The historical study of witchcraft was one of the first fields to accept gender history as part of the mainstream. Many scholars have noted that this development has been slow, but only a few fields of history – notably the history of sexuality and the history of the family – have seen anything swifter. Of course, this does not mean that every historian of witchcraft embraces gender history, or that all witchcraft historians see gender alike. It only means that the history of witchcraft, with its vivid imagery of violence, sexuality, oppression and religion, has produced interpretations from different political and academic angles, and these differing perspectives have been forced to take each other and to take gender matters seriously. Witchcraft historians became interested in gender very early, and gender struggle has also been a part of various political interpretations of the history of witchcraft such as Mary Daly and Barbara Echrenreich. Historians such as Marianne Hester and Lyndal Roper have pursued the issue of female oppression and feminine psychology. Lately the question on gender has revolved around men and male witches, the work of Lara Apps and Andrew Gow laying the standard starting points on the area of witchcraft theory and works such as Rolf Schulte or perhaps Johannes Dillinger on the level on social history. The purpose of this presentation, however, in not to lay out a historiography of gender and witchcraft – a job well done in other presentations – but to explore possible grounds for new generalizations and analysis on the basis of what we currently know about witches (or the accusers and witnesses), witchcraft, or witch trials in various places of the early modern Europe.

Men and women accused

A look at the sex ratios among those accused of witchcraft in early modern Europe is nevertheless required before questions of gender and witchcraft can be assessed. In Europe, our understanding of the sex ratios has changed due to research made on new materials and new sets of trials. According to current statistics (by Levack, Schulte, or Apps and Gow), the proportion of women accused most often varied between sixty and eighty per cent. In some places, such as the Holy Roman Empire or
Habsburg empire (including such places like the Bishopric of Basel, the County of Namur and sometimes Austrian Hungary, which did not formally belong to the Holy Roman Empire), the County of Essex and the Wielkopolska region in Poland, the proportion of women accused was even higher. On the other hand, Iceland, Estonia, Finland, Russia and Normandy saw lower proportions of women and consequently higher proportions of men (90% in Iceland, 60% in Estonia, around 50% in Finland and 70% in Normandy).¹

There are numerous problems with such statistics. For example, the overwhelming impact of homogenizing the widely varying conditions – such as the competing cities, bishoprics, and principalities of the Holy Roman Empire – into a unified geographical entity obscures the fact that the witch-hunts of neighbouring towns were often very different in terms of both intensity and sex ratios. Other problems are posed by the fact that the statistics concern uneven periods of time, varying from almost three centuries in Poland (1500–1775) and Finland (1500–1800) to just a few decades in places like Toul or Aragon. The example of Finland shows that sex ratios can change quickly over time: during the first 150-year-period, from 1500 onwards, most witches were male, although a few women appeared every now and then. However, during the most intensive period of witch trials, from 1660–1700, when new kinds of witchcraft accusations – involving the witches’ Sabbath and various forms of superstitious magic – became common, women came to form the majority of the accused. During the eighteenth century, women became nearly invisible once again: eighty five per cent of the accused during this period were men.2

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Based on these statistics, it seems clear that the apparent heartlands of the witch-hunts – the Holy Roman Empire, France and Scotland – were dominated by the stereotype of the female witch. The peripheries, on the other hand, especially the north-east of Europe, but also Normandy in the west, maintained a stereotype of the male witch. These concepts of centre and periphery are not necessarily geographical or cultural; rather, they are related to the intensity of the witch-hunts. The proportion of men seems to be greater in the less intense and moderate hunts, such as in Iceland, with its 120 accused between 1625 and 1685, and in Estonia with under 200 accused between 1520 and 1729. The countries that blur this picture are Russia, with almost 600 accused between 1622 and 1785, and Finland, with at least 2500 accused between 1500 and 1800. These two countries are geographically large though sparsely populated, which means that it is not easy to compare them with tightly built European cities. Russia and Finland can also be thought of as areas with low intensity witch-hunts because although the trials were frequent, they were also conducted meticulously according to due procedure and the punishments were usually milder than those received further west.³

One can thus claim that the areas with intense witch-hunts saw a greater proportion of female witches than the areas with less intensive hunts. This seems to contradict Erik Midelfort and others who claimed that male witches often appeared in the trials only after the hunt had intensified, and the social characteristics of a witch had been complicated by a snowball-effect whereby the male friends and relatives of previously accused women were stained by association and chains of accusations.⁴

Nevertheless, the focus on intensive witch-hunting is a crude generalization and offers a rather one-sided look at witchcraft and magic – also in terms of how gender worked in the trials. If one seeks


to find out more about the gendered concepts of magic in early modern Europe, one should consider other characteristics of both the trials and the society in which they took place.

**Gendered beliefs about magic**

Gendered concepts of magic in Europe can be approached from two angles: from the perspective of beliefs and from the perspective of practices. In terms of beliefs, scholars have previously been rather unanimous that among the educated elites at least, and through teaching and more or less top-down cultural transmission, the female stereotype of the witch was well-established. Demonologists writing on the subject are usually considered indicative: Stuart Clark concluded that due to a deep-rooted, long-standing dualism in early modern categories of thinking, witchcraft, along with inferiority, was associated with women. By contrast, all good and appreciable things were associated with men. According to Clark, this was not a conscious misogyny, but rather an implicit characteristic of the early modern learned way of thinking. In what has been read by many subsequent historians as a toning down of the second wave feminists’ cry of gynocide by a male mainstream historian, Clark’s claim that prejudice was inbuilt, unintentional and unrecognized actually means that it was not the individual demonologists or witch-hunters who were misogynist; rather, it was the culture and society as a whole.

Twenty-first-century scholars have amended Clark’s argument: instead of a dualistic polarization of opposites, gender is now most often seen as a web of assumptions or latent qualities that could be drawn on as the situation needed. This web of assumptions was “not so polarized as to prevent leakage across gender boundaries”. A similar development has led to the argument that stereotypically feminine qualities could well be attached to individuals of both sexes: some men could be imagined to be like women, and therefore witches: According to Claudia Opitz-Belakhal, Jean Bodin regarded some educated men’s greed for power and knowledge as prone to make them

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6 Clark’s work is now most often cited to his book volume in 1997, but important parts of the volume actually consists of work conducted and published as journal articles already during the 1980s and early 1990’s. See e.g. Stuart Clark, “The Gendering of Witchcraft In French Demonology: Misogyny or Polarity?” in *French History* 5 (1991): 426-37.

as vulnerable to the Devil’s lure as women’s carnal greed. Whereas Bodin associated his enemies with greed, witchcraft and femininity, he also presented himself as godly, dutiful, virile and, with this combination, ultimately very masculine. Other witch-hunters are likely to have done the same, and as many witnesses and accusers in witch trials were women, it was obviously also possible to use witchcraft accusations to present a godly and dutiful femininity. It is also likely that witchcraft sceptics and the more cautious judges were equally able to identify their rationality and patriarchal position as masculine qualities.

Gendered beliefs about magic have also been formed by various other agendas. One of these is religion. For example, Sigrid Brauner, Merry Wiesner Hanks and Rolf Schülte have claimed that Protestant ideologists – including and especially Luther – either adopted or retained for longer the stereotypical image of witches being female. While this may seem a viable generalization, it is noteworthy that in the majority of the areas where most of the accused were men, the dominant religion was Protestantism. The demonologists’ stereotype of the female witch was not necessarily transferred into the practice of trials or the popular concepts of witchcraft. Western scholars have not yet seriously assessed the influence of the Eastern Orthodox religions and Islam on gendered concepts of witchcraft and magic, although the issue must be of significant relevance since geographically, more than a third of Europe was under the influence of these religions.

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11 See footnote 1 for the statistics.
Gendered Concepts of Magic and the Village Community

Witch-hunts were usually at their most intense where the idea of the witches’ Sabbath took root. This Sabbath – where witches were said to congregate – was essential for chain accusations and snowballing denunciations. The majority of the accused in the Sabbath trials were women. This has been explained by the sexual nature of the Sabbath and the encounters between the witches and the Devil. Nevertheless, in Continental Europe, the concept of the witches’ Sabbath grew to include men. Although it was never impossible for demonologists to conceive of female demons and devils having sex with human men, sex was not as important for the masculine experience of witchcraft. This was possibly the case because, as Lyndal Roper claims, early modern understanding related sex to the subordination of the woman to the power of the man. During the witches’ Sabbath, men took on other roles. In German witch-hunts, Rita Voltmer and Heuser found that a wider cultural development was perhaps more important to the change than the escalation of chain accusations: The emergence of male witches was made possible by the reimagining of the witches’ Sabbath in terms of the village festival; boy and male witches took roles in the witches’ Sabbath that corresponded to their roles in the village festival. This reimagining, than a simple escalation of accusations, was the cause of the emergence of the male witch. The Sabbath has also been

12 Roper, *The Witch Craze*, 82-103; See also Roper, *The Holy Household*.

described as the mirror image of everyday society, which also may lead to seeing the main figures of it as men – similarly to everyday society.\textsuperscript{14}

The entrance of the village festivals into the conception of the witches’ Sabbath suggests that the social and cultural structures of village communities – and even households – may in other ways also be important for the gendering of the concepts of magic. In towns, the model of social organization was the hierarchical trade guild or the workshop with its established division of labour. It is therefore likely that townsfolk’s ideas of the gendering of magic were also different from those in rural areas, where the agricultural farmstead organized work according to cyclical periods rather than constant hierarchies, and where physical power and ability – perhaps more than gender – were crucial in determining one’s status. In the coastal fishing villages or areas where migrant labour was common, the patterns appear to have been different again.\textsuperscript{15} One might also conjecture that close-knit village communities were likely to foster long-standing grudges and enmities between people who were bound to the locality of their villages. These people tended to be women, elderly men and boys. However, some of the areas where male witches formed the overwhelming majority – such as eastern Finland, Lapland, and Iceland – were populated by semi-nomadic people. For the Sami of Lapland, the place of residence changed according to the yearly migration from winter villages to summer pastures, while in eastern Finland, slash-and-burn farmers were forced to move to new settlements every few years due to the infertility of their land. As a result of the naturally harsh living conditions and the semi-nomadic lifestyle, the mechanisms that kept social peace in these communities were different from those in settled villages. Likewise, household structures seem to be of interest, since the most intense witches’ Sabbath trial areas – where women were mostly accused – seem to have been those where a nuclear family-type was dominant and people married relatively late. By contrast, in areas where male witches were prevalent, multigenerational and even sibling households were common. This is not a pattern without exception – for example, in Finland

\textsuperscript{14} A classic description of the Sabbath and inversion in Clark, Stuart (1980): Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft. In: Past and Present 87. pp. 98–127. Clark, however, did not make the leap to male witches. For that, see e.g. Dillinger Evil People, 41-73, esp. 52, 55.

family type pattern and marriage cultures in the western mainland differed radically from those in the east of in the archipelago – but it seems a potentially meaningful factor.

**Gender, witchcraft and life**

A considerable part of witchcraft is related to the home and household, but this seems to have meant different things for male and female witches. According to Labouvie, in the Saar region, women were overwhelmingly more connected with maleficium and harmful magic connected to children, childbirth, love and death. Women were naturally connected to the worlds of childbirth and death since they took care of these matters. Similarly, since women cooked food and prepared drink, they were also associated with poisoning. With their various skills and their mysterious relationship with life and death, the popular beliefs of the region traditionally connected women with the transcendent world of spirits and flying night witches, Labouvie claims. This seems a general pattern in southern parts of Germany and France, and also in Mediterranean Europe. On the other

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16 Cf. e.g. the generalization presented in Mary Hartman: The Household and the Making of Society: A Subversive View of the Western Past. Cambridge University Press 2004, 1-34.


hand, in north-eastern Europe, the figure in touch with the other world was the shaman or tietäjä, a cunning man, who could use his power for both good and evil. In these areas, men seem to have been connected with maleficium in at least as great a measure as women.\textsuperscript{19} In this respect, the position of a possible druidic culture in Celtic areas would be interesting, if source material could be found.

Another explanation for the abundance of maleficium associated with children and childbirth is the vulnerability of children’s lives in early modern society. Infant mortality was high, and sometimes only half the children born survived their first year. Even later, risks were frequent and considerable. In some German towns, new mothers represented a disproportionately large number of accusers, with their post-middle-aged help as the accused.\textsuperscript{20} In other areas, teenage girls or young adult women accused their mothers or mother figures, such as the mistresses of the households


where they were in service. This has been related to the psychological tensions between mothers and daughters in close-knit communities, where independence was delayed and disciplinary practices of bringing up children were strict and its ideals inflexible. Women who had recently given birth were also more likely to accuse an older woman in their household of witchcraft because childbirth and maternity reawakened the insecurities and tensions that they had experienced as children in their relationship with their own mothers. Older women paid the price: they became the witch-figures on which these tensions were projected and vented.

Male witches were also often accused of maleficium against people. As was the case with women, this most often meant people in their own neighbourhood. Especially in areas where male witches were not exceptional, this maleficium could also involve the harm of the neighbour’s and relative’s children. Whereas this is an ill fit for psychological explanations about the projection of motherhood-related anxieties onto an evil mother figure, it also indicates the importance of fathers, which can be observed in the various kinds of source material soon after the birth, even though traditional household manuals usually give fathers a more practical role in the upbringing of older children.

children. The father’s role in children’s lives was most visible when the children were old enough to be educated, guided and punished in the way that was at the time conceived rational. Masculine fatherhood was thus juxtaposed with the intimate physical and emotional care given by mothers. In rural households and in the artisanal culture of the towns, full adulthood was not achieved after reaching a set number of years; instead, it was a project gradually entered into through different rites of passage. A man was not considered a full adult until he had advanced from apprentice to master and from bachelorhood to marriage and the patriarchy of a family. Fatherhood was as essential to successful masculinity as motherhood was to femininity, and this is evident even in the witchcraft trials.

Nevertheless, male witches seem to have directed their magic more often against their political opponents, such as clergymen who had come to admonish them for some misconduct or to collect their tithe. Likewise, the more powerful and dangerous witches – those accused of leading campaigns against royal families or members of nobility – seem to have been men. In these cases, the maleficium is described in an almost military way: male witches lead a group of other witches like troops. In Finnish trials, the illnesses sent by these witches are depicted as magical ammunition, physical bundles of concentrated ill will, like arrows or bullets. This is clearly a masculinization of witchcraft, especially as an older meaning of the Finnish word for these bundles, ‘tyrä’, also refers to the testicles. Female witches could also be described as having used tyrä; this is congruent with the claim by Willem de Blécourt that magic could be gendered irrespective of the sex or gender of the user of magic. Nevertheless, whereas carnal lust and envy could be easily seen as feminine qualities and sources of the fuel for feminine magic, political intrigue and economic grudges were thought of as male and masculine sins.

22 Roper, Oedipus and the Devil, 146ff.

Gender and age

Historians agree that older women are generally over-represented among those accused of witchcraft in many places, even in places where male witches dominated (except perhaps in Iceland, where females accused of witchcraft were too few to allow over-representation). In scholarly explanations by Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas, witches were understood to be victims of the changing moral concepts of neighbourly help and charity: the local needy sought alms that the neighbours were no longer willing or able to give. The resulting moral and social tension was resolved by accusing them of witchcraft. The needy in each community were most likely to be older women who could no longer support themselves by work and were thus dependent on others. This explanation has received much criticism since its publication in the early 1970s. Indeed, Macfarlane himself concluded that such a major moral change that could have explained the witch-hunts in Europe (or perhaps even in England) probably never really took place.

Lyndal Roper has also noted that older women were over-represented in Germany. Her explanation related this to the psychology of motherhood and an enhanced importance of fertility in early modern culture. As post-menopausal women were no longer fertile, they came to be thought of as anti-mothers: they poisoned and cursed instead of nurturing and caring. Instead of doing the God-given work of bringing children into the world, they were in league with the Devil. Old women were also seen as envious of the children, families and households that the younger women were running. However, accusations aimed at older women have also been explained not by their vulnerability, but by their relative power. Post-menopausal women were often at the peak of their social power: no longer having to bear or care for children, they had time on their hands to run

256-275, 223-225; Rafaël Hertzberg, Vidskepelsen i Finland på 1600 talet. Bidrag till Finlands kulturhistoria. Akademisk afhandling. (Helsingfors: University of Helsinki, 1889), 33.


households in which the hard labour was performed by the younger generation. They could also concentrate on household production of butter and textiles to the extent that there was a surplus to sell, and they were often still physically quite strong. It seems likely, although as yet unconfirmed, that in the areas where this kind of explanation holds true, female witches were also likely to perform the kinds of magic classified by de Blécourt and Dillinger as ‘male’, such as the advancement of personal gain in dairy production or even in fishing or agriculture.

The stereotype of the witch as an old woman does not hold true equally throughout all regions of Europe, although statistical enquiry into the actual ages of the people accused is difficult in many areas. There is often a verbal description of the accused females, describing them as old, poor, filthy and lame. However, these descriptions may have been made to fit the popular notion of how a witch should appear rather than a genuinely accurate portrayal. The stereotype of the old, impoverished female witch also appears frequently in demonological writing: however, it appears more often in sceptical works, when accused witches were presented as the victims of irrationality. Women simply make a better image of weak victims. Those that sought to present witches as powerful and dangerous, agents of evil that must to be fought against, were better served by the image of a strong, rich and perhaps even politically influential male witch.

Where it has been possible to connect the individuals on trial to church or tax records, many of the accused seem to have been rather average in both age and wealth, and they were often reasonably well connected, with family and friends living in the area. Indeed, the family or friends could be the source of the accusation; competitors in the community might try to attack the whole family


through the female householder or – in other regions – through the husband. In rural Sweden and Finland, most of the accused seem to have been landowning peasant wives or widows. In New England, it has been suggested that landownership and women’s inheritance of land in the absence of a male heir made women especially likely to be accused of witchcraft. It is nevertheless clear that the social stratification of witch trials varied across Europe, and that this variety has an influence on the gendering of both the concepts of magic and on the rise of the suspicion and accusations of witchcraft. Currently, not enough is known about the different European regions to make a systematic analysis.

**Gender, work and ownership**

It is logical that gendered concepts of magic should follow the gendered concepts of the division of labour in Europe. Along with taking care of the children, the elderly and the sick, women in most European societies were responsible for the household work and for livestock. The overwhelming majority of the magic and witchcraft women were accused of related to these areas. Like motherhood, success in animal husbandry – avoiding illnesses, making fodder last until the end of the winter – and the production of household items such as butter or yarn were simultaneously important and unpredictable. Competition between women in the neighbourhood, leading to envy, greed and ill will, were thought to tempt women into witchcraft, and animosity or even simple nosiness concerning other people’s households aroused suspicion. Anthropologically influenced scholars like Diane Purkiss have also claimed that it was the woman’s duty to uphold the boundaries of the household. This task was important because the boundaries around the household were symbolically linked to those between culture and nature, and those around the woman’s own

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29 Labouvie, Men in witchcraft Trials, 41; Eilola, *Rajapinnoilla*, 202-216


body. Transgressing these boundaries risked contamination, and this risk was made tangible through the image of the witch.  

The importance of livestock and textile production in women’s magic is also highlighted by the fact that in the north-eastern areas of Europe, cattle was considered to be the property of women, so much so that the individual women of the household could each own their own cows. If they managed to create surplus produce, this butter, yarn or cloth could be sold for money. Nevertheless, where male witches appeared, they also performed magic related to cattle, the brewing of beer and the production of textiles. In fact, a significant number of the male witches found in Normandy were shepherd boys.

It is worthy of note that the above-mentioned areas of work and production were undergoing change in the early modern Europe. At the time of the witchcraft trials, the commercial production of beer and textiles was already gradually being transferred to the male domain. In north-eastern Europe, the care for cattle, however, was increasingly consigned to the female sphere of life. By the nineteenth century, it became shameful for men to enter a cowshed and authorities at times tried to prevent the hiring of male shepherds. In nineteenth-century folklore material from Finland and Karelia, cattle magic was directly connected to female genitalia: when cattle were led out to pasture, the woman who owned the cattle would straddle the gate so that when the cows walked beneath her, they were exposed to the magical power of her genitalia. This power could be used to protect one’s own folk and cattle, but also to threaten outsiders. This magical custom is not reported in seventeenth-century trial material, nor does it seem that men strictly shunned cattle sheds (it seems that the folklore material exaggerates this), but cattle magic was already more common for women than men. It is also striking that some of the magic performed by men for curing or preventing cattle illnesses seems very feminine in nature: it makes use of the fire in the hearth and cooking utensils,


which were magical both because they were made of metal but also perhaps because they were used to transform natural produce into cultural ones. 33

Early modern male spheres of work related to agriculture, war, trade and travel. In north-eastern Europe, some of the magic performed by men related to ensuring a good harvest in one’s own fields or driving thistles into the neighbours’ plots, but not enough is known about this kind of magic in other areas of Europe. Soldiers across Europe are known to have been drawn to pacts with the Devil in order to protect themselves in battle, but although ‘arrow-witches’ are already mentioned in the *Malleus Maleficarum*, they were obviously more common in countries and periods affected by war. 34 Travelling men performed magic related to carriages and ships, although in coastal regions such as Norway and Scotland, this kind of witchcraft was nevertheless performed by women. 35 Swedish historian Linda Oja suggests that men seem to dominate benevolent magic whereas women dominate malevolent witchcraft on horses and horse equipment. 36 Laura Stark, a Finnish folklorist, found similar patterns in nineteenth-century eastern Finland. A horse’s gear and feed were spoiled


36 Linda Oja, ”Kvinnligt, Manligt, magiskt. Genusperspektiv på folklig magi i 1600- och 1700-talets Sverige” *Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift* (1994): 43-55. Absolute numbers are small, but no women and two men in her sample seem to have magically cured horses.
by any woman who stepped or jumped over them since they had been exposed to the power of her genitals. Only men could take care of horses and gear in a positive way.\textsuperscript{37}

The gendered division of labour seems to have formed and changed quite gradually in early modern Europe. In many areas, work was not yet as strictly gendered as it came to be in the nineteenth century. The division of labour also varied across Europe according to the dominant forms of trade and occupation, type of agriculture and structure of the household. More comparative work is needed to understand the complexity of gendered assumptions around work and magic.

Johannes Dillinger and Willem de Blécourt have both separately suggested that one male form of witchcraft relates to the seeking of personal profit or advancement, an idea that was shunned in communal cultures. Early modern culture was very slowly moving from an understanding of good luck and wealth as limited resources, which could only be redistributed but not increased, to a proto-capitalist understanding where production of new wealth was not only possible but also desirable. Individuals who entered this new mode of thought before the others – or who seemed more successful than ‘their fair share’ – could be suspected of witchcraft. According to de Blecourt, these individuals were likely to have been male merchants and artisans. Dillinger on the other hand, explains that some forms of male magic, like treasure hunting magic, were popular and relatively mildly treated in courts because they allowed their practitioners to circumvent the moral dilemma of common versus individual gain by importing wealth from outside the community. Whereas profit-seeking has previously been identified as a male sphere of magic, it could also be associated with women, especially in relation to magic with cattle and dairy production, as was the case in Finland and Mecklenburg.\textsuperscript{38}


\textsuperscript{38} Katrin Moeller, \textit{Das Willkur über Rech ginge. Hexenverfolkung in Mecklenburg im 16. und 17 Jahrhundert.} (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2007), 224-31; Toivo, \textit{Witchcraft and Gender}, 113-149.
**Gender, status and prosecuting cultures**

The question of gender and ownership in witchcraft is connected to the differing legal systems in Europe. It seems that in places where the courts were dominated by elites – such as noble landlords, or assizes judges or even town magistrates – as it was in many areas of Continental Europe and Britain, and where these elites used the courts to control their subordinates, the accused women were poorer and more vulnerable than if the court was a place of equals.  

In rural Scandinavia and in parts of Britain and New England, where the landowning peasantry or small-scale burghers dominated the courts, the accused, both women and men, were also likely to come from the same social group.  

Alison Rowlands nevertheless notes that the local magistrates may have been keen to suppress the trials in order to prevent superior or neighbouring legal authorities from gaining political power over them. This does not mean that all suspected or practicing male witches were wealthy landowning peasants in these areas; it was merely the case that such people were more

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39 For the backgrounds of the accused e.g. Brian P. Levack. The Witch hunt in early modern Europe. London, Pearson 2006, 134-174; Roper, Witch-craze, 44-66; Roper, Oedipus and the Devil 146ff.

40 Nenonen, Noituus, taikuus, 201-220, also summarized in Nenonen, Finland, 373-377; Walter Rummel has also noted that in the German areas where the local groups lead the witch-hunt instead of higher-ranking elites, the local groups tended to take the opportunity to attack their most powerful competitors within the group by accusing their wives. Although this did not lead to men being accused, the flip side of the coin is, of course, that the weaker ones in the community, including poorer women, were not accused as often. Walter Rummel, Bauern, Herren Und Hexen: Studien zur Sozialgeschichte sponheimischer und kurtrierischen Hexenprozesse 1574-1664 (Göttingen: Göttingen University Press, 1991).

41 Alison Rowlands, Witchcraft Narratives in Germany Rothenburg, 1561-1652 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
likely to be formally accused in court. The poor itinerant witches were dealt with informally, leaving no trace in the records.  

The gendering of a witch in a witch trial could assign feminine characteristics to men and masculine characteristics to women. In some areas, where the accusations were directed at the poorer members of the society, the witches on trial present a weak and vulnerable, victimized femininity. Even the men accused are thus effeminized and regarded as victims. In other areas, being accused in a court of law presumes a certain status. A position as the head of a household among the landowning peasantry or as an artisan in a town was regarded as one the most important characteristics of success, and thus it implied a powerful masculinity. As such, the image of the witch had to portray a more successful set of gender qualities in areas where those accused in a court of law were also mostly heads of households. In these areas, the witch was never portrayed quite so much as a victim. Nevertheless, the conception of the witch as a powerful masculine figure may have also influenced the image of the female witch, in turn giving it greater power and status.

The image of the female witch, in turn, may have influenced regional concepts of femininity in general, and vice versa. In Scandinavia, peasant women in particular seem to have been thought of as not only capable but also responsible for organizing and doing both the household work and considerable parts of the agricultural farm work. In cases where their husbands were absent or incapable, they also took care of the various communal duties of the farmstead, such as the construction of parish buildings, the maintenance of roads, and, when required, the payment of taxes. Peasant women in Scandinavia seem to have had a gendered role that was less connected to reproduction and the household and more connected to public or communal duties and responsibilities than in the rest of the continent and Britain. When the women in the few Finnish Sabbath trials in Ahvenanmaa (Åland) made a pact with the Devil, they did not seal their allegiance by having ritual sex – constituting a common law marriage with him – as they did in German areas studied by Lyndal Roper and others. Instead, they agreed to pay yearly taxes in butter or cash.  

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42 Toivo, Male Witches, 142-144.
43 Toivo Gender, Sex and cultures of Trouble, 87-108.
Conclusion

When observing and interpreting witchcraft trials from the perspective of gender, one must decide whether one is examining witchcraft trials in order to learn more about early modern concepts of gender, or whether one is looking at gender to find an explanation for the witchcraft trials. The former option is engaging because witchcraft trials offer rare portrayals of ordinary people’s lives, often granting the people involved an opportunity to speak for themselves. Tall tales and stereotypical tropes may be put into their mouths, but they add their own personal details to their stories. This option is nevertheless also an intriguing choice because looking at gender through such monumental dramas as witchcraft trials is bound to produce a distorted picture. In investigating gender through witchcraft trials, it is evident that more work needs to be done on the gendered concepts presented by various actors involved: this includes not just the accused and the accuser or demonologists, but also the witnesses, judges, juries and bystanders. These parties should be investigated and differentiated in order to reveal the full complexity of the early modern web of assumptions concerning gender. On the other hand, the option of looking at gender to find an explanation for the witchcraft trials seems more straightforward, but there is a considerable risk of understanding gender only through its negative or weakening effect on society.

How gender is understood is also of great importance: is gender a dichotomous hierarchical power relation, as Joan Scott defines it, or is it rather a way of being and doing, as advocated by French feminism? Understanding gender in a dichotomous or binary way means that distinguishing between what male and female witches did is essential in understanding the gendering of magic and witchcraft. Understanding gender as a way of being a man or a woman may make it easier to grasp the blurring of dichotomies. If gender is not about what people are allowed to do, but about how they do it, it may be easier to understand areas where the gendering of magic seems to be contentious: for example, when considering magic related to children or personal gain. Family and household roles were equally important to men and women. These roles may have placed them in the same situations of work or representation towards the neighbours: they had to perform similar tasks and would have succeeded or failed accordingly.