

## CHAPTER 18

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# ABIEZER COPPE AND THE RANTERS

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ARIEL HESSAYON

IN 1652 Mary Adams of Tillingham, Essex apparently died by her own hand. According to a pamphlet entitled *The Ranters Monster* printed at London for George Horton (Figure 18.1), Adams claimed that she had been made pregnant by the Holy Ghost. Furthermore, she reportedly denied the Gospels' teachings, wickedly declaring that Christ had not yet appeared in the flesh but that she was to give birth to the true Messiah. For these supposed blasphemies Adams was imprisoned. After a protracted labour of eight days, she gave birth on the ninth day to a stillborn, ugly, misshapen monster. This loathsome creature was said to have neither hands nor feet, but claws like a toad. Adams herself became consumed by disease, rotting away; her body disfigured by blotches, boils, and putrid scabs. To compound her sins she refused to repent and then committed the terrible crime of suicide by ripping open her bowels with a knife.

The account in *The Ranters Monster* was reproduced in some contemporary news-books and subsequently in a broadside enumerating the great blasphemers of the times. It was, however, fictitious. While the pamphlet formed part of the genre of monstrous births, which tended to be interpreted as providential signs warning against private and public sin, it also served another function: as an admonition against the licentiousness of the Ranters and an affirmation of the dreadful divine punishments that awaited all such reprobates. Represented as a devout, godly woman of good parentage, Adams became victim to what attentive readers would have recognized as a lamentable falling away from the Church and zealous observance of ordinances into membership of various heretical sects; becoming successively a Baptist, Familist, and Ranter. It was as a Ranter that she was said to have maintained diabolical tenets: the denial of God, heaven and hell, and the opinion that a woman may have sexual relations with any man—regardless of his marital status.<sup>1</sup> *The Ranters Monster* is therefore instructive both for its fictive yet evidently believable account of a woman claiming to be the new Virgin Mary, soon to be delivered of a Christ child, and its construction of assumed Ranter

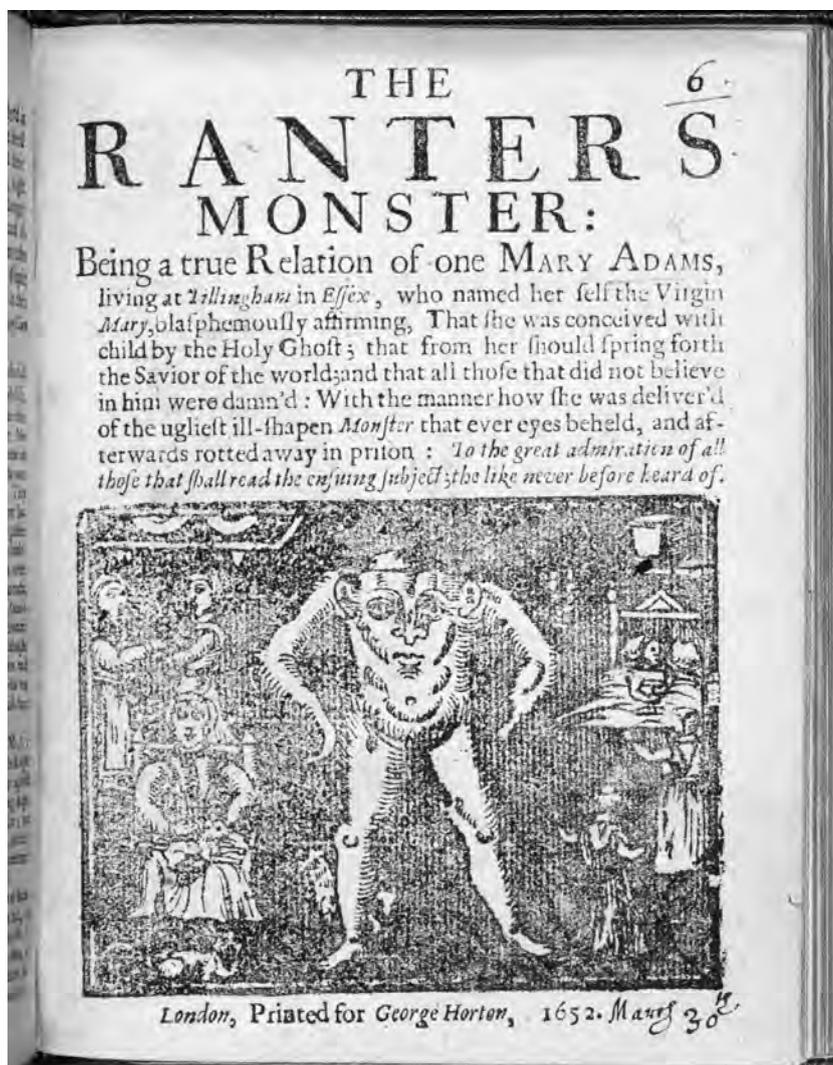


FIGURE 18.1 Anon., *The Ranters Monster: Being a true Relation of one Mary Adams, living at Tillingham in Essex, who named herself the Virgin Mary* (London, printed for George Horton, 1652), title page [British Library, Thomason E 658(6)] ©The British Library Board. All Rights Reserved 20/10/2011.

beliefs. It also epitomizes the difficulties scholars have faced in distinguishing between polemical stereotypes and evidence of actual principles and practices. Indeed, since much of the extant printed literature derives from hostile sources or recantations, J. C. Davis took the extreme position of arguing that there was ‘no Ranter movement, no Ranter sect, no Ranter theology’.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as we shall see, this goes too far.

## THE RANTERS AND THEIR HISTORIANS

The Ranters have generally been better served by literary critics than by their historians. Hence Abiezer Coppe (1619–72?), whom some contemporaries regarded as a fiery sectarian preacher turned diabolically possessed mad libertine, was portrayed by the Oxford antiquary Anthony Wood as a lascivious blasphemer ultimately and justly debilitated by alcoholism and sexually transmitted disease. So blackened was Coppe's name that in the late eighteenth century he was still remembered as one of the wildest enthusiasts of a fanatical age. Nineteenth-century critics fundamentally concurred with this verdict, calling Coppe a 'strange enthusiast' and the 'great Ranter'.<sup>3</sup> In the same vein Alexander Gordon, the Unitarian minister and authority on Protestant nonconformity, dismissed Coppe as an insane if somewhat pathetic fanatical proponent of 'distorted antinomianism', given to flights of mystical fancy that were occasionally expressed in 'passages of almost poetical beauty'.<sup>4</sup> Later commentators were little different: Coppe was an 'indefatigable dipper' who became one of the 'wildest' Ranters with an appetite for excessive drinking, smoking, and swearing, while his most significant work, the 'vigorous and colourful' *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649), was reckoned an eccentric book full of 'curious ravings' and 'stylistic idiosyncrasies'.<sup>5</sup>

Just as Coppe was vilified in particular, so the Ranters at large long remained maligned. Partly this was because they neither sought nor succeeded in establishing an enduring legacy. Their leading lights imprisoned, their most inflammatory writings suppressed and publicly burned, their influence dissipated, the Ranters initially had no advocates to refashion their past and rehabilitate their reputation. Unlike Baptists, Quakers, and even Muggletonians, who carefully collected, collated, and copied manuscript letters, testimonies, and treatises, as well as meticulously compiling records of their fellow believers' sufferings, almost no one attempted to legitimize the Ranters by preserving their records for posterity. Moreover, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century denominationally committed historians—largely preoccupied as they were with constructing complicated if unbroken genealogies of religious dissent—were repeatedly at pains to distinguish the Ranters' blasphemous opinions and seemingly scandalous activities from those of their much eulogized founding fathers, mothers, and precursors during the English Revolution and beforehand. Consequently Quaker scholars, even allowing for polemical exaggeration and distortion, frequently denounced the Ranters as a dangerous pantheistic aberration and disorganized degenerate movement whose extreme mystical doctrines and immoral excesses had threatened to spread like a contagion across the nation had it not been for the spiritual antidote afforded by George Fox's ministry and Quakerism. This alone had cured many wayward souls infected by 'a serious outbreak of mental and moral disorder'.<sup>6</sup>

Nor did the Ranters fare better within the two broad prevailing historiographical trends of the period that were largely responsible for the piecemeal rediscovery or recovery of what is now usually called English radicalism. One was bourgeois, liberal,

and teleological, essentially concerned with identifying democratic and republican ideas that emerged in response to acute social and economic tensions during the English Revolution, together with tracing their growing influence during the American and French Revolutions. The other was Socialist and Marxist, with an emphasis on secular class struggle under the shadow of capitalism. Neither, however, effectively integrated the Ranters within their conceptions of radicalism. Indeed, the Ranters at first received scant attention from Marxists and their fellow-travellers, mainly because they found it awkward incorporating their supposed practical antinomianism and pantheistic doctrines within orthodox, scientific interpretations of the revolution. 'Arrogantly and snobbishly' lumped with self-appointed Messiahs on the 'lunatic fringe' by Christopher Hill,<sup>7</sup> it was other scholars who originally stressed the Ranters' humble origins, 'bold class hatreds', and powerful demands for social justice—including the 'common ownership of all goods'.<sup>8</sup> The most notable was Norman Cohn, whose *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) provided an incipient contribution to the psychoanalysis of prophetic and messianic figures, as well as a welcome reprint of key passages from selected Ranter texts. Envisaging the Ranters as 'mystical anarchists' prone to extravagant behaviour, Cohn eventually located them within a loose tradition spanning from the Brethren of the Free Spirit (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) and Spiritual Libertines (sixteenth century) to Charles Manson and his murderous 'family' (1969).<sup>9</sup>

By the late 1960s several unpublished dissertations had been written on the Ranters. Though most researchers were based in North American universities, one was completed at Oxford by J. F. McGregor under Hill's supervision. McGregor suggested that Ranterism was indicative of a 'climate of opinion, expressed in antinomian ideals' that 'could not be translated into social terms' because it was a 'philosophy of individualism'. According to McGregor, after 1651 Ranterism existed as a largely fictional image in contemporaries' minds, although the Ranters also survived indistinctly as a 'mood of disaffection'.<sup>10</sup> Then in 1970 A. L. Morton published *The World of the Ranters*. Morton was a former chair of the briefly influential Historians' Group of the Communist Party, an organization whose objective had been to create a tradition of Marxist history in Britain. Having previously speculated that William Blake and that 'strange genius' Abiezer Coppe 'shared a common body of ideas and expressed those ideas in a common language'—particularly the seeming resemblances between Coppe's *Fieri Flying Roll* and Blake's Prophetic Books and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—Morton elaborated on the Ranters' 'crazy extravagances' and Coppe's outrageous courting of London's unrevolutionary underclass. For Morton, the Ranters 'formed the extreme left wing of the sects', both theologically and politically. Combining a 'pantheistic mysticism and a crudely plebeian materialism' with a 'deep concern for the poor' and a 'primitive biblical communism', the 'Ranter Movement' spectacularly manifested itself in late 1649, peaked the next year, and then splintered under the hammer of 'savage repression'. Its sudden emergence at a moment when the 'radical, plebeian element' had been politically defeated signalled 'all the signs of a revolution in retreat' from the forces of bourgeois respectability. In contrast to the rural Diggers, the Ranters were primarily an urban movement, appealing to the 'defeated and declassed',

drawing support from London's 'impoverished artisans and labourers' (including those on the margins of criminality), as well as 'wage earners and small producers' in numerous towns.<sup>11</sup>

All the while, Hill became increasingly sympathetic to the Ranters, recognizing that they too perhaps had 'something to say to our generation'. Consequently, they underwent a remarkable transformation in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972). Here Hill envisaged the Diggers and Ranters as boldly defying early modern European bourgeois society's greatest achievement—the Protestant ethic. Antinomianism became 'Calvinism's lower-class alter ego', Ranter swearing an act of defiance against God and 'Puritan middle class standards'. Hill likened the Ranters' tobacco smoking and 'communal love-feast[s]' to drug-taking and free love, overstating—as he later admitted—their participation in a (Puritan) 'sexual revolution'. Moreover, he claimed that the 'Ranter ethic . . . involved a real subversion of existing society and its values'. Only the experience of defeat put a check to the 'intoxicating excitement'. For 'what had looked in the Ranter heyday as though it might become a counter-culture became a corner of the bourgeois culture'. That this was a post-1960s manifesto thinly disguised as 'History from below' was precisely the point.<sup>12</sup>

Over a decade passed before an uncompromising reaction to Morton's and Hill's interpretations was published. This was J. C. Davis's *Fear, Myth and History* (1986), provocatively chosen by Kenneth Baker, then Margaret Thatcher's Education Secretary, as his favourite book that year. Davis argued that abusive terms like 'Ranter' were 'witness to some sort of social struggle rather than functioning as precise cognitive signifiers or markers'. Furthermore, he detected 'a tension between the word "Ranter", as revelatory of the perception of seventeenth-century commentators, and the thing Ranter, as perceived by twentieth-century historians'. Assuming that he was dealing with a heterogeneous collection of individuals rather than a homogenous group, Davis proceeded to test the proposition that Ranterism was either a 'reasonably consistent set of doctrines' maintained, however fleetingly, by a handful of people or the 'broader movement' that contemporaries ordinarily reported. To help identify a small core of 'Ranter ideologists' linked by common theological doctrines and a shared social programme, he proposed two essential components of Ranter thought: antinomianism and pantheism. He then set about eliminating the Ranter fringe ('new messiahs', 'new prophets', and 'new victims') before tightening the core to dispense with several alleged Ranters—the millenarian and visionary George Foster (*fl.* 1650), the former army chaplain Joseph Salmon (*fl.* 1647–56), and the preacher Richard Coppin (*fl.* 1646–59). There followed an examination of the Ranter core, which consisted of the Leicester shoemaker Jacob Bothumley (1613–92), Abiezer Coppe, the anonymous author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew* (1650), and the preacher, polemicist, and sectary Lawrence Clarkson (*c.*1615–1667?). For Davis, the evidence suggested that 'the Ranters did not exist either as a small group of like-minded individuals, as a sect, or as a large-scale, middle-scale or small movement'. Consequently, he was forced to justify why, if there were no Ranters, so many contemporaries believed the contrary. Accordingly Davis ascribed literary conventions to the 'sensational' literature; 'short, racy,

disapproving and at the same time prurient'. He maintained that Ranterism was 'a powerful and dangerous slur' which had to be directed 'away from the Commonwealth towards its enemies'. Amidst the 'reckless fabrication and repetitive exploitation of material' he noted two themes—the influence of atheism and the relationship between Ranterism and royalism. Moreover, sectarian exploitation of the term by Baptists, Quakers, and Muggletonians kept this image of 'deviance' alive.<sup>13</sup>

The fierce but inconclusive debate that immediately followed generated a great deal more heat than light, its most enduring legacy being destructive rather than constructive: concerns, given the problematic nature of the evidence, that it may prove impossible to establish the Ranters' existence to everyone's satisfaction. Even so, it is sometimes forgotten that Davis, like Morton and Hill, depended entirely upon printed documents. Yet for all its faults, in the furore generated by his book it has generally been ignored by Davis's critics that parts of his argument are persuasive, and that some of what he said is correct. Davis was right to warn against taking Lawrence Clarkson's autobiography *The Lost Sheep Found* (1660) or polemics by Baptists, Quakers, and Muggletonians at face value. Likewise, several pamphlet and newsbook accounts of 'Ranters' were either completely fictional or mainly invented. The majority, however, mention names that can be corroborated from court records and seem to accurately reflect charges brought against the accused. The term Ranter should therefore be used cautiously to indicate hostile yet shifting contemporary attitudes towards individuals who normally knew each other (usually through conventicles, Baptist congregations, or as members of spiritual communities); believed themselves to have been liberated from, or passed beyond, the outward observance of Gospel ordinances; maintained that all things sprang from God and that God was in all living things; espoused similar theological notions that were regarded as blasphemous, especially that sin was imaginary and that to the pure all things are pure; justified transgressive sexual behaviour, drunkenness, and cursing through scriptural precedents and interpretations; demanded that Christians fulfil their charitable obligations by giving to the poor, sick, and hungry; and enacted shocking gestures as prophetic warnings of the impending Day of Judgement. While none of this was exclusive to the Ranters, and while there was no Ranter archetype that conformed precisely to all aspects of this characterization, collectively it embodies the central features of their perceived ideas, outward conduct, and self-fashioned identities.

With the publication of two 'Ranter poems', Nigel Smith's important collection of *Ranter Writings* and Andrew Hopton's edition of Coppe's selected writings, literary experts have gradually shown one way out of the impasse reached in the Ranter debate by focusing on typography, genre, imagery, mimicry, parody, vocabulary, and modes of address.<sup>14</sup> Archival-based biographical studies of the major personalities with an emphasis on mapping social networks offer another exit. The remainder of this chapter will therefore highlight the fruits of this relatively new research by identifying the Ranters, exploring their origins, examining how they were seen by contemporaries, accounting for their activities, discussing their beliefs, assessing their possible sources, and reviewing the ways in which their texts were expressed and suppressed.

## IDENTIFYING THE RANTERS

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During the parliamentary campaign in Ireland, Oliver Cromwell referred in a letter of 14 November 1649 to ‘great ranters’ among the enemy between Dublin and Wexford, which his nineteenth-century editor Thomas Carlyle took to mean braggarts. This usage, though unusual, indicates that the noun *ranter* then described a way of speaking. It surely derived from the verb to rant, meaning to talk or declaim in an extravagant or hyperbolic manner, or to speak furiously.<sup>15</sup> In early 1650 Gerrard Winstanley warned women to beware of the ‘*ranting crew*’, refuting the accusation that ‘the Digging practises, leads to the *Ranting* principles’. Clearly the Diggers’ spiritual and temporal community, with its open fluid membership, had been infiltrated by what Winstanley was shortly to call ‘Ranters’, and in a subsequent vindication he dissociated the Diggers from them, giving some reasons against ‘the excessive community of women, called Ranting’ (dated 20 February 1650, with postscript 4 March 1650). Winstanley defined the ‘Ranting Practise’ as ‘a Kingdome without the man’, a corrupting carnal realm of the five senses that lay in the ‘outward enjoyment of meat, drinke, pleasures and women’. It was therefore not the spiritual kingdom of heaven—interpreted as Christ within—but the devil’s kingdom of darkness, full of unreasonableness, madness, and confusion. Excessive copulation with women dissipated male vitality, resulting in unwanted pregnancies and the destruction of harmony within the patriarchal household. ‘Ranting’, moreover, begat idleness, and this evil had to be prevented with righteous communal labour.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, Winstanley’s pamphlets contain the earliest known use of the words ‘Ranting’ and ‘Ranter’ in this sense. Afterwards, ‘Ranters’, together with its variants ‘Raunters’, ‘Rantors’, and ‘Rantipoler’, appears in several newsbooks and other sources from late June 1650, while ‘ranting’ occurs in newsbooks and sermons from early August. In addition, ‘Rantism’ was used from 1653, as was ‘Ranterism’.

As for those called Ranters by their contemporaries, and of whose existence we can be confident, it must be stressed that there are noticeable discrepancies in how this pejorative label was deployed and no consensus as to its exact meaning. Indeed, by imputing a set of odious characteristics onto those designated Ranters, the person adopting the term often unwittingly revealed something about his—or very occasionally her—own anxieties. Nevertheless, Jacob Bothumley, Lawrence Clarkson, Abiezer Coppe, Joseph Salmon, the minister Thomas Webbe (c.1625–c.1651), and the preacher Andrew Wyke (fl. 1645–63) were all considered Ranters during particular phases of their lives. Coppe, Clarkson, and, to a lesser extent, Salmon and Bothumley were acknowledged by polemicists and subsequently several Quakers as their ringleaders.<sup>17</sup>

Between 1648 and his release from Newgate about July 1651, Coppe can be connected through encounters, correspondence, prefatory epistles, and publications with Giles Calvert (publisher and bookseller), Clarkson, Richard Coppin, James Cottrell (printer), John File (author), John Gadbury (astrologer), Mr Maule (of Deddington, Oxfordshire),

Thomasine Pendarves (of Abingdon, Berkshire), John Pordage (rector of Bradfield, Berkshire), Salmon, William Sedgwick (millenarian preacher), Mrs Seney (matron of the Savoy Hospital carted through the streets of London for prostitution), Mrs Wallis (Wyke's kinswoman), Webbe, and Wyke. Coppe was most likely also associated with William Bray (imprisoned army officer accused of being a Ranter and being in bed with two women together at Seney's residence). In addition, Coppe reportedly had an unknown number of followers, several of whom had probably been one-time members of Baptist congregations meeting at London (St Helen's Bishopsgate), Gloucestershire (Little Compton, near Moreton-in-Marsh), Oxfordshire (Hook Norton), and Warwickshire (Coventry, Easenhall, Southam, and Warwick). According to Clarkson, moreover, while in London about January 1649, Coppe had appeared in a 'most dreadful manner' before a spiritual community known as 'My one flesh'. Known to Calvert, they seem to have gathered secretly on Sundays at the homes of the group's various members. 'My one flesh' consisted of, among others, Mr Brush, Mr Goldsmith, Sarah Kullin, Mary Lake (blind 'chief speaker'), Mr Melis (possibly John Millis, brown baker living on Great Trinity Lane), William Rawlinson (who knew of Salmon), Mrs Rawlinson, and Mr Watts.<sup>18</sup> Another spiritual community either overlapping or conterminous with them appears to have included W.C., J.H., Sedgwick, and Edward Walford (a messenger of the House of Commons); another still included Margery Castle, John Radman (army agitator turned mutineer and 'greate Raunter'), and Valentine Sharp.

For his part Clarkson, an itinerant Baptist preacher turned self-styled '*Captain of the Rant*', had conferred with Sedgwick and the Welsh preacher William Erbury (later charged with saying that the Ranters had been the holiest people in the nation). Clarkson counted Dr Barker, Major William Rainsborough (brother of the murdered Leveller martyr), and Mr Wallis among his 'disciples'. Although a married man, Clarkson also claimed that Mrs Mary Middleton and Mrs Star were in love with him, engaging in an adulterous liaison with the latter. After disrupting the Digger plantation on the Little Heath in Cobham, Surrey, he was eventually apprehended with several 'Raunters' allegedly openly 'satisfying their lusts' like 'lascivious beasts' at the Four Swans, near Whitechapel, in mid-July 1650.<sup>19</sup> Mary Middleton of Clarkson's 'old society' was doubtless the Mrs Middleton who, with one or two others, narrowly escaped arrest when a group of Ranters were seized on 1 November 1650 at her husband's house at the David and the Harp on Moor Lane, St Giles Cripplegate. The remainder were caught and committed to Bridewell for indecency, blasphemy, swearing '*Ram me, Dam me*', and singing filthy songs to the tune of the Psalms. They were Walter Albone, John Collins, William Groome, William Holt, William Reeve (possibly brother of the heresiarch John Reeve), William Shakespeare, and Henry Wattleworth. While in Bridewell they may have become acquainted with the former Digger and suspected sorcerer William Everard, since many of 'Ranting *Everard's* party' were reportedly 'lunatick, and exceedingly distracted'.<sup>20</sup> Another group commonly supposed to be Ranters were the followers of John Robins, whom they believed to be 'the God and Father' of Jesus Christ, while Joan, his reputed spouse, would give birth to the Messiah.<sup>21</sup> Another group still were apprehended in London for 'disorder and uncivil

carriage' on 2 January 1651.<sup>22</sup> Other suspected or supposed Ranters, though this is not an exhaustive list, included: James Claphamson; John Norris; Thomas Willett (found dancing naked with a woman); two 'naked Ranters' disrupting a church service at Hull; and a 'company of ranting Sluts' detained in Bridewell.<sup>23</sup>

Several parliamentarian soldiers were also accused of being Ranters, associating with Ranters, or holding blasphemous opinions consonant with Ranterism; William Covell (captain in Thomas Fairfax's regiment of horse); Francis Freeman (captain in Colonel John Okey's regiment of dragoons); Edward Leak (cornet in Major Grove's troop, which originally had 'many persons of subtle Ranting Principles');<sup>24</sup> Nathaniel Underwood (said to have been a cornet in Oliver Cromwell's regiment); and two troopers of Colonel Nathaniel Rich's regiment. In the provinces there were suspected Ranters in Dorset, Ely (where Sedgwick had been a minister until September 1649), and Towcester (Northamptonshire), while spiritual communities akin to Ranters existed at Godmanchester (Huntingdonshire) and Abingdon. Furthermore, John Bunyan remembered having read a few of the '*Ranters Books*' that were distributed in Bedfordshire and highly esteemed by several old professing Protestants.<sup>25</sup> Suggestively, a separatist congregation was established at Bedford about 1650. There were also General Baptist churches at Fenstanton and Warboys (Huntingdonshire). The Warboys church book contains a condemnation of the Ranters' 'wicked practices', while emissaries from Fenstanton later confronted individuals at Kingston (Cambridgeshire), Newport (Essex), and Dunton (Bedfordshire) whose doctrines 'savoured of Ranterism'.<sup>26</sup>

The Muggletonians regarded Clarkson, Mistress Cook, Nathaniel (dung-eating prophet), Isaac Penington, Mr Pope, the pedlar Stephen Proudlove (formerly an alleged member of the 'family of the mount'), William Reeve (the heresiarch John's brother), Mr Remington, William Smith (future Quaker), and TheaurauJohn Tany (self-proclaimed High Priest and Recorder to the thirteen Tribes of the Jews) as Ranters. In addition, Lodowick Muggleton recalled mingling and disputing with Ranters in London, who at that time were 'very high in Imagination'.<sup>27</sup> For their part, the Quakers considered a number of people to be Ranters including, though again this is not comprehensive, Rose Atkins, Bothumley, Jonas Browne, Thomas Burdhall, Thomas Bushel, John Chandler, Coppe, John Flower, Thomas Ford (of Staffordshire), Bess Hodgkin, William Lampitt (of Ulverston, Lancashire), Mr Mills, Blanche Pope, Salmon, Mary Todd, Timothy Travers, and Robert Wilkinson (of Leicestershire, possibly the author of that name). They disputed with what they took to be Ranters at various meetings in London, Leicestershire (Swannington), and Warwickshire (Edge Hill), and wrote of Ranters in counties south of London as well as in Cornwall (Looe), Derbyshire (Kidsley Park, the Peak District), Dorset (Weymouth), Hampshire, Leicestershire (Leicester, Twycross), Norfolk (Norwich), Northamptonshire (Wellingborough), Rhode Island (Providence), Staffordshire (Basford, Leek), Sussex, and Yorkshire (Cinder Hill Green, Cleveland, Staithes, York).

Although several journalists fabricated authorial personae as former Ranters or claimed to have witnessed Ranter gatherings to authenticate their sensationalist accounts (John Holland, 'J.M.', J[ohn] R[eading?], 'Gilbert Roulston', 'Timothy Stubs',

‘Samuel Tilbury’), no actual Ranter embraced this opprobrious epithet. All the same, just as those cultivating St George’s Hill referred to themselves as Diggers and some scornfully called Quakers declared themselves to be Children of Light, so a few people branded Ranters or, more rarely, High Attainers styled themselves the Mad Crew. This ‘mad ranting crew’ were accused by the London minister Robert Gell of pretending to be ‘Gods peculiar people’ and of believing that they had ‘happy and blessed unitie and community’ with God and, crucially, ‘among themselves’.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, leading Ranters such as Coppe and Clarkson also developed a strong sense of group identity, regarding themselves as members of a spiritual community. Thus Coppe believed that he had been shown ‘*a more excellent way*’ beyond church fellowship with his Baptist brethren, owning ‘none but that Apostolical, Saint-like Community spoken of in the Scriptures’,<sup>29</sup> while Clarkson described himself as ‘one of the Universality’.<sup>30</sup>

Identifying the Ranters is, in short, a contentious exercise. There was (and is) no agreed definition. Furthermore, not all contemporary ascriptions should be accepted. On the one hand there was lumping: uninformed polemicists tended to invent, exaggerate, and conflate for self-serving ends. On the other, an impulse for splitting: former co-religionists and opponents within the same milieu were anxious to dissociate themselves from the Ranters by accentuating doctrinal and behavioural differences. Both tendencies have been reflected in the historiography. And while both approaches have their merits and limitations, it might be better to reconceptualize the Ranters as an assortment of spiritual and temporal communities, sometimes overlapping and given added cohesion by their adversaries. At their heart were Coppe, Clarkson, and their adherents, although it is noteworthy that other groups such as the one centred around Bothumley seem to have existed independently. Marked variations notwithstanding, they generally shared similar origins and characteristics.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE RANTERS

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Although the surviving evidence is uneven, the most plausible explanation for the Ranters’ origins is to conceive of it as polygenetic rather than monogenetic; that is, they had multiple instead of singular beginnings. Those who became prominent Ranters came from different parts of the country, were of low social status, either relatively poor or of modest means and, with the exception of Coppe, autodidacts. Bothumley, like his father, was a shoemaker and freeman of Leicester. Clarkson came from Preston and was described as a tailor. Coppe was the son of Warwick tailor with commercial links to the town’s tanning industry. He attended Warwick’s free school before going to Oxford, but left without a degree. During the Civil Wars Bothumley served in Hertfordshire as quartermaster in Colonel Alban Cox’s regiment of foot; Clarkson was a soldier at Great Yarmouth under the command of Captain Paul Hobson; Coppe was minister to Major George Purefoy’s garrison stationed at Compton House, Warwickshire; Salmon was a soldier and then chaplain in Commissary-General Henry Ireton’s

regiment of horse; and Wyke, who had friends living near Ipswich, served Parliament in an unknown capacity.

The most important thing these men had in common was their religious background. Bothumley, together with his father, was part of a tightly knit group of Leicester semi-separatists. From the age of 14 he was frequently in trouble with the church authorities for refusing to receive communion kneeling and attending conventicles, where he repeated sermons. Bothumley remained obdurate when ordered to perform public penance and was excommunicated in 1634. Consequently, he was forced to forsake his trade and seek his livelihood elsewhere until he was absolved in 1640. Similarly, even though his parents conformed to the Church of England's teachings, Clarkson claimed to have dissented by refusing to receive communion kneeling at a railed altar. Instead he took it sitting, administered by sympathetic preachers in the countryside. His youth, moreover, was marked by puritanical devotions; long walks to hear godly ministers, keeping the Sabbath, fasting, private prayer, and memorizing the Authorized Version of the Bible. On arriving in London sometime after January 1642 he hunted out the ablest preachers, diligently reading their works. Thereafter Clarkson discovered his own 'small gift of preaching' and, following his adult baptism in the moat around the Tower of London on 6 November 1644, he began evangelizing and baptizing in Suffolk and Norfolk.<sup>31</sup> This resulted in allegations of sexual misconduct during his trial at Bury St Edmunds and imprisonment. On his release he issued a recantation and purportedly turned Seeker, denying the Scriptures to be the word of God and thus their authority as a guide to Christian conduct.

For his part, Coppe's youth was marked—according to his later confession—by a godly litany of zealous devotion: fervent prayer, daily Bible-reading, memorizing Scripture, frequent fasting, keeping a daily register of his sins, and abasement before God. Thereafter through his godly upbringing and natural abilities he gained entry into stridently anti-Catholic, anti-Arminian, and anti-Socinian circles. Rising on the crest of Puritan patronage, he seemed destined to espouse these views as a renowned Presbyterian preacher. But instead Coppe became a notorious Baptist active in Warwickshire, Oxfordshire, and part of Worcestershire. He was imprisoned in Coventry for fourteen weeks and then, aged 28, underwent a profound transformation, an experience that he came to represent as a spiritual passage from death to life. Salmon too recalled in his confession a progression through various forms of church fellowship, having been successively a zealous Presbyterian, Independent, and Baptist. As a Baptist he was 'made one eminent both in holding forth this way to the world, and also in an open suffering for the same'. Salmon then had a deep spiritual experience and came to believe that he had passed beyond outward forms, ordinances, and fleshy representations of God.<sup>32</sup> Webbe's earliest religious experiences are unknown, but when still only a young man he appeared before the House of Lords in November 1644 charged with venting blasphemies—among them denying the immortality of the soul, a view shared by several Baptists. Although he recanted, Webbe was shortly accused of preaching antinomian doctrines and evangelizing against baptism by water in Suffolk, Essex, and Kent. Afterwards Webbe became minister of Langley Burrell, Wiltshire, where he

became infamous locally for scandalous activities. Wyke likewise became a Baptist, and was imprisoned for rebaptizing and lay preaching. He claimed that he had been ordained, most probably by a Baptist congregation meeting in Bell Alley, Coleman Street (London), and subsequently went forth from his church to spread the gospel message. Wyke was active in Suffolk, Rutland, and the adjacent counties before moving to Colchester.

When these men became Ranters their skilled preaching attracted crowds and enabled them to gather what was most likely a handful of committed disciples. Coppe was praised for his ‘admirable good Oratory’ and reportedly had an abundance of followers, while Salmon and Wyke were said to have acute wits, voluble tongues, and a great deal of confidence.<sup>33</sup> Parliament had issued an Ordinance in April 1645 permitting only ordained ministers to preach, but Clarkson, in common with other pamphleteers, justified unlearned lay preaching by drawing parallels with the lowly occupations of Christ and his disciples: a carpenter, fishermen, and tent-makers were compared with poor tailors and weavers. Among their hearers were probably Independents and Baptists who had left their congregations questioning the legitimacy of church fellowship and the validity of outward ordinances such as baptism; what heresiographers categorized as a new sect of ‘Seekers’, who sought and awaited a return to the primitive Christianity of the Apostles. This process, which may have been reinforced through the publication and distribution of their writings, partially accounts for the rapid emergence of the Ranters at a moment of heightened apocalyptic speculation. It also resembles, albeit in miniature, traditional versions of Quaker origins which emphasize how George Fox and other pioneer evangelists harvested support for their message from pre-existing communities of Independents, Baptists, and so-called Seekers.

## THE RANTERS THROUGH THE EYES OF THEIR CONTEMPORARIES

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The Ranters were generally demonized as a lustful, ungodly crew given to all manner of wickedness. Their allegedly lascivious habits and sinful theatrical antics—cursing, excessive drinking, revelling, roaring, smoking, whoring, and parodying of religious ceremonies—were envisaged as a threat to patriarchal norms and societal order, their teachings denounced by Presbyterian moralists and scandalized former co-religionists alike as detestable doctrines inspired by the devil. Accordingly, many contemporaries perceived them as a horrible, monstrous sect. Some condemnations were modelled upon and positioned within a long line of anti-heretical writing that stretched from Paul, Epiphanius, and Augustine to Luther and Calvin. Intemperate, alarmist, and often inaccurate, their purpose was to represent doctrinal and behavioural errors as inversions of truths so as to facilitate their extirpation. Constantly alert to precedents,

several polemicists also provided the Ranters with a distinctive identity and genealogies that variously linked their blasphemous doctrines and abominable, filthy practices to Adamites, Anabaptists, atheists, Donatists, the Family of Love, Gnostics, Manichaeans, Nicolaitans, royalists, Simonians, and Stoics, as well as the even more fanciful Athians, Clements, Marcious, Seleutians, and Shelomethites.

More than twenty cheap pamphlets primarily or nominally targeting the Ranters, each usually consisting of a sheet of paper folded into eight pages, were issued between November 1650 and August 1654. Nine of these works claimed to have been published by authority or licensed according to order, though the copyrights of only two were entered in the Stationers' register. At least four were printed by Bernard Alsop and perhaps the same number by Jane Coe, while George Horton published three items. Significantly, several recycled and adapted woodcuts and bits of text that had been used in earlier publications, and it seems either that Coe and Horton collaborated in this venture, or that Horton acquired Coe's blocks. Some of the imagery was intended to shock and showed representations of the devil, sexual debauchery, nakedness, merriment, and, in one instance, baby killing (Figures 18.2–4). These crude yet presumably marketable representations tended to complement the contents which conveyed potent messages warning godly Christians of the devil's seductive power and his ability to tempt the unwary into sectarian degeneracy. In the same vein, the minister Richard Baxter later grouped the Ranters with Anabaptists, Familists, Seekers, Shakers, and Quakers, imagining them as part of a cunning popish confederacy let loose by the devil to undermine the foundations of the Reformation. Baxter advised professing Protestants to be humble, fearful, circumspect, and watchful lest they be infected with the same poison.

Winstanley too warned against the Ranters, likening '*Ranting*' to a golden, pleasing, and deceitful bait to ensnare foolish young men.<sup>34</sup> In common with the Ranters he had a pronounced sense of community, believing that only those who had undergone an illuminating spiritual transformation could willingly dispense with their possessions and have all things common. Yet Winstanley was also careful to stress that his notion of community did not extend to sharing women; a stigma that had attached itself to the Anabaptists after their forerunners had seized the town of Münster in 1534, proclaiming it the New Jerusalem, and forcefully establishing polygamy. Accordingly Winstanley, whose heterodox religious views were the product of a spiritual journey with distinct Puritan and General Baptist phases, distanced himself from the perceived sexual excesses of the Ranters by distinguishing between community of goods and community of women. This emphasis on morality links the Diggers with certain followers of the German mystic Jacob Boehme—who desired everything should be held in common except women and lived chastely together in community at Bradfield, Berkshire—and Quakers.

Edward Burrough denounced the Ranters as a viperous generation deceived by Satan in the guise of an angel of light and corrupted by the Whore of Babylon. Similarly, Margaret Fell reproved them for asserting several blasphemous doctrines; notably that God was darkness as well as light, that all acts were good in God's eyes, and that to the

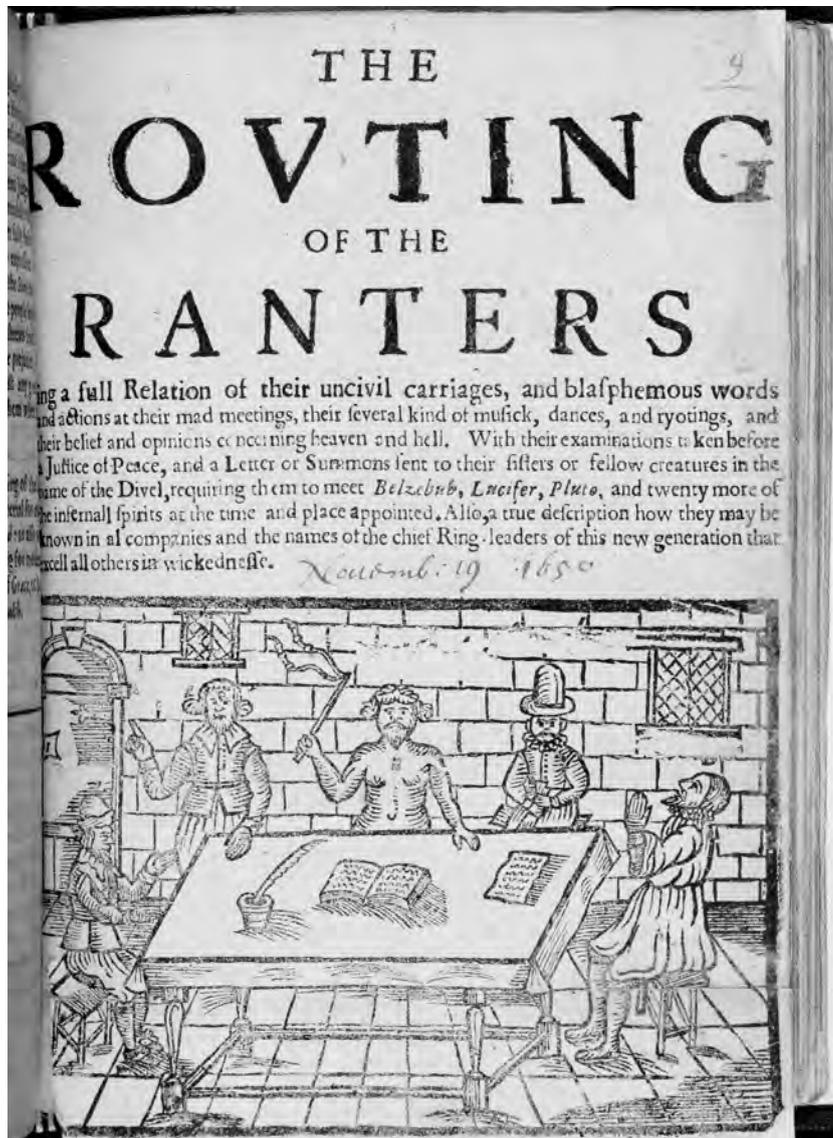


FIGURE 18.2 Anon., *The rovting of the Ranters Being a full Relation of their uncivil carriages, and blasphemous words and actions at their mad meetings* ([London], published by authority, and printed by B[ernard] A[lsop], 1650), title page [British Library, Thomason E 616(9)] ©The British Library Board. All Rights Reserved 20/10/2011.

pure even unclean or unlawful acts were pure. Nor were these isolated voices, for other Quaker authors condemned the Ranters in manuscript, print, and person, including Fell's future husband George Fox, who rebuked them for their blasphemous expressions, cursed speaking, swearing, drunkenness, tobacco smoking, dancing, and unbridled lust. Forged in the heat of religious controversy this vitriolic if largely one-sided

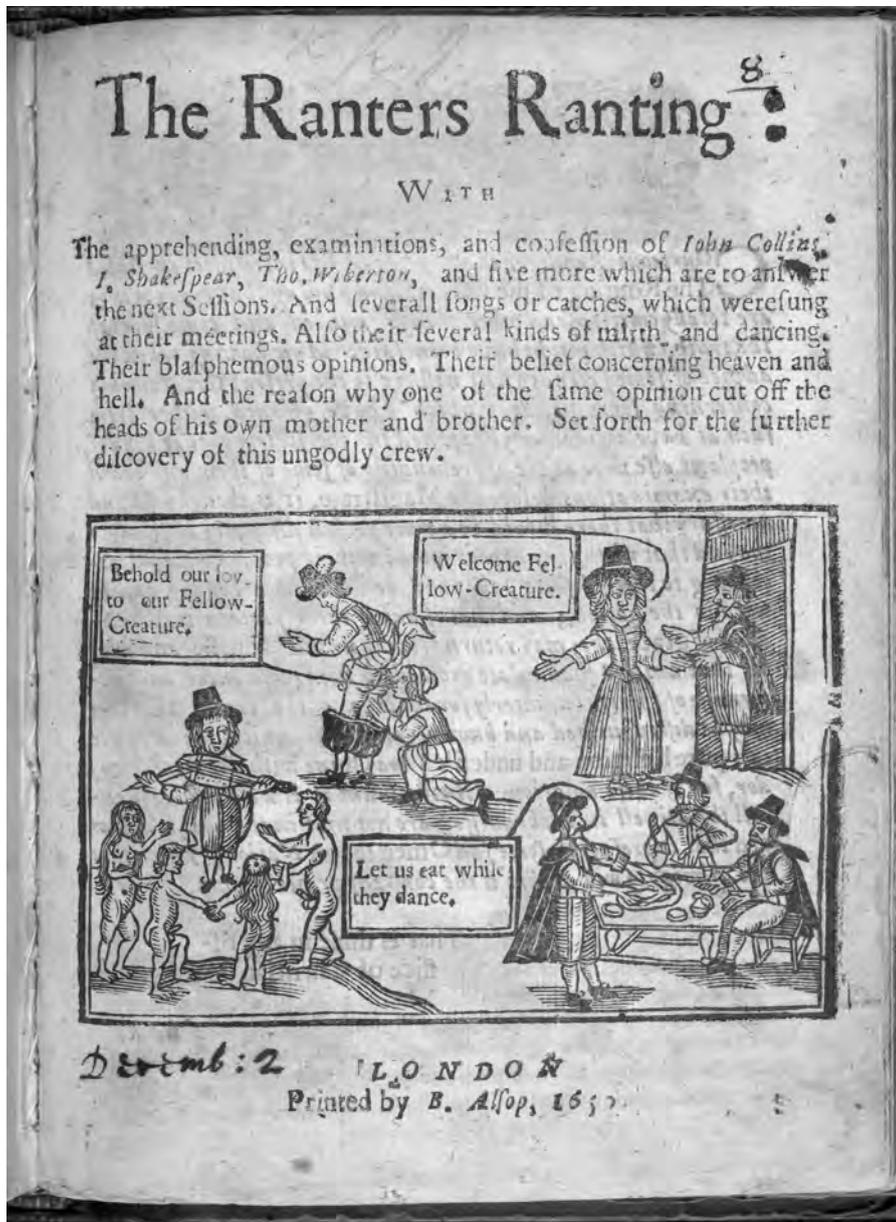


FIGURE 18.3 I[ohn] R[eadings?], *The Ranters Ranting: with The apprehending, examinations, and confession of John Collins, J. Shakespear, Tho. Wiberton, and five more which are to answer the next Sessions* (London, printed by B[ernard] Alsop, 1650), title page [British Library, Thomason E 618(8)] ©The British Library Board. All Rights Reserved 20/10/2011.

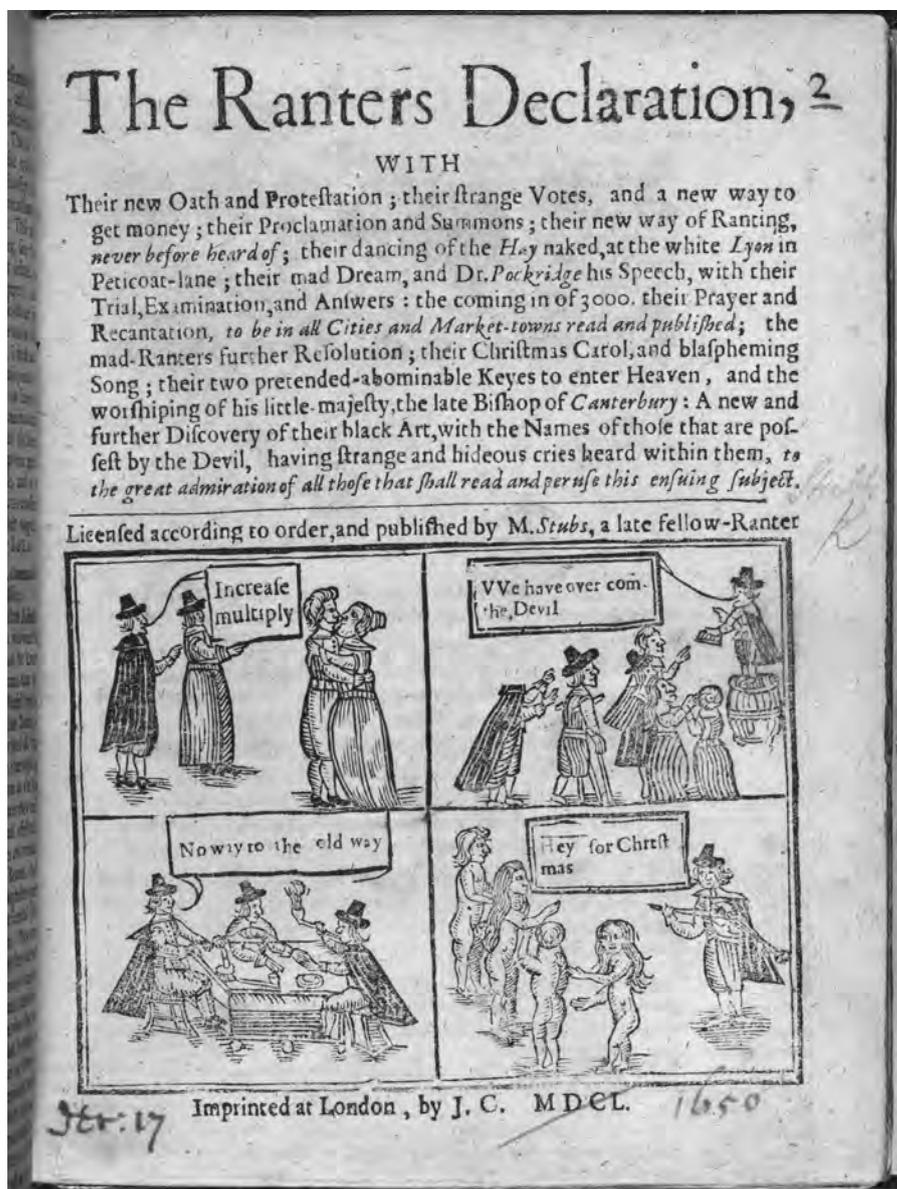


FIGURE 18.4 Timothy Stubs [pseud.], *The Ranters Declaration, with Their new Oath and Protestation; their strange Votes, and a new way to get money* (London, printed by J[ane] C [oe?], MDCL [1650]), title page [British Library, Thomason E 620(2)] ©The British Library Board. All Rights Reserved 20/10/2011.

exchange demonstrated the early Quakers' evident concern to distinguish between the Ranters' sinful behaviour and their own upright conduct, since a variety of critics—Baxter, Bunyan, Baptists, and Muggletonians among them—tarred Ranters and Quakers with the same brush. And for good reason, because despite the Quakers' 'outward

austere carriage,<sup>35</sup> there appeared to hostile observers little theological difference between them: Fox accused the Ranters of claiming they were God and boasting of their communion with God and Christ, yet was himself charged with affirming that he had the divinity essentially within him and that he was equal with God. Moreover, both were attacked for maintaining that the Light (Christ) was within everyone, denying the validity of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, antiscripturism, anticlericalism, falling into trances, and public nakedness. Fox even conceded that the Ranters had experienced a 'pure conviction' (religious awakening), before straying from the path of righteousness and becoming enemies of Christ's doctrine.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, he admitted some Quakers had been Ranters; the most notable being the former Baptist evangelist John Chandler, who wrote a tract urging all Ranters to examine their conscience and turn to the light of Christ.

Among Fox's many polemical adversaries was Lodowick Muggleton who, along with his cousin John Reeve, claimed to be one of 'the two Witnesses of the Spirit' foretold in the Revelation. In his exegeses of Revelation, Muggleton interpreted the seven churches of Asia as having a European antitype: the Catholic, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Independent, Baptist, Ranter, and Quaker. According to Muggleton, the Ranters' ministry had mainly proceeded from the Baptists', while the bulk of the Quakers' doctrines—but not their proud, conceited, sanctimonious conduct—derived from the Ranters. Deploring the Ranters' spiritual wickedness, elevated language, and destruction of their bodies through lust, Muggleton simultaneously denounced what he understood to be their principal teachings; that God was an infinite, incomprehensible Spirit present in everything; that God was the author of all actions, whether good or evil; and that light and darkness, God and the devil were all one. The 'Prince and head' of these atheistic lies maintained by 'all filthy Sodomitical Ranters', those 'cursed Children of that Dragon Devil' Cain, had been TheaurauJohn Tany. He had been vilified by Reeve as the Ranters' 'King' for professing that God was an immortal, eternal being that dwelled in spiritual form in every man: an immanentist theology that thereby denied the corporality of Christ, which constituted the essence of Muggletonian Christology.<sup>37</sup>

These textual and visual representations of Ranters must also be contextualized since they resonate with distorted portrayals of other religious communities—mostly real but occasionally imagined—that had separated from or refused to reach an accommodation with the Church of England. Hence the Catholic minority were accused of licentiousness, idolatry, and superstition, as well as being suspected of conspiracy, disloyalty, and treason. Similarly, Anabaptism was compared to a contagion, canker, or gangrene that had infected several limbs of the body politic. Shocking accounts of adult baptism rituals contained lurid allegations that young women were immersed naked in rivers, afterwards indulging their carnal appetites with those who had dipped them. The Diggers were regarded as new-fangled, distracted, crack-brained, and tumultuous, while Quakers were so called in order to mock their trembling—variously interpreted as evidence of diabolic possession, witchcraft, or epileptic seizures. Quakers were depicted as of low social standing, unlearned blasphemers, fanatical disrupters of

organized religious services, fomenters of sedition, even as clandestine papal agents. And they were defamed as sufferers from mental illness who in extreme cases engaged in bestial sexual practices.

Taken together, then, these constructed ‘Others’—in the sense of that which lay outside or was excluded from the group with which someone identified themselves—had some obvious differences yet also shared several significant features. Among them were an emphasis on blasphemous religious beliefs and rituals, diabolic inspiration, sinful conduct (especially sexual immorality), mental instability, dissimulation, disloyalty, and disorder. By preying upon individual and collective fears they combined to create panics centred on perceived threats to the progress of the Reformation, national security, good government, a hierarchical social system, the maintenance of law and order, property ownership, and patriarchal authority. Furthermore, because contemporaries envisaged these ‘Others’ as the antitheses of perfect models (divine truths, religious orthodoxy, constant devotion, sexual probity, virtuous conduct, faithfulness) their inverse reveals constructed notions of idealized individual and communal selves. Resemblances between perceived Ranters and their immediate contemporaries—particularly apparent Adamites and atheists, as well as Baptists, Familists, royalists, and Quakers—therefore suggest that these were not interchangeable static stereotypes but rather a blurring of notional boundaries between different types of ‘Others’. This noticeable degree of fluidity was partly a consequence of the readily available repertoire of constantly evolving tropes from which they derived as well as the common functions they served. It also highlights the need to analyse separately the Ranters’ beliefs about themselves.

## THE RANTERS RANTING

In *The Spirituall Madman* (December 1648), William Sedgwick looked forward to a time when young men and maids would dance together and ‘mad Lads’ would swear ‘by the *eternall God*’, cursing their enemy the devil ‘with all plagues to the pit of hell, and so dam him and ram him in’.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Coppe envisaged the ‘Eternal God’ as ‘UNIVERSALL Love’, declaring in *A Fiery Flying Roll* that what was taken for swearing and cursing in some was ‘more glorious’ than praying and preaching in others.<sup>39</sup> Coppe recalled that he had been ‘utterly plagued, consumed, damned, ramm’d, and sunke into nothing, into the bowels of the still Eternity (my mothers wombe)’, his vocabulary resonating with an intercepted letter in which Salmon greeted Webbe—the web of his ‘own spinning’—with ‘*ten thousand*’ holy kisses: ‘*Eternal plagues consume you all, rot, sink and damn your bodies and souls into devouring fire.*’<sup>40</sup> Suggestively, Valentine Sharpe also wrote of his flesh being consumed by the plagues of God, Clarkson used the phrase ‘damm’d and ramm’d into its only Center’, while the Ranters seized at Moor Lane reportedly exclaimed ‘*Ram me, Dam me*’ (ram meant God).<sup>41</sup>

Copies of other intercepted correspondence in the hand of Fairfax's senior secretary William Clarke indicate that Sedgwick developed an idiosyncratic doctrine of spiritual fatherhood and sonship. Addressing one spiritual son, Sedgwick spoke of spiritual parricide and filicide followed by an imminent spiritual rebirth from his nourishing womb. Among Sedgwick's spiritual children was Edward Walford, whom he regarded as a jewel within his bosom that might not fare better 'in the wombe of Eternity in the heart & Bowells of Glory'.<sup>42</sup> Walford in turn was spiritually embraced by J.H. with 'eternall kisses' in the bosom of their father, and was the spiritual father of W.C. his 'first begotten'.<sup>43</sup> Significantly, Sedgwick, Walford, Coppe's correspondent Thomasine Pendarves, and R[ichard] C[oppin?] all appear in *News from the New-Jerusalem* (preface dated 24 September 1649), a collection of spiritual epistles published by Giles Calvert. So, given Coppe's cryptic allusion to Sedgwick within him, he may have been another of Sedgwick's spiritual offspring.<sup>44</sup> Coppe himself was said to have been John Gadbury's spiritual father. He was most likely also the spiritual progenitor of 'My one flesh': an anonymous letter to William Rawlinson, perhaps by Clarkson, desired that this spiritual community be gathered up in one bond of love and lie together in Coppe's bosom 'where is our true & p[er]fect Center'.<sup>45</sup> The anonymous author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew* was probably also connected with these circles since he signed himself 'Jesus the Son of God'.<sup>46</sup> If he was Andrew Wyke, as an attribution in an early eighteenth-century library catalogue seems to imply, then that strengthens this suggestion.

As well as these paternal and filial spiritual bonds, the peculiar ways in which these people addressed each other and communicated in correspondence—using violent, martial, and sexual imagery together with word plays, acronyms, and inversions—suggests both a common code to express religious experiences and that they considered themselves members of spiritual communities united with each other and Christ in one mystical body of flesh and blood. Coppe's community of self-regarding saints, of which he became the general and Salmon and Wyke his metaphorical serving boys, was conceived as the 'universall Assembly' and 'Church of the first born'; 'the spirits of just men made perfect' (Hebrews 12: 23).<sup>47</sup> Imitating the original apostolic community upon which it was based, Coppe called nothing that he had his own. Indeed, he believed that he was living in the 'last daies' (James 5: 3) when cankered gold and silver would rise up like fire in judgement against those that forborne from casting all into 'the Treasury' (Mark 12: 43). For only those who had 'ALL THINGS COMMON' (Acts 2: 44) would escape the plague of God which threatened to 'rot and consume' all possessions. Coppe therefore exhorted:

*Come! give all to the poore and follow me, and you shall have treasure in heaven*  
(Matthew 19: 42).<sup>48</sup>

In the same way, *A Justification of the Mad Crew* upheld the principle of truly enjoying 'all things in common' (Acts 2: 44). Citing the scriptural precedent of those upon whom the 'sprinklings of the spirit fell', who were made to 'see and act in this Communitie', its author denounced the hypocrisy of ownership:

what is mine is every ones, and what is every ones is mine also: every woman is my wife, my joy and delight, the earth is mine, and the beasts on a thousand hills are mine.<sup>49</sup>

Then there was Coppe's supposed embrace of adultery and delight in citing the example of Hosea, 'who went into a whore' (Hosea 1: 2).<sup>50</sup> Unsurprisingly, his provocative behaviour became intertwined with accusations that Ranters maintained community of women. And because they supposedly interpreted the passage '*All things are lawfull*' (1 Corinthians 6: 12) as giving them unlimited freedom of action, Ranters allegedly deemed it acceptable to make use not only of a man's wife, but also his 'Estate, Goods, and Chattels'—for 'all things were common'.<sup>51</sup> Little wonder that a few contemporaries questioned the sincerity of Coppe's second recantation in which he catalogued several doctrinal errors and casuistically asserted the contrary truths, disowning adultery and fornication as sins, detesting the notion that '*Community of wives is lawful*'.<sup>52</sup>

Maintaining spiritual community among themselves, some prominent Ranters also believed that they were in community with God and his creation. Thus in an epistle to Thomasine Pendarves published in *Some Sweet Sips, of Some Spirituall Wine* (printed for Giles Calvert, 1649), Coppe declared:

The *River* is as cleare as Chrystall, nothing but Christ, all Christ, Chrystall—it is as clear as Chrystall, *Christ-all*, Halelujah.<sup>53</sup>

This alluded to the water of life (Revelation 22: 1) and the notion that 'Christ is all, and in all' (Colossians 3: 11). Coppe envisaged the '*Living God*' as the '*Fountaine of Life*' (Revelation 21: 6) in which '*all things consist*', and wrote in the margin of 'An Additional and Preambular Hint' (before 18 September 1649) of the '*Effluence or out spreading of Divinity*' or '*out-going of God into ALL THINGS*'. Significantly, these marginal annotations show a familiarity with Jacob Boehme's *XL. Qvestions concerning the soule* (1647) and Coppe continued by speaking of '*the out-breathing, or emanation of Divinity, into Father, Son and Spirit*' and the '*eye or globe of eternity, where the end makes towards and meets the beginning . . . and all's swallowed up into Unity*'.<sup>54</sup> Afterwards when attempting to regain his liberty he still affirmed that God 'fillesh ALL in ALL' and is 'ALL in ALL', and that 'we'—the sons of God—'are partakers of the Divine nature, through our Mystical, and Spiritual Filiation', 'fraternity, unity, and in-dwelling'.<sup>55</sup>

Coppe's doctrines can be compared with his comrade Salmon, who insisted that 'God and the Saint are really one' in 'glorious union of the spirit'; 'I am in thee, and thou in me, that they also may be one with us'.<sup>56</sup> In his recantation *Heights in Depths* (1651)—its title perhaps a reworking of Ephesians 3: 8—Salmon advanced a vision of God as the 'oneness or Eternity', a being of 'nothing but good' from whose womb our 'scattered spirits' had descended 'into multiplicity' 'to lose our selves in an endless Labyrinth'. Yet our souls would 'ascend from variety into uniformity' to find 'bliss and happiness' in their 'original center'.<sup>57</sup> Salmon also related how he saw the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21: 2) 'in its divine brightnes and corruscant beauty' and how he had appeared to himself as:

one confounded into the abyss of eternitie, nonentitized into the being of beings; my soule spilt, and emptied into the fountaine and ocean of divine fulness: expired into the aspires of pure life.<sup>58</sup>

Although the source of these ideas has yet to be identified, they appear to have originated from a Neoplatonic and perhaps also alchemical tradition.

Interestingly, in his correspondence with Webbe, Salmon alluded to a soldier who had been condemned to have his tongue bored through with a red hot iron. This was Jacob Bothumley, whose blasphemous book *The Light and Dark Sides of God* (1650) was burned before his face. In this work Bothumley acknowledged that God was an 'endlesse and infinite Ocean' and if he spoke of God it would be 'nothing but contradiction', because God was 'beyond any expression'. Bothumley could not conceive of God as having a 'personall being' or a 'simple, pure, glorious, and intire being' confined in a place above the stars and firmament. Rather, he saw that:

God is in all Creatures, Man and Beast, Fish and Fowle, and every green thing, from the highest Cedar to the Ivey on the wall . . . God is the life and being of them all.

Only in man did God appear 'more gloriously in then the rest'.<sup>59</sup> Bothumley also supposed that some lived in the 'light side' of God, and some in the 'dark side' at the same time maintaining that there was nothing contrary to God but only to our apprehension. In another place he presented an exposition of the dual presence of the divine and the diabolic within man, appealing to the verse 'God is Light, and in him there is no darkness' (1 John 1: 5).<sup>60</sup> Bothumley's conception of God evokes Nicholas of Cusa's admission in *The Single Eye* (1646) concerning 'the Coincidence of contraries, above which is the infinite'. Yet the resemblance is not close enough to indicate readership.<sup>61</sup> Again, Bothumley's belief that God was in all creatures recalls the Hermetic notion that God was 'All, and the All, through all, and about all'.<sup>62</sup> These, however, are parallels rather than influences, suggesting that *The Light and Dark Sides of God* was an individual meditation on the nature of God in a tradition exemplified by another East Midland work, *The Divine Cloud of Unknowing*.

Similar themes were explored by Clarkson in a blasphemous book which may have originated in a sermon on Isaiah 42: 16, 'I will make Darkness Light before them'. Published as *A Single Eye All Light, no Darkness* (1650), it was publicly burned by order of the House of Commons. Here Clarkson maintained that 'sin hath its conception only in the imagination'. Indeed, 'so long as the act was in God' it was 'as holy as God'. Consequently there was no iniquity to behold with 'purer' eyes, only that the 'Devil is God, Hell is Heaven, Sin Holiness, Damnation Salvation'.<sup>63</sup> These oxymorons recall Nicholas of Cusa's editor's dictum that knowledge of God consisted of opposites and contradictions. That editor was Giles Randall, who owned and sold copies of Clarkson's first book *A Pilgrimage of Saints* (1646). Though Randall may have discussed these writings with Clarkson, there is no indication in *A Single Eye* that Clarkson had read them. Nor does it appear that he was familiar with Boehme's teachings. A more likely source for Clarkson's doctrines was the posthumously published sermons of Tobias

Crisp, a minister who extolled free grace, defended libertinism, and was considered an Antinomian.

Crisp's sermons may also have been familiar to Coppe, who asserted that God was served though 'perfect freedom, and pure Libertinisme'. Yet Coppe went further by combining this outrageous doctrine with an exultant apocalyptic proclamation:

Sin and Transgression is finished and ended; and everlasting righteousness brought in [Daniel 9: 24]; and the everlasting Gospell preaching [Revelation 14: 6].<sup>64</sup>

While imprisoned in Coventry for the misdemeanour of swearing and defying an order which prohibited visiting Coppe, Wyke too preached from the prison grate of 'the Love of God in pardoning sin, finishing transgression & bringing in everlasting Righteousnesse'.<sup>65</sup> Salmon, who was confined with Wyke for the same offences, had claimed that sin was nothing more than 'a transgression of the Law'. This outward law, however, was but a carnal dispensation lacking spiritual force and because all things were alike and one with God—hell, heaven, light, darkness, good, evil—so 'all things are pure before him'. Only when our base carnal apprehension of God—the Antichrist within—had been destroyed could we attain the spiritual discernment to conclude that 'there is nothing but what is good in the pure sight of divine presence'.<sup>66</sup> In the same vein, Coppe perverted the sense of a scriptural text, which was conventionally read as a Pauline reference to Christ's nullifying Jewish dietary prohibitions on unclean meats and drinks, to declare:

Well! To the pure all things are pure (Titus 1: 15).<sup>67</sup>

Following his profound spiritual experience from which he emerged as a resurrected man with a new name (Revelation 3: 12), Coppe reportedly set about putting his inflammatory beliefs into practice. And it was this provocative behaviour—enacting prophetic performances warning of impending divine judgement, falling down before the feet of cripples, beggars, and lepers, kissing their feet, and giving them money, together with his justification of cursing and swearing—that led to him being called the 'great Ranter'.<sup>68</sup>

## THE RANTERS ROUTED

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By 8 January 1650 Coppe had been taken into custody and imprisoned at Warwick. He was shortly moved to Coventry jail and on 19 March transferred to Newgate. Sometime after 28 June 1651, after purportedly recanting, Coppe was finally released. Salmon and Wyke were committed to Coventry jail by 13 March 1650. Wyke was bailed on 5 July and Salmon on 9 September 1650. Bothumley was tried by court martial on 11 March 1650 and cashiered from the army. Clarkson was apprehended in mid-July 1650, detained in custody, and examined on 27 September by a parliamentary committee for suppressing licentious and impious practices. He confessed and was sentenced to

one month's labour in New Bridewell followed by banishment, though the latter part of this decree was not executed. Major William Rainsborough, who had allegedly subsidized the publication of *A Single Eye*, was disabled from his office as a justice of the peace. Of the Ranters committed to Bridewell, William Groome escaped but was soon recaptured and remained imprisoned on 10 December 1651; William Shakespeare was indicted but acquitted; John Collins and William Reeve indicted and convicted of blasphemy. Collins was still imprisoned on 14 January 1652 pending payment of a £100 fine, while Reeve (if he was the heresiarch's brother) was said to have become a drunkard. As for Webbe, he was deprived of his living in September 1651.

Although no Ranter was burned at the stake for heresy, the published writings of blasphemers and seditious—if not their bodies—were still consigned to the flames in public book-burning rituals that resembled Protestant *auto da fés* by proxy. Copies of Coppe's *Fiery Flying Roll*, Bothumley's *Light and Dark Sides of God*, and Clarkson's *Single Eye* all met this fate in 1650. Moreover, on 10 May 1650 Parliament issued an Act for suppressing incest, adultery, and fornication. This was followed on 28 June by an Act against profane swearing and cursing and on 9 August by an Act against blasphemy. Although this legislation can be seen as part of a wider programme designed to further the cause of godly reformation in doctrine and manners, it is also evident that the impetus for these measures came from a parliamentary majority's desire to eradicate the Ranters. Coppe was still more specific, claiming that the acts against adultery and blasphemy 'were put out because of me'.<sup>69</sup>

Afterwards, Bothumley kept an unlicensed alehouse in Leicester. He also held several minor civic offices; sergeant-at-mace, library keeper, and keeper of the house of correction—living for nine years in a tenement within Leicester's jail. He disputed with George Fox at Leicester in 1653 and with Richard Farnworth and other Quakers at nearby Swannington in January 1655. In September 1667 he was presented before the church courts for not receiving communion at his parish church of All Saints. Bothumley's only other publication was an abridgement of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. Dedicated to the Mayor and Aldermen of Leicester, it was intended to show the sufferings of those in former ages whom God had singled out to witness his truth. Wyke was dispatched to Ireland as an army preacher, where he was regarded as a Baptist and became involved in written controversy with a Quaker. He was active in Dublin and then counties Antrim (Belfast, Lisburn), Armagh (Lurgan), and Down (Dromore, Tullylish). In 1663 Wyke was arrested together with a number of nonconformist preachers. Salmon, weakened by almost six months of incarceration, issued a recantation. He moved to Kent and was active in Chatham, Strood, Frindsbury, and Rochester, where he preached regularly in the cathedral every Sabbath sowing 'the seeds of Ranting Familism'.<sup>70</sup> Salmon then emigrated to Barbados. In November 1656 he was reported to be preaching regularly, seemingly denying 'Ranting outwardly', attracting followers and securing protection from powerful people on the island.<sup>71</sup> He was succeeded at Rochester by Richard Coppin, who was imprisoned at Maidstone in December 1655 on suspicion of blasphemy. Clarkson took up astrology, medicine, and magic upon his release, combining his newly acquired skills in healing and recovering

stolen goods with preaching in Cambridgeshire, Essex, and Norfolk. He subsequently became a Muggletonian and, claiming to be the only true Bishop and faithful messenger of Jesus Christ, wrote five treatises in quick succession, including an attack on the Quakers that provoked an intemperate response. Yet he also quarrelled with Muggleton who, fearing his attempt to usurp control of their tiny sect, excommunicated him on 25 December 1660. A humbled Clarkson was eventually forgiven on condition that he desist from writing. According to Muggleton, after the Great Fire of London Clarkson became involved in an ill-advised financial scheme that led to his incarceration for debt at Ludgate, where he died about a year later. As for Coppe, in September 1651 he preached two recantation sermons in Oxfordshire. Towards the end of February 1655, together with a Baptist army officer and 'a great company of ranters' Coppe drank and smoked tobacco in George Fox's presence.<sup>72</sup> After the Restoration and having changed his name to Hiam, he was licensed to practise medicine and surgery. He was buried under that name in St Mary's church at Barnes, Surrey.

There were Ranters: admittedly not many, but the debate on their existence should now be considered closed. Instead discussion should focus on their significance within wider contemporary contexts. For a brief moment during the English Revolution it may have seemed, at least from George Fox's retrospective perspective, that—in words he disingenuously attributed to Durand Hotham, a partially sympathetic Justice of the Peace in the East Riding—had it not been for the Quakers, England would have been 'overspread with rantisme', and despite all their laws none of the nation's magistrates could prevent it.<sup>73</sup> On this justificatory view, divinely appointed Quakerism triumphed against diabolically inspired Ranterism. And certainly it is indisputable that by the early 1660s there were a maximum of 60,000 Quakers compared to no openly professing Ranters. But as we have seen, and indeed as others have shown, from shortly before the execution of Charles I in January 1649 until the parliamentary forces' victory at the Battle of Worcester on 3 September 1651 the blasphemous beliefs and outrageous behaviour of those reproachfully known as Ranters—whether real or imagined—greatly troubled a number of magistrates, military officials, ministers, moralists, and politicians, as well as prominent Baptists and Diggers. Although the anxieties they engendered were out of proportion to their size, exaggerated as they were by journalists and other polemicists, the varied if near universal condemnatory reactions to and fairly swift suppression of the Ranters exposed manifold pre-existing religious divisions within England's fledgling republic.

Yet that is not the end of the matter, since there remains much to be done. With the partial exception of Coppe, we still need detailed accounts of the Ranters' reading habits and possible influences on their thought. Moreover, we await research on the lesser-known individuals that comprised 'My one flesh', together with a reconstruction of their social networks. The same may be said of members of several other spiritual communities, notably those clustered around Sedgwick and those named in *News from the New-Jerusalem*. We also require meticulous studies of Bothumley, Coppe

(particularly after 1648), Coppin, and Salmon. So it is fair to suggest that despite all that has been said about them, there is another book on the Ranters still to be written.

## NOTES

1. Anon., *Ranters Monster*; ODNB.
2. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, 124.
3. Barclay, *Inner Life*, 423.
4. Entry in the old DNB.
5. Whiting, *Studies*, 274; Tindall, *John Bunyan*, 97; Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 316, 353–54.
6. Jones, *Studies*, 467–81.
7. Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 16; id., *Century of Revolution*, 149.
8. Tindall, *John Bunyan*, 96–9; Petegorsky, *Left-Wing Democracy*, 236, 237, 239.
9. Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 315–72; id., ‘Ranters’, 15–25.
10. McGregor, ‘Ranters’, 60, 128, 173.
11. Heinemann and Thompson (eds.), *History and the Imagination*, 122–3, 125, 127–37, 142–3; Morton, *World of the Ranters*, 17–18, 70–1, 110–12.
12. Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 15–16, 138, 162, 199, 202–3, 280, 314–23, 339–41, 358, 363, 371, 379.
13. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, 17, 18, 20, 21, 75, 77–8, 81, 83, 92.
14. Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed*; Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue*, 174–93; Hawes, *Mania and Literary Style*; Flinker, *Song of Songs*, 120–39, McDowell, *English Radical Imagination*, 89–136.
15. Carlyle (ed.), *Cromwell’s Letters*, ii. 15; OED, s.v. ‘rant’, ‘ranter’.
16. *Complete Works of Winstanley*, ii. 167, 235–40.
17. The Bodleian Library copy of Richard Coppin’s *Divine Teachings* (2nd edn. London, 1653), shelf-mark Antiq.e.E 34(2), also has a note added after Coppin’s name; ‘who is one of the chiefe rantors’. Although this annotation is undated, the volume passed into the possession of the eighteenth-century bookseller John Denis.
18. Clarkson, *Lost Sheep*, 24–6.
19. Ibid. 26–9; Anon., *Routing of Ranters*, 2.
20. Anon., *Ranters Recantation*, 6.
21. Hessayon, ‘Gold’, 151–2, 157–60.
22. *Perfect Passages* (27 December 1650–3 January 1651), 168.
23. *Moderate Intelligencer*, no. 4 (23–30 May 1653), 32; Trapnel, *Report and Plea*, 38.
24. *Mercurius politicus*, no. 211 (22–9 June 1654), 3584–5.
25. Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 20–2.
26. Underhill (ed.), *Records*, 73, 77–80, 90, 107, 198, 269–70.
27. Underwood (ed.), *Acts of the Witnesses*, 54–5, 57, 59–60, 62–3, 77–8.
28. Gell, *Sermon Touching Gods Government*, 39.
29. Coppe, *Copp’s Return*, sig. A2<sup>r</sup>–3; id., *Remonstrance*, 5.
30. C[larkson], *Single Eye*, title page.
31. Clarkson, *Lost Sheep*, 10.

32. Salmon, *Heights in Depths*, 10–25; id., *Divinity Anatomized*, 38.
33. *Several Proceedings*, no. 16 (11–18 January 1650), 213.
34. *Complete Works of Winstanley*, ii. 167.
35. Collier, *Looking-Glass for Quakers*, 7.
36. Fox, *Word from the Lord*, 13.
37. Hessayon, 'Gold', 209–11.
38. Sedgwick, *Spiritual Madman*, 13, 14.
39. Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, 1, 8.
40. *Ibid.*, preface; Stokes, *Wiltshire Rant*, 13–14.
41. Laurence, 'Two Ranter Poems', 58; C[larkson], *Single Eye*, 12, Anon., *Routing of Ranters*, 5; Anon., *Ranters Ranting*, 2.
42. MS Clarke 18 fos. 55<sup>v</sup>–56<sup>v</sup>.
43. MS Clarke 18 fos. 6<sup>r-v</sup>, 19<sup>v</sup>–20<sup>r</sup>, 20<sup>v</sup>–21<sup>r</sup>.
44. Coppe, *Second Fiery Flying Roule*, 15.
45. MS Clarke 18 fo. 23<sup>r-v</sup>.
46. Anon., *Justification of Mad Crew*, sig. A3<sup>v</sup>.
47. Coppe, *Some Sweet Sips*, 8, 33; id., *Fiery Flying Roll*, preface; id., *Second Fiery Flying Roule*, 18, 22.
48. Coppe, *Second Fiery Flying Roule*, 4, 16, 22.
49. Anon., *Justification of Mad Crew*, 16–18.
50. Coppe, *Second Fiery Flying Roule*, 7.
51. Anon., *Ranters Declaration*, 6.
52. Coppe, *Copp's Return*, 6, 12–14.
53. Coppe, *Some Sweet Sips*, 54.
54. *Ibid.* 55; Smith (ed.), *Ranter Writings*, 73–5.
55. Coppe, *Copp's Return*, 10, 24–5.
56. Salmon, *Divinity Anatomized*, 5–6.
57. Smith (ed.), *Ranter Writings*, 207, 216, 220, 222.
58. Salmon, *Heights in Depths*, 15, 16.
59. Bothumley, *Light and Dark Sides*, 1, 2, 4–5, 71.
60. *Ibid.* 10, 29.
61. Nicholas of Cusa, *Single Eye*, 77.
62. Hermes Trismegistus, *Divine Pymander*, 157.
63. C[larkson], *Single Eye*, 8, 13–14.
64. Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, preface, 1, 7.
65. MS Clarke 18 fo. 25<sup>v</sup>.
66. Salmon, *Divinity Anatomized*, 62–8; Salmon, *Heights in Depths*, 47, 49.
67. Coppe, *Fiery Flying Roll*, 8.
68. ODNB.
69. Coppe, *Remonstrance*, 1, 6.
70. Rosewell, *Serpents Subtilty Discovered*, 1.
71. FHL, MS Swarthmore I 66<sup>r</sup>.
72. ODNB.
73. *The Journal of George Fox Edited from the MSS*, ed. Norman Penney, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), i. 29. The contrast with what Hotham himself wrote could not be starker.

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