

Marking (dis)order: witchcraft and the symbolics of hierarchy in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Finland

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What do witchcraft and witch trials tell us about power and social hierarchy? Witch trials have often enough been explained in terms of social relations and schisms, particularly in local contexts. In a highly competitive world, disagreements resulted from and caused both attacks by suspected witches and accusations made against them. It has often been noted that in Sweden and Finland the social dynamics behind witch trials changed during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹ At this period, the authorities took a paradoxical lead both in initiating trials and in suppressing them, and as a consequence the neighbourhood's importance diminished in certain respects. Yet the benevolent magic prosecuted during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was firmly rooted in the neighbourhood community, the importance of which cannot be discounted. Witchcraft and witch beliefs were closely connected to questions of power and hierarchy in local as well as national contexts. In this discussion I will examine how the vocabulary and imagery of witchcraft and magic in the trials reflects the symbolics of social hierarchy as well as the basis and creation of hierarchies in peasant communities. First, however, a brief outline of witch trials in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Finland is necessary.

From maleficium to benevolent magic

In the late seventeenth century, as previous research has shown, there was a change in the number and nature of witchcraft accusations in Scandinavia. At a point when the sensational Swedish trials of Aland, Northern Ostrobothnia, Dalarna and Bohuslän in the mid-1660s and early 1670s had largely exhausted interest in diabolic gatherings, the number of indictments actually began to rise.² But whereas the charges before the 1670s usually concerned neighbourly *maleficium*, afterwards their focus was increasingly on the practice of benevolent magic to uncover thieves and to cure illnesses.³

Even before the 1660s, the educated Finnish elite had expressed doubts

about the demonological theories that underpinned the concept of the witches' sabbath, but the problem of 'superstition' or *vidskepelse*, the religious error of benign magical beliefs and practices, remained something to be combated with vigour.⁴ 'Good witches' or cunning-folk continued to be prosecuted by the local authorities. Indeed, the attention of the Swedish and Finnish authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical, became increasingly centred on the suppression of *vidskepelse* rather than harmful witchcraft. *Vidskepelse* was thought to be as pernicious as witchcraft and, with its seemingly lucrative outcomes, it represented a greater threat to the authorities. In this respect it has been shown that charges initiated by the authorities rather than the public were more likely to lead to convictions, and that most such cases concerned benevolent magic rather than witchcraft.⁵ Furthermore, if the populace submitted information on *maleficium*, the authorities often converted the substance of the charges into *vidskepelse*.⁶ Trials about benevolent magic can thus be seen as an attempt by the authorities to educate the populace in the direction they wanted, for economic, political, religious and cultural reasons. In the opinion of the cultural and power elite, charms to cure illnesses and procure good luck in household tasks were sinful and reprehensible. The populace, on the other hand, found them useful aids in everyday life.⁷

Even though the trend was for the prosecution of benevolent magic and 'superstition', in the western Finnish parish of Ulvila, which the following discussion focuses on, *maleficium* trials continued into the early eighteenth century. Between 1690 and 1704, there were eight or nine cases of magic and witchcraft in Ulvila, which were heard twenty-six times altogether in court since some cases developed in a very complicated manner with counter-suits being pursued. One such case was a defamation suit brought by an alleged witch attempting to clear her name. Four of the cases, heard at eleven different sessions, primarily concerned *vidskepelse*,⁸ such as that involving Jaakko Eerikinpoika Karlö, his neighbour, and their wives, who accused each other of *vidskepelse*.⁹ Yet some cases were officially described as *vidskepelse*, but actually consisted of acts of traditional *maleficium*. One such trial from 1693 began when a peasant suspected a man of having brought forth a bear to rip up his cattle.¹⁰ Other crimes were described by the courts as *trolldom* or *förgörning*, which basically referred to acts of harmful witchcraft or *maleficium*. In 1693, for example, Heikki Yrjönpoika Janckari and his brother-in-law Risto Olavinpoika were accused of having used witchcraft to kill Heikki's brother-in-law in order to gain control of his father-in-law's inheritance. The court was unable to find any clarity in the situation as both the accused ended up denouncing each other. Heikki proclaimed his own innocence and accused his mother-in-law of the crime. Both defendants were sentenced to take an oath of purification.¹¹ Risto Olavinpoika had already been accused of magic in the previous decade and he was tried again in 1695, when he was variously accused of being able to cause crop failures, of

preventing cattle deaths, of having spoiled a burgher's beer in a nearby town, and rather curiously of failing to announce that another burgher's beer should not be sold or bought. The later charge may have been related to other acts of *vidskepelse* for which Risto was also accused. In the early 1700s Risto was once again brought to court, this time charged with bringing forth a bear that ate two horses. It was said that Risto did this because he was asked to do so in his function as some sort of cunning-man. The trials dragged on, postponed from one session to another for various reasons – to get more witnesses, because the witnesses were drunk or because they were absent. According to Erkki Lehtinen, who wrote a local history of Ulvila, at the end of his life Risto was granted a Christian burial because he had sworn on his deathbed that he was innocent.¹²

However, in the kingdom as a whole the trend was for benevolent magic trials to increasingly outnumber *maleficium* trials.¹³ As an example of the changing emphasis of the trials, the story of a widow called Agata Pekantytär is very instructive. Agata worked a sizeable farm in Ulvila. Like most of those accused of witchcraft and *vidskepelse*, but contrary to some modern popular beliefs, she was neither old nor poor.¹⁴ She was linked to some of the cases already described. She appeared as a witness in the aforementioned case of defamation, for example, and the aunt of the man supposedly killed by Heikki Yrjönpoika Janckari and Risto Olavinpoika had previously accused Agata of *vidskepelse*. The web of accusations and counter-accusations at this period obviously trapped a significant portion of the parish. Agata found herself prosecuted for 'benevolent' magic in 1675 and 1676, and on both occasions she was merely sentenced to pay fines. Ten years later she was accused of flying to Blåkulla, a famous witches' meeting place where extraordinary sabbaths occurred, and also charged once again for benevolent magic. The jury considered the accusation concerning Agata's flights to Blåkulla less than reliable, and it was remarked that the witness who made the allegation was prone to drinking too much. Some of the other accusations took a little longer to refute, but refuted they were and she was finally acquitted. At the end of the 1690s a fourth accusation about her activities was aired but never came to court, although the rumour was mentioned in a separate trial to clear the reputation of another alleged witch.¹⁵

To give a little background context to the nature of trials in the area at the time it is worth mentioning the work of Marko Nenonen. He found twelve cases in Ulvila (including Agata's) between 1674 and 1681, which involved forty-seven trial sessions in total, representing a peak period of prosecution.¹⁶ A quick look at the records suggests that most of them consisted of benevolent magic,¹⁷ several were concerned with basic *maleficium*,¹⁸ and one case involved trips to Blåkulla.¹⁹

Agata's first two court cases seem at first to fit perfectly with the picture of the 'new kind' of accusations. Both charges were brought to court by the

local clergyman, and not by neighbours. When the charges were first raised in 1675, the prosecutor used the term *vidskepelse*. Agata's alleged crimes included the employment of various magical methods to discover the person who had stolen some fish from her. The clergyman suggested Agata had tried to bury some pieces of a doorstep broken by the thief along with a human corpse, failing that she was said to have resorted to 'other unlawful means', putting something into a hole that she had drilled into a living tree to make the thief lose his mind. Responding to the latter charge Agata admitted to having stuck a twig into a living spruce to make the thief bring back his catch. The actual good or bad outcomes appear ambiguous. Agata was fined forty marks for *vidskepelse* and *förgörning*.²⁰

In the 1676 trial the clergyman used the terms *vidskepelse* and *trolldom*. This time the list of magical crimes committed by Agata included that she had taken a door lock from a woman lodging with her in order to put it in water to somehow influence the court. She was also accused of taking fodder from nine of her neighbours' barns in order to secure fodder for her own livestock for the next winter, and of driving her cattle out in winter snow at Christmas, apparently for the same reason. She was also accused of using a charm to lure fish into her nets, and of planning to attach pieces of her neighbours' nets to her own for the same purpose. Moreover, it was said that she could make her cows bear cow or bull calves as she wished and could even prevent human pregnancy if so requested. Although contraceptive magic could be understood as evil if used on unwilling persons, nothing like that was suggested in court. The main emphasis of the charges and the sentences was on *vidskepelse* throughout, and Agata was fined another forty marks.²¹ In contrast, however, her trials during the 1680s were initiated by neighbours, but never led to conviction, and the 1690s trials were aimed at punishing idle gossip, not supposed witchcraft.²²

A close reading of the court records suggests that there was a great deal of local social controversy behind the new kind of accusations just as there were behind witchcraft accusations. The dynamics of the trials can be uncovered by looking at the actors: who were they and what were their previous actions. The court records mostly identify people by name and home village only, sometimes, but not necessarily, using epithets like 'free owning peasant', 'tenant', or, in the case of women, 'wife', 'maid' or 'widow'. The relations of the witnesses to the plaintiff or defendant are not always explicitly stated, although this often emerges in the narrative of the testimony. The relationships between those concerned in Agata's trials of 1675 and 1676 are unclear in the court record. There is, however, an important hint in another trial in 1677. Agata had apparently given people to understand that she had learned some of her magic from the widow of the clergyman of a nearby parish, who sued Agata for defamation in a separate trial. During this trial testimony given in the 1676 prosecution was repeated, and Agata opposed

one of the prosecution witnesses on the grounds that they were 'in dispute over' a farmstead. This witness, named Aune, was Agata's sister-in-law.²³

With this information in mind, traces of the dispute between the sisters-in-law can be found in the court records for the previous years, and this in turn provides keys to identifying most of the other relevant witnesses. Thus the witnesses in the first two court cases were, in fact, more closely connected to Aune than to anyone else mentioned in the case, including Agata. Agata and Aune were old enemies due to a dispute over the inheritance of a considerable farm. The dispute had officially ended in Agata's favour, and, tellingly, the witchcraft and magic accusations began a year after the farm had been securely bequeathed to Agata's daughter.²⁴ It is quite obvious that Aune, using her influence and friendships in the community, was the initiator of the rumours that led to the legal action against her sister-in-law. It would seem her accusations were the result of frustrated wrath and incredulity at the unexpected outcome of the inheritance dispute. In this respect the ill will in the neighbourhood was the influencing factor behind the official actions of the vicar.

Social conflicts have often been detected behind and presented as the prime cause of witchcraft accusations in research. As far as a local community and its social dynamics are concerned, social conflict and competition are obviously important. Yet settling for such an explanation runs the risk of belittling the belief in witchcraft and simplifying it as a scapegoat for something supposedly more rational. To illustrate this point, we can look in more detail at the events surrounding Agata and her prosecutions.

An inverted hierarchy and the world of negation

Agata Pekantytär had lived in the village for a long time. She had been the wife and mother of the heir of Tommila farm, but in the society in which she lived she was not expected to become the head of the farm herself. Thus in the inheritance dispute and its outcome, we see a total inversion of social hierarchy. The contested farm was one of the largest in the village. Aune had lived on the farm prior to Agata and her daughter taking possession. Before the favourable resolution of the dispute, Agata had lived in a small cottage like the rest of the landless, labouring poor in the area. Now she became the head of the biggest farm in the village, a role that was usually a male preserve.

In contemporary social thought, as well as in popular thinking at the time, hierarchical relations were still coloured by medieval feudal concepts, understood in terms of mutual, polar rights and responsibilities.²⁵ Hierarchical superiority came in exchange for presumed physical, mental and spiritual protection. There were also responsibilities towards the community, which affected a person's status. A single farmer was to a great extent dependent on the other farmers in the village. Farming also included many responsibilities outside the strictly agricultural sphere, from processing and marketing

products to the responsibilities they had in the communal life of the village, such as building and maintaining roads and crown or church buildings, and holding parochial offices.²⁶ Trust or distrust in the abilities of a newcomer to fulfil these responsibilities was one of the components of social status. In rural Finland, there was room for limited social mobility. Sons and daughters of peasant farmers often spent a few years in service before marrying or taking up their father's farmsteads, although sons would often try to remain at home and take at least part of the responsibility while their parents lived. The village community's confidence in new farmers was usually ensured in the process of taking up a farm.²⁷

Newcomers might enter local farming society by taking up crown farmsteads on which there had been a tax default. If a peasant farmer left his taxes unpaid for three years, his farm would be confiscated and the crown could offer it to other peasants, in the hope that they would succeed better. This included an evaluation of the farmstead and the possible need for tax-free years to allow for repairs, clearing of fallen buildings and trees. Legally, six other farmers from the rest of the village or the parish would have to vouch for him to pay his taxes in full after a fixed number of free years.²⁸ In this process, collective trust was publicly displayed before the newcomer's arrival. Although not all persons who took up a farm needed such a ritual display of trust, the process of taking up a farm would almost always include some form of public acknowledgement: purchases were publicised and inheritances settled in court. The communal trust in Agata's abilities to perform her duties was not confirmed in this way and, in fact, the nominated heir of the farm was her daughter, not Agata herself. Her personal status seems to have remained insecure. Moreover, even as the court order settled her place in the village hierarchy by right of kin, there were other grounds for hierarchy that were not established. Could she actually work the farm satisfactorily? Together with the long dispute, this general lack of trust created a state of confusion in the village.

In the light of this inversion of social hierarchy by Agata, it is plausible to suggest that the imagery of witchcraft was employed in, and at least partly because of, the specific state of hierarchical confusion in the village. For the people who perceived something as subversive, the concept of witchcraft helped to make sense of the world again. Labelling it as an inversion simultaneously marked the subversion as evil. The act of marking disorder created order from chaos. The imagery of witchcraft served as the opposite required for every cultural symbolic meaning, defining order through negation. The comparison between polar opposites was essential for symbolic understanding and the identification of a thing (or the self) through what it was not. Such identification was more urgently required the more confused the situation. It is useful and correct, of course, to identify general grudges that resulted in more or less honest accusations of witchcraft, to see witchcraft as the scapegoat of envy, and understand witchcraft as an explanation for

Agata's strange success, but we still need to be aware of deeper meanings. What I consider of most interest about the accusations of the 1670s is that they clearly echo the theme of inversion. Now we need to move on and consider how accusations came to symbolise the confusion of social hierarchy, as a means to react and deal with it, and, perhaps for some people, actively to subdue it. There are layers of mental culture and concrete events and actions present at the same time.

Witchcraft in general and the witches' sabbath in particular were not without hierarchy, but the hierarchy was turned upside down. The inversion of proper hierarchy was confused or perverse but never absent. Witchcraft was not like Viktor Turner's and Mihail Bahtin's ritual and festive inversion, which are based on equality and promote the values of *communitas*. Witchcraft did not entertain the idea of equality, except that hidden in the general framework of Christianity and equality before God's judgement, as noted by Gábor Klaniczay.²⁹ The inversion of hierarchy symbolised in witchcraft served to define the order through negation, not only as hierarchical in general, but also as a specific kind of hierarchy. In Robin Briggs's view, the sabbath concept can be seen as an anti-fertility rite, representing the opposite of the desirable commonweal.³⁰ In learned demonology, descriptions of Satan, Hell and the activities of witches were characterised by ritual backwardness. The whole cosmic order was inverted, the Devil put in the place of God, and the servants of God on earth – the secular and religious magistrates – displaced. Stuart Clark has linked the notions of the world upside down in learned demonology to a general conception of a polar world, found in many areas of elite culture from literature and theatre to science and theology. In this understanding of the world, order is dependent on both opposite polarities.³¹

Ritual subversions of social hierarchy and power relations served in various ways to stabilise the existing hierarchy. They helped, through symbolic criticism, to remind the powerful that they had responsibilities, and they served to channel frustration and opposition. They also had a symbolic cultural meaning in themselves: they did not merely strengthen the established order, but also created and therefore influenced it. They worked to establish a popular view of how things should have been, and although carnival parades might be directed against authority, in other situations they might just as well serve as forms of popular social control, directed against inversions of the accepted social order.³² They could also perform a subversive role. Witchcraft trials could similarly operate in

two seemingly contradictory ways. The punishment of witches could, for example, on occasion promote cohesion and unity in a community, reinforcing in the process the dominant political values of the ruling group. But equally, it might serve as a vehicle for criticism and complaint, thus providing a valuable opportunity for malcontents to vent their dissatisfaction with, and opposition to, the ruling élite.³³

As Stuart Clark puts it, 'witchcraft was constituted by an act of revolt', and represented the opposite of perfect government.³⁴ In some European laws, including the Swedish Rural Law of 1442, witchcraft appeared among the statutes against treason (*högmålabalken*).³⁵

Vidskepelse was considered as inversionary as witchcraft. After all, it deprived God of His power to give and take happiness as He pleased, putting human action and – at least in the opinion of the authorities – the Devil's help before God. The shifting perception of *vidskepelse* from being a diabolic reality to an ineffective, futile and erroneous belief may have also made the symbolical inversion of witchcraft less subversive. The very same local authorities were responsible for popular education concerning superstition, among other things, and for maintaining peace and social order in the peasant community. On the level of social and ideological theory, witchcraft and *vidskepelse* thus fitted into the model of social misrule, which symbolised the opposite of world order. On a pragmatic micro level, a closer look at the charges and testimonies against Agata reveals that inversion and reversal were recurrent themes here as well. During her first trial, in 1675, she admitted to having tried magic to reverse a theft by making the thief bring back his booty, though her neighbours suspected her intention was actually to make the thief mad. The inversion is also present in her magic – forcing a dry twig into a growing tree: putting something dead in a living thing.³⁶ In the various charges of the next trial, the idea of reversal is even clearer. Agata's maid told an elaborate story describing how her mistress had accused her neighbours of having damaged her fishing nets, so that they would catch more than their natural share. She advised the maid to counter this sabotage by stealing mesh from the neighbours' nets, and tying it to Agata's own nets so that more fish would swim into hers. It was not just any fish she wanted, but the fish that would have otherwise swum into her neighbours' nets. The idea of reversal is clear; although so is the notion that having more than one's share left less for the others.³⁷ The same notion is present in Agata's alleged charms to ensure food for her cattle during the winter. The clergyman accused her of taking a little hay from her neighbours' barns to feed to her cattle at Michaelmas. He and other witnesses also described how Agata let her cattle out in the winter snow, an action made all the more strange by putting bells on their necks as she would have done in the summer, thus turning the seasons upside down. The clergyman also said that she was able to make a spoilt brew good again. The wording does not speak of making sure that the brew would succeed in the first place, but that the damage could be undone. Finally she was said to be able to block pregnancy, which could be understood as inverting the course of nature, although the wording is not as explicit as in the above examples. In all these instances Agata was clearly represented as perverting the natural course of things.³⁸

Although the formulations about fixing a brew and taking hay from her

neighbours are actually to be found only in the presentation of the charges by the clergyman, many of these events of reversal appear in the testimonies given by the neighbours and relatives. Although the whole court record is to some extent influenced by the questioning of the judge and the clerks – who in Finnish trials also translated and often summarised the testimonies – they still largely represent the views of the peasantry. The chain of events, which the populace perceived as witchcraft, usually remains unaltered, even though different meanings can be attached to it. In fact, even the formulations about fixing a brew and taking hay mentioned in the clergyman's statements appear in the section listing the deeds of *vidskepelse* as directly reported to him by his parishioners. Although they were reformulated by the clergyman, the parishioners' narratives remain clearly visible. This prompts the suggestion that the inversionary nature of witchcraft did not exist only in learned demonology and elite descriptions of witchcraft and magic, but very clearly in the reality of 'popular culture'.³⁹ Witchcraft and magic are not necessarily to be understood as real acts of rebellion but as part of the rhetoric and imagery used when the hierarchy was questioned. Unlike in the model of Clark and Elmer, it is the group's internal hierarchy – not the position or legitimacy of the ruling elite – which is questioned.

It is worth emphasising that the accusations made against Agata in the mid-1670s were primarily concerned with reversals of property ownership: fish, fodder and household produce. This may reflect the general importance of property rights as well as the swift change in Agata's economic circumstances and relationships. The magic Agata was said to perform, with which the villagers were most concerned, mirrored a turning upside down of the relationships between farmers. This is not surprising, bearing in mind the conflict-related nature of witchcraft. However, only one of the magical acts Agata was said to have performed or suggested was directly related to Aune's family, with whom the principal conflict over Tommila farmstead was concerned. Rather, Agata's actions seem to pose a threat to neighbours in general, and farmers or members of farming households in particular. Net fishing was very much a farmers' activity, and although cottagers might also own cows and pigs, cattle were primarily the business of farming households. Brewing beer and pregnancy, of course, touched all social strata, but they seemed to receive considerably less attention in the original testimonies of the villagers.

Agata's contraceptive skills received a lot of attention later in 1677 because she was said to have claimed that she learned them from the widow of the former minister of a nearby parish, who sued her for defamation. During this trial, Aune testified about a conversation with Agata, claiming that when she had complained about her crying children, Agata had said 'Had you said so when you were pregnant, I could have fixed things so that you would not have had more children', and that she had learned this from the minister's widow. The other witness in this trial, Marketta Klauntytär, had

sent a testimony about the same conversation to the court during the 1676 trial, but said nothing about it now, merely reporting that Agata had asked her to mediate a reconciliation with the widow. The theme of reversal was still present in the accusation of contraception magic although weaker than in fodder magic, but the emphasis of this trial was not on witchcraft or *vidskepelse*, but on deciding whether or not Agata had claimed she had learned her skills from the widow. Paradoxically enough, the previous trials seem to have been initiated by Aune, yet did not emphasise the threat Agata posed to her. Rather they showed Agata as potentially harmful to the whole community. Yet in the defamation case, which was initiated by an outsider, Aune played a far more visible role.⁴⁰

It is reasonable to suggest that the importance of relationships in the charges and suspicions against Agata mirrored her uncertain personal status and the untested qualities that she may or may not have brought to the community as the head of a farm. In other words, personal and communal were interdependent in both the imagery of magic and the village social hierarchy. Fishing was the only economic activity targeted by Agata that was actually described as being performed communally. Agata's maid Kaarina had seen how much the neighbours had caught, and it was the success of this collective effort which supposedly led Agata to try and alter the natural outcome in future. Yet other situations where Agata was said to have used magic involved a communal aspect. With regard to livestock it is true that several houses often pastured their cattle together, but winter fodder – the specific object of Agata's magic – was a communal matter in-so-far as its total amount was considered, as with the number of fish caught. The imagery of the fodder magic, centred on the taking of a small amount from a neighbour's barn to one's own, suggests that the total amount was considered constant, and, according to the 'law' of limited goods, if someone got more the rest were left with less.⁴¹ Much of the magic was also concerned with activities in which the individual worker represented his or her whole household, so although women conducted most of the work mentioned in the charges against Agata, the product of that work was considered common to the whole household. Work outside the household sphere, on the other hand, generated private property.⁴²

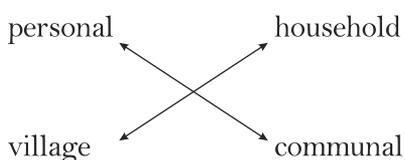


Figure 1. Personal and communal in the formation of a person's social status reflected in the imagery of Agata's magic

Anu Pylkkänen's study of women in rural households in early modern Finland, has examined the differences in social hierarchies between western and eastern parts of the country. It would seem that eastern Finnish hierarchy was significantly more male-dominated, although sometimes a woman might take the place of a man in the hierarchy. Most importantly, women appeared less in court and in public, and were instead represented by the male head of their household. Women, therefore, did not represent their households externally in the same way as men. In western Finland, however, social hierarchy was based more on work, and left more options open for women, although it also left them more vulnerable in potentially ambiguous situations.⁴³ It is presumably no coincidence that witchcraft and magic accusations also differed in western and eastern Finland. In the east, *maleficium* charges against men played a prominent role throughout the seventeenth century, although charges of benevolent magic became increasingly common. But in western Finland benevolent magic already dominated the trials by the 1670s and most of the accused were female. In Karelia, in eastern Finland, women were also less often accused of other crimes, even those of chastity. A viable point is that accusations depended on the general culture of representation in court and in public, and, to repeat, women generally did not often appear in eastern Finnish courts. However, Viipuri Karelian women acted as accusers and prosecutors in witchcraft cases relatively more often than women in Western Finland, although absolute numbers are small and women acted far less often than men.⁴⁴

Various reasons have been put forward for the predominance of males in eastern Finnish trials for witchcraft and magic. These have focused on the extent of dairying and livestock holding, and the female role in the farming household. There was considerably less dairying in eastern Finland, lessening the scope for disputes over this aspect of female responsibility, and reducing the need for women to perform and be charged with related magic.⁴⁵ However, Nenonen, emphasising the role of the local authorities, points out that in eastern Finland, especially in Viipuri Karelia, the demonological theories of early modern Europe never gained much support among the local authorities. According to Nenonen, demonological theory was what focused attention on women, and so the eastern authorities never developed a particular interest in female magic.⁴⁶ On the other hand, as far as witchcraft was connected to social and hierarchical confusion, which was not always the case, the more formal eastern model of gender relations seems to have offered fewer possibilities for communal problems over women's hierarchical status.

In the testimonies presented against her Agata was represented as turning things upside down, inverting the expected course of things, mirroring the twist she had caused in the village social hierarchy. It is illustrative of the general state of confusion that the natural course of actions often seemed unsure: should the fish go to her nets or to the neighbours'? Should

the fodder last longer in her barns or in her neighbours'? It is worth considering the extent to which the polarity of this mode of thinking was due to the concepts of luck and limited goods found in various popular cultures,⁴⁷ and how these made people think along the lines of reversal: what comes *to* me comes *from* them and vice versa.

Marking (dis)order

The symbolism of inversion and reversal in Agata's trial testimonies reflected the wider rumours that were circulating in the village. Rumours are essentially only semi-public: known by many, but not everyone and often uncertain by their very nature. Bringing such matters to court, as far as it was the result of popular action, whether official accusations in court or less formal denunciations to a local authority, was partly about making the subject public. However, the court also represented lawfulness and rightfulness. It can be doubted how deep a respect the populace had for all the actions of the authorities or the decisions of the courts, but in general they were places where the people could claim their rights in various situations, and where their common disputes were pursued. Was bringing the matter to court then an attempt to set things right again?⁴⁸

It should be noted that in most instances a witchcraft lawsuit did not change the course of other matters. Most of the witchcraft and magic trials in Finland ended up in acquittals or fines. They could not be relied upon to eliminate such unpleasant persons as witches.⁴⁹ Furthermore, usually no confiscation of property occurred. Naturally, the affirmative sentence of fines for magic and witchcraft did not restore the ownership of the disputed farm from Agata to Aune or Aune's husband. The inversion of hierarchy by Agata was not undone. In most cases it could not be. However, the court trials still served to 'set things right again' in two further symbolic ways. The narratives in the rumours that circulated in the village reproduced the grounds of suspicion over and over again, whether it was the story of bewitching fish or letting the cows out in the snow. With all the imagery of inversion, they tried to create a picture identical with the important points of reality – in this case the confusion over the proper order and the suspicion that the order might be wrong. In court, the mark of an abnormal situation was made clear and definitive, the disorderly situation made known. As has been stated earlier, identifying disorder already brought some order into a chaotic situation. Moreover, disorder, as represented by witchcraft and *vidskepelse* in both gossip and prosecutions, was not synonymous with lack of order or chaos – only the wrong order. In court, not only were these stories retold, but also the ways and situations in which they were born and then circulated were described. In 1676 Agata's maid told the court that she was just coming back from fishing when Agata had asked her about her catch and then ventured

on using magic. A little later Antti Heikinpoika told the court that he had met Agata on his way to church on a certain day and she talked about hanging bells round oxen's necks.⁵⁰ Circumstantial details of this kind served to give credibility to the narrative, to highlight the reality behind the narratives. Yet such remarks also disengaged the narrative from the persons and situations present. It reminded the listeners that the events of the narrative were not happening here and now, but somewhere else, at another time, perhaps even to other people.⁵¹

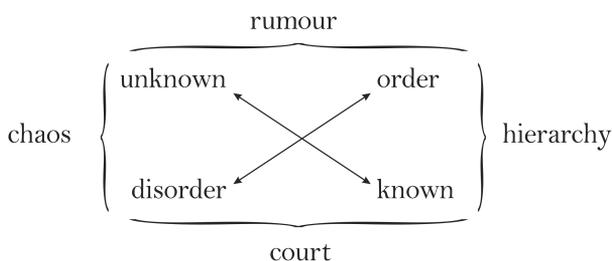


Figure 2. The reproduction of hierarchy in rumours and in court action

'Somewhere else' and 'some other time' are more uncertain than the 'here and now'. In a seemingly paradoxical way the court narratives' process of making explicit what was known also made explicit the extent of the unknown. This uncertainty was deliberately highlighted by some witnesses, who under testimony described their own conjectures regarding rumours and events. An account of a wife who had seen two calves breathing heavily on the shed floor and came to the conclusion that they must have just returned from a flight to the witches' sabbath did not convince anyone. Presumably because of the danger of a defamation counter-suit, this story also involved a lot of confusion about who said what to whom, which did not enhance its credibility.⁵² Furthermore, a lot of other testimonies were influenced by hearsay. The above-mentioned Antti Heikinpoika continued his testimony by describing a dubious conversation between Agata and two women, where he had not actually been present. He named the women involved, but they did not appear in court.⁵³ Antti's testimony was thus not only a narrative of the events, as encapsulated in the original conversation or even of the original conversation between the women, but also a narrative of a narrative of those events. The point being made concerns not only the variable credibility of the testimony, but also the process of telling and retelling multiple narratives. The ways of producing narratives thereby becomes visible, and draws the attention of both a modern reader and a contemporary listener to the fact that the narratives were narratives, different from the reality they represented. Even the much-discussed influence of the judge and the clerk on the stories told in court serve to emphasise this point. The inverted world was

no longer reality, but an image. Paradoxically, such an unwinding of the narratives made the court situation culturally even more significant.⁵⁴ One aim of the courts was to normalise abnormal situations. The court decided whether or not a wrong had been done and if it should be punished. Thus a certain mark of lawfulness was stamped on the outcome, whatever it was. Appeals to higher courts were made, but once a court judgement was final, it was usually, though not always, considered valid by the population as well as the educated elite, regardless of other differences of opinion and belief. To early modern people, lawful was not only something legal, but also something that was customarily or generally acknowledged as valid – like boundary marks. Hence the uncertainty of Agata's situation and her relations with the rest of the village was stabilised in court. The mark of lawfulness in the court sentence, even when affirming the existence of witchcraft, could actually function to unmark a situation. Thus it did not remove or undo the phenomena that caused the suspicion of magic; in this case the inversion of hierarchy by Agata, but it made it possible – even normal – to live with it.

Whereas bringing the case to court meant, for most of those present, stamping a definitive mark of disorder on the situation – making the disorderly situation known, and thereby already bringing some order into it the actual trial process sought to unmark the situation, by emphasising the narrative nature of the testimonials and by using the official court sentence to create a known order out of disorder. Thus it was possible for Agata to go on living in the village for decades and successfully run her farm, despite the magic and witchcraft trials. However, one must remember that not all trials could come to such a conclusion. Obviously, if the matter was not settled in a way that was felt just, or if one or more members of the community continuously revived suspicions, such an outcome could not be achieved. In this respect Agata certainly benefited from the fact that her most powerful enemies moved away from the village.⁵⁵

Although the trials for *vidskepelse* after the 1660s were different from those for witchcraft in that the authorities often instigated them, they often had the same kind of origins in the local community. Consequently they served similar needs and employed the same kind of symbolism as witchcraft. The long-familiar concept of polar opposites as the organising force of the universe in learned minds functioned also in a popular community to bring order into a confused situation. The charges and testimonies reflect the thematic of an individual's relation to the rest of the community and the consequences this had on local social hierarchies. The imagery of inversion was part of the rhetoric of a polar world. The symbolism brought order to chaos by defining it – even as it defined it as something unwanted. The unwanted, on the other hand, defined what was wanted. In bringing witchcraft or magic to court, the situation was publicly marked as abnormal and unwanted. However, the

trial process worked to unmark the situation in two different ways. First, the process of the hearing emphasised the nature of the narratives, including the symbols of inversion, as separate from reality. Second, the whole court procedure aimed to restore social normality, and the mark of lawfulness served to unmark the situation as normal, regardless of the actual sentence meted out.

In the eyes of the authorities, *vidskepelse*, which came to dominate trials after the 1660s, was increasingly perceived as a pernicious but essentially useless superstition. The authorities wished to instruct the populace regarding their changing perception of such beliefs. It is possible that in the process *vidskepelse* gradually lost its potential as the symbol of polar hierarchy. *Vidskepelse* was for long an ambiguous concept for the populace, with its seemingly good outcomes and its supposed futility. It is, of course, even more likely that the grounds of hierarchy changed so that they were no longer measured on the scale of good and evil, but on another scale, closer to that between reason and credulity or education and primitiveness.

Notes

- 1 Finland was part of Sweden until 1809.
- 2 Marko Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus ja noitavainot Ala-Satakunnan, Pohjois-Pohjanmaan ja Viipurin Karjalan maaseudulla 1620–1700* (Helsinki, 1992), pp. 105–8; Per Sörlin, *Wicked Arts: Witchcraft and Magic Trials in Southern Sweden, 1635–1754* (Leiden/Boston/Köln, 1999), pp. 20, 215.
- 3 Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus*, pp. 139–51; Marko Nenonen, “‘Envious are All the People, Witches Watch at Every Gate’: Finnish Witches and Witch Trials in the Seventeenth Century”, *Scandinavian Journal of History* 18 (1993) 83–5.
- 4 Antero Heikkinen, *Paholaisen liittolaiset. Noita- ja magiakäsityksiä ja – oikeudenkäyntejä Suomessa 1600-luvun jälkipuoliskolla* (Helsinki, 1969).
- 5 Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus*, p. 150.
- 6 Linda Oja, *Varken Gud eller natur. Synen på magi i 1600- och 1700-talets Sverige* (Stockholm, 1999), *passim*.
- 7 Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus*, pp. 286–90; Oja, *Varken Gud eller nature*, pp. 283–8.
- 8 Ulvila 8–10 May 1690, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 5: 170–1, National Archives of Finland (NAF); Ulvila 21 and 23 February, 1691, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 6: 29–32, NAF; Ulvila 19–21 October 1691, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 6: 542–3, NAF; Ulvila 7–9 January 1692, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 7: 17–19, NAF; Ulvila 25 and 27 June 1692, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 7: 260–1, NAF; Ulvila 17 and 19 June 1693, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 1: 181–2, NAF; Ulvila 25–26 October 1697, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II, KO a 9: 524–8, NAF.
- 9 Ulvila 19–21 October 1691, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 6: 530–1, NAF; Ulvila 7–9 January 1692, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 7: 12–13, NAF; Ulvila 25 and 26 June 1692, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 7: 270–3, NAF; Ulvila 10–11 October 1692 Ala-Satakunta II: 471–3, NAF.
- 10 Ulvila 18–20 October 1693, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 1: 443–4, NAF.
- 11 Ulvila 17 and 19 June 1693, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II, KO a 1: 180–1, NAF; Ulvila 18–20 October 1693, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 1: 433–5, NAF; Ulvila 12–13

- March 1693, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 1: 35–7, NAF; Ulvila 16 and 18 June 1694, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 3: 251–5, NAF; Ulvila 23 and 25 January 1698, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 11: 29v–33, NAF.
- 12 Ulvila 8–10 January 1695, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 5: 30, NAF; Ulvila 4–5 November 1695, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 5: 367–8, NAF; Ulvila 27–28 June 1702, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 16: 130–2, NAF; Ulvila 13–16 February 1704, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 20: 346–52, NAF; Ulvila 27–28 June 1704, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta II KO a 20: 985–6, NAF; Erkki Lehtinen, 'Keskiajalta 1860-luvulle', in K. Virkkala, A. Kopisto and E. Lehtinen, *Suur-Ulvilan Historia* (Ulvila, 1967), p. 764.
- 13 Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus*, p. 247ff.
- 14 The General Register of Settlement in Finland, Ulvila, concept 1674–93, 33, NAF.
- 15 Ulvila 19–20 January 1675. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 16–17, National Archives of Sweden (NAS); Ulvila 11–12 September 1676. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 53–54v, NAS; Ulvila 11–13 July 1687, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 2: 225–9, NAF; Ulvila 3–4 and 6–7 February 1688, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 3: 58–60, NAF; Ulvila 14–15 September 1700, Ala-Satakunta ja Vehmaa II KO a 14: 757–62, NAF.
- 16 Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus*, pp. 105, 408–9.
- 17 All Agata's cases and also Ulvila 19–20 January 1675, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta I KO a 4: 3v–4, NAF.
- 18 Ulvila 26–27 July 1677. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 64v–65, NAS.
- 19 Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus*, pp. 300–1.
- 20 Ulvila 19–20 January 1675. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 16–17, NAS.
- 21 Ulvila 11–12 September 1676. *Bielkesamlingen* vol. 27: 53–55, NAS.
- 22 Ulvila 11–13 July 1687, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 1: 225–9, NAF; Ulvila 3–4, 6–7 February 1688, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 3: 56, NAF; Ulvila 13–15 September 1700, Ala-Satakunta ja Vehmaa II KO a 14: 757–62, NAF.
- 23 Ulvila 26–27 July 1677. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 69v–70v, NAS.
- 24 Ulvila 4–6 July 1674, Vehmaa ja Ala-Satakunta I KO a 4: 29–30, NAF.
- 25 Kimmo Katajala, *Suomalainen kapina. Talonpoikaislevottomuudet ja poliittinen kulttuuri Suomessa Ruotsin ajalla n. 1050–1800* (Helsinki, 2002), pp. 322–9.
- 26 For example, Peter Aronsson, *Bönder gör politik. Det lokala självstyret som social arena i tre smålandssocknar 1680–1850* (Lund, 1992), pp. 68–110.
- 27 Magnus Perlestam, *Den rofaste bonden – myt eller verklighet? Brukaransvar i Ramkvilla socken 1620–1820* (Malmö, 1998), p. 82ff.
- 28 In practice the amount of sureties could be reduced to two: Eino Jutikkala, *Suomen talonpojan historia. Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura* (Helsinki, 1958), pp. 115–19.
- 29 Mihail Bahtin, *Rabelais och Skrottets historia. Francois Rabelais' verk och den folkliga kulturen under medeltiden and renässansen* (Uddevalla, 1986); Viktor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York, [1969] 1982), p. 177ff; Gábor Klaniczay, *The Uses of Supernatural Power* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 12–16.
- 30 Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbours: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (London, 1996), pp. 40–1.
- 31 Stuart Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft', *Past and Present* 87 (1980) 98–127; Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 3–147.
- 32 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Oxford, 1987), p. 104ff.
- 33 Peter Elmer, 'Towards a Politics of Witchcraft in Early Modern England', in Stuart Clark (ed.), *Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture* (London, 2001), p. 104.

- 34 Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning', 118–19; Clark, *Thinking With Demons*, p. 88.
- 35 Konung Kristoffers Lands Lag, Högmålabalken VI, XIII. Schlyter, D. C. J.: Codex Iuris Communis Sueciae Christophorianus. Konung Christoffers Landslag. Lund 1869, 297ff.
- 36 Ulvila 19–20 January 1675. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 16, NAS.
- 37 Ulvila 11–12 September 1676. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 53–5, NAS.
- 38 Ulvila 11–12 September 1676. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 53–5, NAS.
- 39 See Clark, 'Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning', 103; Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 25. Clark is probably quite right in not attributing the characteristics of the stereotypical witches' sabbath to the thought or intentions of the 'witches', but the more freely given testimonies in Finnish trials about everyday magic shed more light on popular views too.
- 40 Ulvila 26–27 July 1677. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 69v–70v, NAS.
- 41 For further recent discussion on how the notion of limited goods could have influenced other aspects of peasants life see Peter Henningsen, 'Peasant Society and the Perception of a Moral Economy: Redistribution and Risk Aversion in Traditional Peasant Culture', *Scandinavian Journal of History* 26, 4 (2001) 271–96.
- 42 Anu Pykkänen, *Puoli vuodetta, lukot ja avaimet. Nainen ja maalaistalous 1600-luvulla oikeuskäytännön valossa. Lakimiesliiton kustannus* (Helsinki, 1990), pp. 144–52, 271–307.
- 43 Pykkänen, *Puoli vuodetta*, pp. 315, 330.
- 44 Marko Nenonen, 'Noituus ja Idän mies. Noitavainojen erityisluonne Viipurin Karjalassa', in Kimmo Katajala (ed.), *Manaajista maalaisaateliin. Tulkintoja toisesta historian, antropologian ja maantieteen välimaastossa* (Helsinki, 1995), p. 138; Anneli Mäkelä, *Suvusta Perheeseen – Satakunnan ja Karjalan naisen asema 1500-luvulla* (Helsinki, 1989), pp. 87–93, and also p. 115; Pykkänen, *Puoli vuodetta*, p. 231.
- 45 Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus*, pp. 366–7.
- 46 Nenonen, 'Noituus ja Idän mies', pp. 143–50.
- 47 Klaniczay, *Uses of Supernatural Power*, p. 166.
- 48 This is a common notion in explanations that connect social grudges and witchcraft. Punishing the witch is obviously the whole aim of the process, eliminating his or her power or even a person may be an important aspect of the trial. However, I am not only referring to the 'witch' or 'witchcraft', but to the whole situation of uncertainty which was labelled with the symbolics of witchcraft.
- 49 Nenonen, *Noituus, taikuus*, pp. 123–36.
- 50 Ulvila 11–12 September 1676. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 53v, 54, NAS.
- 51 A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary* (Bloomington, [1979] 1982), pp. 87–91 (disengagement), pp. 100–2 (engagement).
- 52 Ulvila 3–4 and 6–7 February 1688, Ala-Satakunta II KO a 3: 59, NAF.
- 53 Ulvila 11–12 September 1676. *Bielkesamlingen*, vol. 27: 54v, NAS.
- 54 See similar effect in art and rhetorics by Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London and New York, 1990), p. 54ff.
- 55 The General Register of Settlement in Finland, Ulvila, concept 1674–93, 33, NAF.