peter Burke (*The Comparative Approach to European Witchcraft*, pp. 435–440), while recapitulating the most important theses of particular articles and stressing the benefits of comparative approach tries to draw on this basis a general portrait of European witchcraft trials in the early modern era.

On reading the volume many problems arise that are only superficially touched upon by particular authors. What was the influence on the trials of demographic factors such as the density of population and especially the so-called sex ratio, that is proportions between the sexes? B. Ankarloo e.g. rightly indicates that women greatly outnumbered men in the second half of the 17th c. in Sweden as the result of wars. This issue should be analysed also with reference to other regions. What was the role of socio-economic factors, e.g. supply and demand for labour, hired and compulsory labour, the development of capitalist relations? The majority of authors emphasize the importance of the legal system, especially the presence or absence of the Roman Law in it, but this observation seems to be too general, there is a need for a more insightful discussion of legal systems since, e.g., the

fragments devoted to Denmark or Portugal reveal the enormous importance of local traits in this respect. The problem often arises of relationship between the crisis periods (famine, war, plague) and the growing wave of persecution; the these that persecution grew a f t e r the climax of the crisis should be confirmed by further studies (the theses of R. Muchembled, E. Monter and G. Klaniczay exhibit divergences in this respect). Of great interest is G. Klaniczay's thesis about the correlation between the degree of urbanization and the trials, although it has not been taken up by other researchers. There is no attempt to interpret the phenomenon of the emergence of hundreds of children at the height of trials in Sweden (Dalarna 1668–1675). The comparison of this extremely interesting, grim phenomenon by E. W. Monter with only one corresponding occurrence in the Basque region in early 17th c.<sup>21</sup> would need to be complemented in the light of new research; children as accusers and victims appear also in the 17th c. Silesian trials<sup>22</sup>.

Almost all the essays unanimously state that in respect of the structure of the sexes in the trials, “peripheries” did not diverge from the “centre” — 80–93% of the accused and victims were everywhere women. Exceptions to the rule may be found only in Finland and Iceland, also in some regions of Estonia and Norway; the majority of men involved in witchcraft in those territories may be explained by longer and deeper survival of paganism that bore some traits similar to the African shamanism. While admitting that the establishment of Christianity in the country and the domination of “learned” over “popular” culture went hand in hand with the feminization of the witch stereotype, no author tries, however, to give a further explanation of this phenomenon. And yet it somehow had to reside in the socio-cultural context of the era. Many new studies show that the 16th and 17th cc. constituted a period of significant transformations in the situation of women. The Reformation developed their social and educational needs, without, however, creating a suitable framework for their satisfaction. The development of capitalism led to a more intensive competition in the labour market, above all a separation of production from the household. The factor of sex dominated a number of early modern problems, bringing about an unprecedented growth of tension in all social groups — this is proved among other things by an enormous number of publications, by the emergency of the anti- and pro-feministic literature, from learned treatises up to satirical, popular

<sup>21</sup> Cf. G. Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate. Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition*, Reno 1980.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Karen Lambrecht, *Hexenverfolgung und Zauberverprozesse in den schlesischen Territorien*, Köln-Weimar-Wien, 1995, p. 169 ff.



pamphlets and theatre plays. These texts were circulated in hundreds and thousands of copies in such countries as Germany, France, England, and shaped the mentality of both the élites and the popular masses<sup>23</sup>. In the work under discussion only B. Ankarloo poses himself the question, what could influence the shaping of the female stereotype of the witch, and seems to agree with the thesis of Ch. Lerner suggesting that the 16th–17th c. transformations created a portrait of a female as the element that menaced social order, identified with patriarchal order<sup>24</sup>. Indeed the civil and criminal law of the early modern times imposed on women a greater responsibility for their deeds than medieval law (hence such purely feminine crimes as prostitution or infanticide were more often tried and punished). The growing independence of women in respect of law as well as religion (in Protestantism) was connected with placing on them a greater responsibility for preserving and transmitting the cosmological and transcendental elements of popular culture. To this were added the results of demographic changes that upset the proportion of the sexes in the population. According to Ankarloo these were precisely the factors that lay at the basis of the great wave of trials at Dalarna in 1668–1675. The attention of researchers should be directed this way also in studying of other regions than Sweden.

In the picture of European “peripheries” there is a lack of the countries as Bohemia, Ukraine, Russia, Poland. There are some mentions of Poland (pp. 230, 440), but they are based on the worthless work of B. Baranowski. Although J. Tazbir’s article from “Zeitschrift für Reformationsgeschichte” has been quoted (p. 231) and appears in the bibliography, no real use has been made of it in the text. It seems ironic that Mr. Baranowski’s rather erroneous work, although it was published in Polish, remains the only source of knowledge about Poland, while a more recent publication in German has been disregarded.

It seems very interesting how the Wallerstein model “centre” — “peripheries”, constructed in the field of socio-economic history, has been applied to the issue of witchcraft trials, that is to the field of socio-cultural problems. The volume under discussion shows that resulting from this model comparative methods were used more extensively, providing a better investigative perspective and revealing the chronological shift of phenomena appearing in the “centre” and in the “peripheries”. A model thus created suggests, however, an interpretative thesis that seems alarming: it assumes

<sup>23</sup> Of the rich literature cf. Marie-Hélène Davies, *Life, Thought and Religion Mirrored in Illustrated Pamphlets 1535–1640*, Allison Park, Pennsylv. 1986 as well as Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety 1550–1640*, Cambridge 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Christina Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, London 1984, esp. pp. 84–88.

that the witchcraft trials were an indispensable element of the development that marked the 16th–17th c. Europe — and not its pathology. None of the authors words such a thesis expressis verbis, however it suggests itself in reading. Considering the sinister dimensions of the phenomenon — the first occurrence of a massive genocide in the history of Europe (the later ones came only in the 20th c.) the matter seems to deserve some serious reflection.

*(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)*