One of the central issues of current research, especially of feminist research into early modern witchcraft, is the question of (female) agency. The stereotype of female passivity in the face of male oppression has been contested, and we have now a far more sophisticated understanding of women and their varied means of expressing agency and resistance than was possible in a system of reference based on victimhood. Witchcraft trials, perhaps paradoxically, have proven to be fruitful sites for finding evidence of women’s resistance and agency. Women accused of witchcraft resisted in various ways, including the recantation of confessions made under torture. This very resistance, particularly recantation, has led to some highly questionable interpretations of witchcraft cases. On one hand, it is necessary to recognize the possibility of resistance and the role of the accused witch in shaping the narrative of his or her confession. To speak as if confession under torture were simply inevitable erases the struggles of accused witches. On the other hand, it is possible to take the recognition of agency too far, and to distort experiences and motivations. Women and men were influenced by the operations of power, but also influenced these in turn. Agency theory posits that actors always have choices, no matter how restricted; ‘agent-centred’ morality proposes a novel twist on both traditional Kantian internalist categories and a useful political starting point for taking agents’ conscious moral choices seriously.

In this chapter, we address the problems of both male and female witches’ agency and selfhood. Issues of agency and resistance are not
specific to women, even if women have been foregrounded in studies relating to both concepts. We have seen that it was quite possible that a majority, even a large majority, of accused witches in a given region might be men. Ideas about male witches and accusations against them may have differed somewhat from those concerning women, but in general they were more alike than unlike. Therefore, we must apply questions regarding agency and resistance to cases involving men as well as to those involving women.

We approach agency and resistance first through a critique of Lyndal Roper’s psychoanalytical reading of witchcraft confessions, then through an analysis of witchcraft trials that involved what Wolfgang Behringer has dubbed ‘the elaborated concept of witchcraft’, the theory of satanic allegiance typically invoked during ‘epidemic’ episodes of witch-hunting, thereby bracketing out most accusations involving ‘minor’ witchcraft, popular magic, healing spells, potions and the like.3

The scholar of early modern witchcraft faces a number of difficult methodological and epistemological problems, most of which stem from the ‘impossible’ nature of witchcraft itself. The problem of how to read and assess ‘non-factual’ witchcraft materials – that is, witchcraft trial testimony – is central to witchcraft scholarship.4 However, the troubled relationship between witchcraft scholars and their materials goes deeper. Research into early modern witch-hunting and ideas about witches is closely dependent on witchcraft trials; indeed, without the trials, there could be very little of such research at all. Even the intellectual historian of witchcraft, putatively uninterested in actual prosecutions, works with materials that are linked closely with trials: the authors of late medieval and early modern demonological treatises drew heavily on trial accounts for evidence to develop and sustain their arguments. These treatises, in turn, contributed to the evolution of learned witchcraft theory and thus to the dynamics and patterns of witchcraft prosecutions.

On one level, this is merely stating the obvious. But, when one considers more carefully the central role of trials in the production of witchcraft materials, it becomes apparent that modern scholars are locked
into an intimate relationship with processes that involved the deliberate infliction of extreme suffering. We may decry the methods of interrogators and torturers, or express admiration and sympathy for accused witches, but we remain in the uncomfortable position of benefiting – intellectually and professionally – from the ordeals of others. This is not to suggest that we should stop studying witchcraft, any more than we should stop studying the history of warfare, science, or any other subject. Our research, however, needs to be accompanied by serious reflection on the ethics of representing others. Such reflection, we submit, is lacking in witchcraft studies, with scholars preserving virtual silence on the ethical, as opposed to methodological or political, problems associated with writing about witches and witchcraft. It is important to state that we are not opposed to multiple readings of historical materials, nor to postmodern approaches. We are, however, opposed to readings – of any school – that treat human subjects as blank slates upon which a historian may inscribe whatever he or she wishes. Historians have great freedom in their interpretations simply because their subjects are dead. This ought to be regarded as a privilege, not as a right. It is unethical to use that freedom to shape our representation of historical subjects to serve us and our (political) agendas without any thought of serving them, preserving their memory, and re-presenting them.5

To the extent that we have access – via distorting, rhetorically charged tropes and textualisations, to be sure – to historical actors’ categories, we are bound to take them seriously as historical factors, no matter how silly, naive or misguided they might seem to, say, a pragmatic suburban car salesman or a worldly advertising executive. It is quite true, as Lyndal Roper has suggested, that we cannot read witchcraft confessions as straightforward documents susceptible to analysis by traditional methods such as ‘historical realism’.6 However, we are licensed to examine the documents for traces not merely of the interrogators’ knowledge or theory that shaped the proceedings, but also for the resistances and principles that shaped the contributions of the accused witch. Roper intended to do this, but was blocked from doing
so with an open mind by the ideological engagements she brought to her sources.

In her much-reviewed and highly original collection *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe*, Roper approached the topic of witchcraft confessions and their recantation from a psychoanalytic perspective. One of Roper’s great accomplishments in this book, composed of nine substantial and thematically related articles or chapters, was to call into question traditional feminist approaches to domestic and sexual power politics as expressed in her first book, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg*. Arguing in *Oedipus and the Devil* that women who endure sexual oppression and even abuse in patriarchal societies are more than just victims, Roper applied assiduously and to impressive effect the by-now familiar theory of limited agency: not only the powerful, but also the oppressed have and make choices and respond even to abuse in ways that make it easier for them to live with misery and with themselves; suppressed rebellion is still rebellion and evidence of it discredits misogynistic narratives of passivity. This theory turns out to be both useful to us, because it helps us to understand the actions of some accused witches, and useful to Roper’s psychoanalytic agenda, as it gives her a political structure into which to fit otherwise strange, even self-incriminating statements and actions.

Roper was interested in the motivations for confession and theoretical explanations designed to get behind them. Regina Bartholome (Augsburg, 1670) provided a case study that gave the original paper and the entire collection its name. Regina, aged twenty-one when she was tried for witchcraft, confessed that she was a witch. Roper argued that ‘the fantasy of witch-hood is created in a project of collaboration between questioner and accused, and that the dynamic by which it progressed can indeed be usefully explained psychoanalytically.’ In Regina’s case, Roper suggested, Oedipal tensions and self-destructive tendencies combined to produce a dramatic confession to witchcraft and Devil-worship.
In another essay in the same collection (‘Witchcraft and fantasy’), Roper uses the case of Anna Ebeler, a lying-in maid who was executed as a witch at Augsburg in 1669, to elaborate on her understanding of witchcraft confessions as products of collusion between the witch and her interrogators. This collusion was not entered into freely by the accused witch, but was a last hope of steering and participating in the elaboration of a confession. This would be a very subtle and deep-reaching insight into the process by which witchcraft accusations and confessions were concocted, but for Roper’s sense that more was at play than simple collusion as a result of exercising a restricted but crucial agency. While she dutifully invoked the limitations and qualifications clearly attendant upon any application of Freudian theory to pre-modern individuals, psychosexual complexions and complexes, Roper eventually let go of all pretence and put accused witches from Bavaria and Swabia on a Viennese couch. Roper argued – and this is strong stuff – that in the ‘play’ (her word) of torture, confession, retraction, re-torture, re-confession and further recantation, the witch participated in sexually charged ways in her own destruction.

Despite this profoundly partisan reading of women’s motivations, one of the great accomplishments of Roper’s book was to reconnect female physicality with women’s experience of life (in the early modern world) as regards maternity, sex, nurturing infants and children, and most especially, gender relations. In the context of witch-hunting and interrogation, Roper argued that we must take female physicality and reproductive differences from men seriously. Female witches were often accused of ‘bad nurture’, of making suckling infants or children wither, shrivel up, fail to thrive, and die. The recognition that many women accused of witchcraft (at least at Augsburg) were lying-in maids charged by the mothers of babies who got sick or failed to thrive has helped to build a more nuanced historiography relating to witch-hunting. Female physicality had other implications. Roper speculated that in consequence of the forced intimacy between torturer and witch, always figured as a woman, an intimate relationship developed. It was built on
the physical incursions of the torturer on the woman’s flesh and his services afterwards in binding up the wounds. Thus, ‘a bond of intense personal dependence on the part of the witch on her persecutor [sic] might be established.’13 The conditional mood of the auxiliary verb ‘might’ is crucial; and it would be much harder to make the same argument and to adduce the same psychosexual consequences if the witch were a man. The notion of sexually charged collusion between executioner and witch relies very largely on the preconception that witches were women. Indeed, Roper discussed no male witches at all.

Roper explicitly sexualised the process of torture using banal language from the well-worn repertoire of Freudian sexology:

Once the torturer’s application of pain had brought the witch to confess, she knew she faced execution, and she knew her executioner. In the procedure of interrogation itself, carried out in the presence of council interrogators, scribes and executioner, there is an unmistakable sadomasochistic logic, as the witch, in response to pain, might reveal details of her crimes only to deny them subsequently; or as she proffered scattered scraps of information about diabolic sex only then to tantalize her questioners with contradiction or silence. In this sadistic game of showing and concealing, the witch forced her persecutors to apply and reapply pain, prising her body apart to find her secret. Once it was found, she might herself identify with the aggressor [italics added throughout].14

To suggest that a witch, no matter how much she ‘directed’ her confessions and recantations, was engaged in a sadomasochistic undertaking, or that she tantalised her tormentor, or even forced him to apply pain, is both to distort the concept of agency and to subordinate agency to unconscious drives. This distorts the accused witch’s role in the interrogation dynamic in the service of psychoanalytic theory. Roper’s language is laden with implications that the accused witch derived benefit or pleasure from the experience of interrogation under torture, or that she was, on some level, a willing participant. It is, of course, within
the realm of possibility, however unlikely, that an individual witch might respond to interrogation in this way. Roy Porter has alluded to the sado-masochistic sexual tendencies in Romantic literary depictions of witches and witch trials; one wonders about the lenses through which modern scholars view the topic, and where these lenses originate.\footnote{Evidence from other early modern witchcraft cases, as well as accounts by modern torture survivors, suggests that Roper has paid insufficient attention to the complex relationship between the devastating effects of torture and the struggle of the torture victim to maintain a sense of identity. The fact that an accused witch prolonged her ordeal by recanting does not necessarily mean that she was engaged in a pathological, self-destructive game. Occam’s razor allows – perhaps requires – us to posit much simpler explanations for such behaviour: confession was offered to stop torture, but recantations were made for totally different reasons, and not to elicit more torture or as part of a sado-masochistic engagement. To believe as Roper seems to do is to bind the statements and explicit self-justifications of those accused of witchcraft to a procrustean bed.}

An example from eighteenth-century Zug in the Swiss Confederacy shows that witches could be tortured into confessing, then recant repeatedly without any evidence of Oedipal or other Freudian complexes at work. In the trials at Zug in 1737, Marx Stadlin and his daughter Euphemia withstood all the horrific tortures applied to them and refused to confess to anything, and were therefore released. However, Anna Maria Stadlin, Marx’s wife, said ‘she would rather say that she was a witch than be tortured so – she was already half dead’. Nevertheless, in keeping with her husband’s and daughter’s strong faith, she recanted six times, until she collapsed finally under repeated torture and confessed one last time.\footnote{Her motivation to confess and recant repeatedly might have had something to do with the kind of ‘vicious circle’ or \textit{Teufelskreis} that Roper invokes – at least in the sense that psychological terror can be both irresistible and resisted by turns,}
but there is no reason to suspect further depth-psychological levels when Anna Maria seems to have been innocent, along with her family, and did her best to follow their martyr-like example.

Modern studies and first-hand accounts of torture also offer useful insights into the dynamics of interrogation. The testimony of modern torture survivors indicates that people resist interrogation under torture for as long as they can, and that the psychological effects of torture are varied but severe.\(^\text{17}\) They also indicate that, while confessions may indeed be produced through a process of shaping and reshaping by both the prisoner and the interrogator, to suggest that prisoners experience this process as a sado-masochistic \textit{game} is ludicrous. That is, they may well see their interrogators as sadists playing a game with their lives,\(^\text{18}\) but not themselves as masochistic participants.

Survivors’ accounts suggest various reasons for resistance and capitulation to interrogation. In one case, summarised in an essay by Felicity de Zulueta, a Tunisian man refused to cooperate with his interrogators despite being subjected to terrible torture. When asked by an interviewer why he did not cooperate, he responded that ‘he wanted to preserve his dignity. He could not admit that people could be forced against their will.’\(^\text{19}\) Others have described their feelings of intense fear and vulnerability, and explained that they confessed simply in order to stop the torture. A set of accounts by Burmese prisoners contains repeated stories of attempts to resist interrogation that falter or fail due to fear, confusion, and mental and physical exhaustion:

\begin{itemize}
  \item ‘When my physical situation deteriorated and I was unable to delay my interrogators any longer, I gave them some of the information they wanted.’\(^\text{20}\)
  \item ‘I became unsure of reality and my answers became inconsistent. Was I dreaming, or was all this really happening?’\(^\text{21}\)
  \item ‘I wasn’t sure if I could take another round of torture. … I was trembling with fear and I tried to come up with something that would get me out of the physical abuse.’\(^\text{22}\)
\end{itemize}
‘I was providing answers to their questions that I had previously resisted giving them. This was because I was weak and beginning to feel depressed.’

There is nothing in such accounts to suggest that the authors believed their experiences were a game, or that they derived any sort of pleasure from them. For both men and women, being interrogated under torture was clearly deeply traumatic.

We have already noted that Lyndal Roper’s psychosexual interpretation depends on female witches and male interrogators. It is undeniable that torture was and is very often sexualised, either through the application of pain to the genitals, rape, or the threat of rape. What may be forgotten is that women are not the only victims of sexual torture. The following statements are from a female and a male Burmese torture survivor:

One officer threatened that if I refused to confess I would lose my virginity. I was so frightened that I couldn’t eat or sleep. If I confessed to the crime, although I had nothing to do with it, I would be sentenced to death. I couldn’t decide what to do; I was in an impossible situation and I nearly went mad.

Suddenly, a guard kicked me behind my knee. I collapsed on the floor on my knees. When I tried to stand up, I was forced to lie on my back and I was handcuffed. The hood was still over my head and I was lying face down on the floor. Suddenly, my sarong was taken off. I wasn’t wearing any underwear and my lower body was completely naked. … I don’t want to describe what followed because I don’t even want to think about it. … A voice broke the silence. ‘Moe Aye, think carefully and tell us the truth. If you don’t, we will make you a homosexual.’ Someone then sat on top of me. Another took off my handcuffs, pulled both of my hands forward and handcuffed me again. I was about to be raped by another man. I was absolutely terrified as I expect anyone would be in such a situation.
True and actual likeness of the newly built Evil-doers' House at Hamburg, built for the punishment and correction of those who have lived away from and reviled God, of people who practise evil-doers, begun in the current year 1627 in the month of June and finished in the following August.
The Bamberg Hexenhaus (witch-house), after a copper-plate engraving formerly in the Royal Library at Bamberg.

**Cartouches**: citation from 3 Kings 9, 8-9 (= 1 Kings 9, 8-9), in Latin and German: ‘And this house will become a ruin, every passer-by will be appalled and gasp [tuss] at the sight of it; and they will ask, “Why has the Lord so treated this land and this house?” The answer will be, “Because they forsook the Lord their God, who brought their forefathers out of Egypt, and clung to other gods, prostrating themselves before them and serving them; that is why the Lord has brought this great evil upon them.”

**Legend (upper right)**:

C: A statue of Justice standing above the entry, under which is the verse: ‘Having been warned, learn justice and do not despise God.’ (Virgil, *Aenid*, 6,620)

D: Label for the Chapel

E: The Torture Chamber

F: The stream that flows under the Torture Chamber

G: The Entrance to the Courtyard

2 The Bamberg *Hexenhaus* (witch-house), after a copper-plate engraving formerly in the Royal Library at Bamberg.
Both survivors express extreme fear and horror at the threat of rape (neither was actually raped), showing clearly that sexual torture and its effects are not suffered by women only.

We are not suggesting that torture lacks ‘cultural mutability’, or that modern categories may be imported wholesale into the past; indeed, we have argued precisely the opposite in our critique of Roper. Lisa Silverman has argued persuasively that there are important differences between the early modern context of torture, in which the application of pain in the pursuit of truth was both legal and ‘partook of … a general cultural consent’, and the modern context, in which torture is illegal and non-consensual. Nevertheless, whatever the differences in culture, language and epoch between these survivors and early modern witches, they all had certain things in common: pain, resulting from the torture of their body; fear, even horror, of further or more brutal torture. And in all the cases we adduce here, they also have in common a fierce desire to resist the force being practised upon them – albeit with differing motivations: to preserve their soul, or the integrity of their personality, or their dignity, though these are, perhaps, different ways of referring to similar sorts of interiority.

A case study

The city of Bamberg was the site of one of the most infamous mass persecutions of witches in European history, with at least nine hundred burnings between 1624 and 1630. Wolfgang Behringer has accounted for this surge by reference to massive crop failures, famines and epidemics in the period after 1624. Johannes Junius, a Bürgermeister (variously burgomaster, alderman) of fifty-five, whose wife had been executed for witchcraft the previous year, was first examined on a charge of witchcraft on Wednesday, 28 June 1628, in what was for Bamberg a typical trial. Junius was almost certainly held and tortured in the Bamberg Hexenhaus, which was purpose-built for this function in the summer of 1627 (see figure 2). It should be noted that
there is no mention in the trial record or elsewhere that Junius was accused because of his wife’s conviction.

At this first hearing, torture was not applied. Junius was accused by Dr Georg Adam Haan\textsuperscript{31} of having frequented a gathering of witches in the electoral council chambers, where they ate and drank together. The accusation was, therefore, aimed directly at the top levels of urban society, and would seem to have been as much about civic politics, power and honour as about anything else. Junius denied this charge in its entirety, along with another concerning a ‘witch-dance’ in the Hauptsmoor (Hamptsmoor) forest made by a woman named Elsse, wife or perhaps daughter of Hopffen (‘Hopffens Elsse’). Having been left to think for two nights on the charges made against him by his supposed accomplices, Junius was again interrogated on Friday of that same week (30 June 1628). He was admonished to confess, but refused, and so was tortured, first by thumbscrews. He refused to confess anything, insisted that he had never denied God his Saviour or allowed himself to be baptised blasphemously, that is in a satanic parody of Christian baptism (see figure 3). The scribe wrote that he felt no pain. Under the intensified torture of leg-screws, Junius remained firm, confessing nothing. He professed to know nothing of the charges. He insisted again that he had never renounced God nor ever would, and that he still felt no pain. Subjected to the strappado, with his shoulders dislocated and his ligaments no doubt badly torn, Junius repeated that he had never renounced God and that God would not forsake him; he repeated that he knew nothing of witchcraft. Finally, Junius was stripped and examined, and a bluish mark like a clover leaf on his left side was pricked three times, but Junius was said to have felt no pain, and no blood flowed from it.

Both unnatural phenomena were believed to be signs of a witch: witches could not, according to current theories about witchcraft, feel ordinary pain, as they were protected from it by their pact with the Devil. Pain, as induced by torture, was meant to break through this layer of protection and help undo the bewitchment, leading a witch from the
Devil to confession and reconciliation before salvific execution. It should be noted that although the court reporter claims that Junius felt no pain in the thumbscrews and leg-screws, Junius later wrote in a clandestine letter to his daughter that he suffered terrible agony under repeated hoistings and droppings (eight) via the strappado. This letter furnishes the core of our argument against Roper’s readings of witches’ confessions and their recantation.

Five further days of confinement in what we can legitimately presume to have been excruciating pain were followed by a hearing on Wednesday, 5 July, a mere week after Junius was first questioned. Without torture, the trial documents duly inform us, but under the urgent persuasion of the questioners, Junius ‘at last begins and confesses’. Junius collapsed, furnishing the court with detailed accounts of his misdeeds and naming others who had been present, thereby
accusing them of witchcraft as well. The details of his confession conform closely to the ‘elaborated concept of witchcraft’, as Wolfgang Behringer has described it, that quasi-literary confabulation of satanic, pagan and folk practice with utterly imaginary but quite ancient slanders that had first coalesced in the *Malleus maleficarum* of 1487, but did not reach its fully formed state until the sixteenth century. It is important to note that Junius confessed to having renounced God in Heaven and all the heavenly host by the formula ‘I renounce God in Heaven and his host, and will henceforth recognise the Devil as my God’ (see figures 4 and 5). Given the insistence with which Junius had, under torture, denied renouncing God, we can conclude that he had been questioned closely and repeatedly about this item. The presence in the confession not only of a description of the act, but also of the precise formula used, points to a carefully shaped and guided
process of question and response, which produced the final document that Junius ratified and confirmed in public on 6 August 1628, a full month after he ‘at last began and confessed’. This is the key crime here, as in most other cases involving the ‘elaborated concept’. There are also various local details and imps’ names in the confession, but it follows the generic script very closely.

Remarkable by contrast for its candour and clear-sighted desperation, Junius’ moving last letter to his daughter allows us to see at work a dynamic entirely different from that which Roper posited in her analysis of the witch trials she chose to examine. Junius wrote to his daughter Veronica after he had ‘confessed’. Soldan and Heppe report that the letter survived because the judges kept it secret; however, its presence in the file with the other documents does not prove this. On the contrary, had the letter been in the hands of the magistracy before
Junius’ execution, he probably would not have been given the *coup de grâce* with a sword to spare him from being burned alive.\(^3^4\) Junius dated the letter 24 July, approximately two weeks before his execution on 6 August; other internal evidence in the letter confirms this date. He declared his innocence movingly, in a rhetorically marked fashion that heightened the effect of the word _unschuldig_: ‘Innocent I came into prison, innocent I was tortured, innocent I must die.’ He related the circumstances of his first interrogations, which coincide precisely with the trial record: he was accused by the chancellor’s son (Dr Georg Adam Haan, presumably) and Hopffens Elsse; he denied having eaten and danced with them and having renounced God. Thus far one is free to wonder to what extent he was repeating the official trial record, which may well have been read to him before 6 August, the date on which he confirmed his confession and was executed. However, after torture was applied, Juniuss’ story diverges on a number of significant points from the court record. As we mentioned above, the court recorder claims that Juniuss felt no pain from the thumbscrews, leg-screws or pricking – a sure sign of a witch. Juniuss, however, tells a very different story:

> And then came – God in highest Heaven have mercy – the executioner, and put the thumbscrews on me, both hands bound together, so that the blood ran out at the nails and everywhere, so that for four weeks I could not use my hands, as you can see from the writing … Thereafter they first stripped me, bound my hands behind me, and drew me up in the torture. Then I thought heaven and earth were at an end; eight times did they draw me up and let me fall again, so that I suffered horrible agony.\(^3^5\)

Juniuss dates this to Friday, 30 June. This accords with the trial record, but Juniuss makes a careful protocol of the pain involved. One has the sense that he feels a strong need to justify himself in his daughter’s eyes, and in the eyes of someone else again even more important to him: God.

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[ 81 ]
Junius’s letter makes a number of startling revelations and expresses his own motivations and sense of anguish at having confessed falsely, at having said that he had renounced God, at having accused others unjustly under compulsion. First of all, the executioner may well have been no sadistic dungeon-master but a frightened, bewildered functionary caught in the unstoppable judicial machinery that was consuming witches all around him. In fact, the executioner presented himself as a secret angel of mercy. He counselled Junius as follows:

Sir, I beg you, for God’s sake confess something, whether it be true or not. Invent something, for you cannot bear the torture which you shall suffer; and even if you bear it all, you still shall not escape, not even if you were a count, but one torture will follow another until you say you are a witch. Not before that will they let you go, as you may see by their trials, for one is just like another.36

It is highly improbable that any kind of tribunal should have instructed an executioner to counsel prisoners in this way. Furthermore, Junius begged his daughter to keep the letter secret because his jailers (Wechter) would be beheaded were it to be found. If we take the most probable reading of this advice, we must conclude that far from the executioner being forced by the accused witch to ‘apply and reapply torture’, here the executioner was begging his prisoner to avoid further torture by making any confession. Junius wrote that he was deeply anguished, day and night, about how to react to the executioner’s advice, given that he would have to say that he was a witch, though he was not, and renounce God, though he had never done so.

The consequences of such a course of action were clearly, as becomes manifest in his other reasons for confessing and his discussion of his anguish over his confession, both the lives of others and the salvation of his own soul – not a sado-masochistic impulse to play Justine to the executioner’s bargain-basement Marquis de Sade. Junius’ solution is simple and shows how concerned he was with the
state of his soul when the time came to face death. He would confess to avoid further (unnecessary) torture: ‘I would surely be better to say it with mouth and words, even though I had not really done it; and afterwards I would confess it to the priest, and let those answer for it who compel me to do it.’

By ‘answer for it’, Junius meant answer before God, since it was clear that the interrogators were not about to have to answer for it before anyone else. Faced with the inevitability of his death, Junius confessed, but claimed in his letter to have done so with mental reservations and to have planned to confess his false confession to the priest. There is one obligatory reason why he would confess it to the priest, and it was not primarily to unburden his conscience. Confession was by this time compulsory before receiving communion, but more importantly, it was necessary to confess all sins if one were to be absolved of them before it was too late, that is, before death. In Counter-Reformation Europe, this message was hammered home by obligatory weekly auricular confession and the adoption of the technology that made it practical: the confessional. Junius then recounted, in terms that closely mirror those of the official trial record, how his questioners urged him to say that he had seen neighbours at the witch-gatherings, telling him to take a mental walk up and down the streets, through the market and into the castle. Junius made an effort to name as few people as possible. He was forced, however, to name his friend and colleague in the city government, Dietmeyer. Then they urged him to confess the crimes he had committed. When he said nothing, the court ordered him to be hoisted up again, so he said that he had been told to kill his children, but that he had been unable to do so and had killed a horse in their place. This did not satisfy the court, Junius related, so he said that he had taken a consecrated host and desecrated it, after which he was left in peace. The court had extracted enough evidence to convict him of diabolical witchcraft.

Junius summed up his experience by repeating the key ideas and the advice given him by the executioner:

[ 83 ]
Now dear child, here you have all my confession and [the record of] my trial, for which I must die. And they are sheer lies and inventions, so help me God. For I was forced to say all this through fear of the torture that was threatened beyond what I had already endured. For they never leave off with the torture till one confesses something; no matter how good he really is, he must be a witch. Nobody escapes, even if he is a count.39

After closing the letter formally, Junius adds:

Dear child, six witnesses have testified at the same time against me: the chancellor, his son, Neudecker, Zaner, Hoffmaisters Ursel and Hopffens Els[se], all falsely, through coercion as they have all told me, and begged me [to forgive them] for God’s sake before their sentences were executed … they knew nothing but good and nice things about me. They were forced to say it, just as I myself would experience.40

Both those who accused Junius and Junius himself were, therefore, most anxious at the very end of their life to apologise for their false confessions, to set the record straight with their fellows and before God. There was a so-called Gnadenzettel, a ‘mercy note’ among the documents pertaining to Junius’ case: he was given the coup de grâce with a sword before being consigned to the flames.41 His status and his confession, which he seems not to have recanted publicly, were probably the chief motivating factors in the decision to spare him death by burning. Despite this small mercy, Junius sees himself as a martyr and calls himself a martyr repeatedly: ‘Sterbe also unschuldig und wie ein martirer’ (I die innocent and as a martyr). He writes toward the end of the letter: ‘I beg you for the sake of the Last Judgement, keep this letter under careful watch and pray for me as your father for a true martyr after my death … You may boldly swear on my behalf that I am no witch (Trudner) but a martyr, and thus I die in readiness [for judgement].’42

These passages have been published in excerpts in a number of venues: by Friedrich Leitschuh in 1883,43 by George Lincoln Burr,
who published a translation in a small pamphlet titled *The Witch-Persecutions*, 44 by Soldan and Heppe in their polemical *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse* (Bauer’s revised edition, 1911–12); 45 by Wolfgang Behringer in German; 46 and in the form of a rather stilted and highly abridged translation by Alan Kors and Edward Peters in 1972 in their classic English-language source book on witch-hunting. 47 We have appended a new translation of as much of the relevant portions of the text as was available to us. Junius’ letter has been read previously as evidence for the injustice of witch trials; as proof that those accused generally confessed only under duress, especially torture; as proof that those accused of witchcraft, especially during epidemics of witch-hunting, did not need to have engaged in any traditional folk practices or ‘magic’ to be accused of witchcraft and executed for it; as proof that interrogators ‘scripted’ confessions for the accused and backed up these scripts with the threat of violence and actual violence. However, we can also read this document as proof that those who confessed to witchcraft often were forced to do so in the most brutal way; that ‘collusion’ in producing the confession was limited to lip-service; that a person like Junius retained complete mental reservations concerning the confession itself and intended to confess to confessing falsely to a priest; and that people such as those mentioned by Junius and Junius himself apologised to those they had falsely accused under torture.

Certainly Junius was not without agency in this process. On the contrary, he thought out and later recounted the mental process that led him to confess (in the light of the executioner’s advice) against his will, but in order to avoid further and clearly useless suffering. He made a shrewd calculation that the experienced executioner who pleaded with him so sincerely was right that there was no escape in any case, and he chose a courageous and clever course of action. It is not unreasonable to suggest that his very human physicality, his inability to face further torture, led him to exercise his agency in this particular way. Roper, in seeing agency as irreducible and practically unfettered in the ‘collusion’ of a witch in producing her or his confession, disregards the vast power
differential between interrogators, executioners and magistrates on the one hand, and anyone, including a burgomaster, or as Junius’ executioner says, even a lord, who found himself charged with witchcraft – never mind a teenager, a middle-aged lying-in maid or a wet-nurse far from her own child – on the other. Junius is anxious over confessing to crimes that must, had they been true, have entailed the eternal damnation of his soul (renouncing God, the ‘unforgivable sin’). The difference is that Junius is able to find a way to confess while saving his soul. Junius has an extremely powerful motivation: his own salvation, and probably that of others, was at stake.

Might we not say that those female witches whose confessions and retractions Roper analysed were moved by similar considerations? These women, we suggest, confessed and then withdrew their confessions in an agony of guilt at their wrong-doing and fear of its consequences, both for others falsely accused and for the salvation of their own soul. Once forced to confess again, as the logic of the ‘elaborated concept’ of diabolical witchcraft would have required them to do, they once again recanted as quickly as possible. Roper suggests that a witch who revokes her confession embarks on a horrifying ‘game’ of cat and mouse. Perhaps we can say that a witch who revokes her confession is asserting her self-understanding and self-definition, attempting to salvage her soul (or perhaps her ‘Christian personality’), and not playing any other game at all.

Suzanne Gaudry, tried and executed for witchcraft at Ronchain in 1652, was interrogated on three separate occasions and tortured. The account of her first two interrogations suggests that she confessed freely to being a witch; that is, to being in the service of the Devil, to attending the ‘nocturnal dance’, and to practising maleficium. The only signs of resistance are her statements that she ‘was frightened of being taken prisoner for the crime of witchcraft’, that she had never abused the Holy Communion, and, in the second session, that her previous declaration was not true. At the end of each of these sessions, Gaudry signs a declaration of her various
crimes. At the third interrogation, the dynamic changes. We quote the exchange between Gaudry and her interrogators at length:

The prisoner being led into the chamber, she was examined to know if things were not as she had said and confessed at the beginning of her imprisonment. – Answers no, and that what she has said was done so by force. … Pressed to say the truth, that otherwise she would be subjected to torture, having pointed out to her that her aunt was burned for this same subject. – Answers that she is not a witch. … Charged with having confessed to having made a horse die by means of a powder that the devil had given her. – Answers that she said it, but because she found herself during the inquisition pressed to say that she must have done some evil deed; and after several admonitions to tell the truth: She was placed in the hands of the officer … , throwing herself on her knees, struggling to cry … [s]aying at every moment that she is not a witch.

Gaudry maintains her innocence throughout this session, which is interesting, for the court had learned that the ‘peasants’ who took Gaudry and another woman, Antoinette Lescouffre, to prison ‘had persuaded them to confess in order to avoid imprisonment, and that they would be let go’. This advice tends to explain why Gaudry confessed at first; perhaps she realised that her confessions were not helping her case after all, and so she adopted a different strategy in her third interrogation. The torture session shows Gaudry resisting, confessing, and recanting:

The prisoner, before being strapped down, was admonished to maintain herself in her first confessions and to renounce her lover. – Said that she denies everything she has said, and that she has no lover. Feeling herself being strapped down, says that she is not a witch, while struggling to cry. Asked why she fled outside the village of Rieux. – Says that she cannot say it, that God and the Virgin Mary forbid her to; that she is not a witch.
And upon being asked why she confessed to being one, said that she was forced to say it. Told that she was not forced, that on the contrary she declared herself to be a witch without any threat. – Says that she confessed it and that she is not a witch, and being a little stretched [on the rack] screams ceaselessly that she is not a witch, invoking the name of Jesus and of Our Lady of Grace, not wanting to say any other thing. Asked if she did not confess that she had been a witch for twenty-six years. – Says that she said it, that she retracts it, crying Jésus-Maria, that she is not a witch. … Being more tightly stretched upon the torture-rack, urged to maintain her confessions. – Said that it was true that she is a witch and that she would maintain what she had said. … Interrogated as to what her lover was called. – Says that she said Petit-Grignon, then, being taken down [from the rack] says upon interrogation that she is not a witch and that she can say nothing. Asked if her lover has had carnal copulation with her, and how many times. – To that she did not answer anything; then, making believe that she was ill, not another word could be drawn from her. As soon as she began to confess, she asked who was alongside of her, touching her, yet none of those present could see anyone there. And it was noticed that as soon as that was said, she no longer wanted to confess anything.51

This witch cried out not to the Devil, but to Jesus and Mary – repeatedly. This parallels the invocations and imprecations of those martyred for their religious beliefs, as Brad Gregory has shown.52

It could be that witches such as Suzanne Gaudry, Regina Bartholome, Anna Ebeler, and Anna Maria Stadlin were not as clear in their minds as a legally experienced burgomaster about the contingent nature of a forced confession and one’s ability to exculpate oneself from it by formal confession. To be sure, simple women knew all about confession if they were Catholics, but they might not have understood its mechanics as well as Junius did. If they were not Catholics, confession and absolution were not such simple matters for them, and as Gerald Strauss has shown, Protestants in the generations following
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Luther often had no real idea of the mechanics of justification by faith alone, freely given grace, and the whole edifice of theology that made auricular confession theoretically unnecessary among Lutherans.53

If we see both Junius and women accused of witchcraft such as Anna Ebeler as working to save their souls, we are freed from any reason to use mental gymnastics to apply culture-bound, place-bound and time-bound theories about human sexuality, or even the much-discussed links between _eros_ and _thanatos_, to explain their behaviour. These accused witches and recanters may well have been concerned first and foremost with the state of their soul, their injury of others, and their own salvation. This definition of personal integrity might not correspond closely to contemporary occidental understandings of personal identity, self-knowledge and the like. However, the integrity of the soul as regards salvation was crucial – as studies such as Brad Gregory’s book on martyrdom, _Salvation at Stake_, are proving – to the self-understanding of early modern Christians in life-and-death confrontations with ‘capital justice’.53 Men and women might have negotiated these confrontations differently, but their motivations, as they expressed them, were fundamentally the same. The soul in peril, not the _female_ psyche, seems to have been the central concern to both accused and accusers. When torture is applied to save souls (rather than to play games), then not only the tortured _female_ body, but also the tortured _human_ body, the receptacle of the human soul, deserves attention in studies of witch trials. Studies that focus on the trials of female witches perform the vital and much-neglected task of illuminating and recovering the role of women in history; however, such gender-specific studies often occult the gender-inclusive nature of witch-hunting and ideas about witches.

Notes

1 See e.g. Naess, ‘Norway: The criminological context’, 375. ‘Great pain was inflicted on the accused witches and sorcerers. The pastors were present and asked the prisoners to confess to diabolism. Naturally they did in the end.’
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3 ‘The elaborated concept’ is a conglomerate of: 1) the Devil’s pact (and apostasy); 2) a sexual relationship with the Devil; 3) the possibility of aerial flight to 4) the witches’ sabbath to worship the Devil; 5) maleficent witchcraft. Behringer, Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria, 13–14.

4 Lisa Silverman has noted that research on torture faces a very similar problem: ‘Torture is always at the center of an epistemological crisis because it always forces us to reconsider the relationship between coercion and truth, between free will and evidence.’ Tortured Subjects: Pain, Truth, and the Body in Early Modern France (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2001), 10.

5 On the closely related subject of writing about early modern torture, Lisa Silverman argues that historians, by representing the testimony of early modern torture victims ‘as composed of deliberate lies’, have a tendency to represent torture victims as if they were fully endowed with agency, volition, and rationality. She observes also that literary critics, on the other hand, represent modern torture victims ‘as absolute victims’, innocent and rendered so completely ‘passive through pain that they cannot articulate this innocence’. Tortured Subjects, 86–87.


8 That this version of the theory of agency owes a good deal to classical liberal concepts of free will and autonomous choice that both Marxists and ‘Tories can agree to despise causes Roper no hesitation.


10 Ibid., 227.


12 Ibid., 207 ff.

13 Ibid., 205.

14 Ibid., 205–206.


16 Wilhelm Gottlieb Soldan and Henriette Heppe; Max Bauer, ed., Geschichte der Hexenprozesse, 2 vols. (Munich: Georg Müller, 1911–12),
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18 Various studies have suggested that torturers are not, generally speaking, sadists; evidence indicates that torturers are made, not born. See e.g. Ronald D. Crelinsten and Alex P. Schmid, eds., *The Politics of Pain: Torturers and their Masters* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995).

19 Felicity de Zulueta, ‘The torturers’, *A Glimpse of Hell*, 87–103: 87. Among other things, the man was beaten with pipes and sticks; his skin was torn from his nails and between his toes and fingers, then burned; his moustache was torn out; and one of his torturers urinated in his mouth.


23 Ning Kyaw, ‘Like water in their hands’, *Tortured Voices*, 106–122: 120.


25 Ma Su Su Mon, ‘At the mercy of the beast’, 29.


that a news pamphlet approved by the archiepiscopal authorities at Bamberg put the total for the entire region under the control of Bamberg (Stift) at around 900 (vol. 2, 17).


31 The entire Haan family and their servants were destroyed after Kanzler Dr Georg Haan (a functionary of the Hochstift Bamberg) began to doubt the correctness of the accusations and trials in the mounting witch-panic. His trial lasted from December 1627 to July 1628. Dr Georg Adam Haan was his son (tried 27 May to 13 July 1628); Junius was accused by the latter and drawn into the wake of the Haan trials. The only study of the Haan trials is Andrea Renczes, *Wie lösch hardwood eine Familie aus? Eine Analyse Bamberger Hexenprozesse* (Pfäffle, Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1992). This is a careful archival treatment but the author’s interpretations and conclusions are of limited value.

32 Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria*, 218: The ‘central spiritual crime’ of the elaborated concept of witchcraft was the pact with the Devil and renunciation of God. It was characteristic of Catholic views that intercourse with the Devil, witches’ flights, Sabbaths and sorcery were also held to be real, not merely diabolical fantasies, as claimed by critics, including many Protestants.


34 Soldan and Heppe, *Hexenprozesse*, vol. 2, 13–14. Kors and Peters simply assume that the letter was ‘smuggled out of prison to his daughter’ (*Witchcraft in Europe*, 253) without questioning Soldan.


36 Herr, ich bitt euch umb gotteswillen, bekennt etwas, es sey gleich war oder nit. Erdenket etwas, dann ir könnt die marter nicht ausstehen, die man
euch anthur, vnd wann ir sie gleich alle ausstehet, so kompt ir doch niht
hinaus, wann Ir gleich ein graff weret, sondern fangt ein marter wider auf
die andre an, bis ir sagt, ir seyt ein truttner, und sagt, eher, eher niht dann
lest man euch zufrieden, wie denn auß allen iren urtheylen zu sehen, daß
eins wie das ander geheht (8–9).

37 Es war ja besser, ich sagt es nur mit dem mauhl und worten, und hette es
aber im werck niht getan, sollte es danach beychten und es die verant-
worten lassen, die mich dazu nötigen (9).

38 See, most recently, Wietse de Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul: Confession,
Discipline and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan*, Studies in
Medieval and Reformation Thought 84 (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

39 Nun, hertzliebes kindt, da hastu alle meine Aussag und verlauf, darauf ich
sterben muß und seint lautter lüg und erdichte sach, so war mir gott helff.
Dann dieses habe ich alles auß forcht der ferner angetrohenen marter über die
schon zuvor außgestandene Marter sag muß. Denn sie lassen nicht mit den
martern nach, hiß man etwas sagt, er sey so fromm als er wolte, so muß er ein
trudener sein. Kompt auch keiner herauß, wenn er gleich ein graf wür (11).

40 Liebes Kindt 6 haben auf einmahl auf mich bekennt, als: der Cantzler, sein
sohn, Neudecker, Zaner, Hoffmaisters Ursel und Hopffens Els alle falsch
auß zwang wie sie alle gesagt, und mir umb Gotteswillen eher sie gerichtet
abgetetten … werden sie wissen nichts all liebs und guts von mir. Sie
hetten es sag muß, wie ich selbsten erfahren werde […] (8). Cf. the faulty
translation in Alan C. Kors and Peters, *Witchcraft in Europe 1100–1700*
‘just as I myself was’; this is reported speech set before his torture.


42 Ich bitte dich um des jüngsten gerichts willen, halt dies schreiben in guter
Hut und bet für mich als dein vatter für ein rechten mertirer nach meinem
tode … Das darfst künlich für mich schwören daß ich kein trudner son-
dern ein mertirer bin und sterb hiemit gefast (12).

43 Friedrich Leitschuh, *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Hexenwesens in Franken*
(Bamberg: Hübcher, 1883), 49ff.

44 George Lincoln Burt, *The Later Persecutions. Translations and Reprints*
from the Original Sources of European History, vol. 3 no. 4 (Philadelphia:
n.p., 1897).

45 Soldan and Heppe *Hexenprozesse*, vol. 2: Junius’ letter to his daughter in
German (original orthography) and a facsimile of the first sheet, 6–12.

305–310.


48 Ibid., 266–271.
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49 Ibid., 272–274.
50 Ibid., 272.
51 Ibid., 274–275.
52 Gerald Strauss, Luther’s House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).