**"Devils Clad in Flesh":**
**The Significance of the Perceived Ranter Threat, 1649-1651**

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The execution of Charles I in 1649 marked the elimination, not only of the monarch, but also of the head of the Church of England, creating religious uncertainty as well as a political vacuum. It was under these circumstances that the Ranters, one of the most infamous of all the radical religious sects to emerge during the Civil War and Interregnum, sprang up. The Ranters were notorious for outrageous behaviour such as preaching in the nude and having multiple sexual partners. They were antinomians, meaning they rejected conventional moral laws, both scripture and legal strictures, in favour of what they believed to be divine personal revelation. In the brief period from late 1650 until early 1651, the Ranters were the subjects of a number of polemic pamphlets describing their blasphemous behaviour.[1] By the end of 1651, however, following a number of Parliamentary Acts intended to suppress such blasphemies, the Ranters had largely disappeared from popular press and were no longer apparently viewed as a threat.

Despite their relatively brief appearance on the historical scene, Ranters have since the 1970s attracted much scholarly attention. During this period, historians caught up in the social and sexual revolution occurring around them saw the Ranter rejection of conventional societal norms as a precursor to their own counter-cultural movements. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, a historiographical debate had emerged surrounding the true nature of the Ranter movement. The main divisions within this debate are between those who believe that the Ranters were an organized religious sect; those who think they were merely a loose movement with no formal structure, yet nevertheless espousing a cohesive doctrine; and those who argue that the Ranters did not

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[1] J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the historians,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 83.

exist at all but were rather the fabrication of fearful contemporaries.[2] The following

paper, however, will argue that historians should move past the debate surrounding the

nature of the Ranter movement, as this debate often spends too much time examining

Ranters for the primary purpose of tracing the roots of modern counter-cultural

behaviours. Rather, this paper will argue that historians should instead concern

themselves with what the contemporary sources pertaining to Ranters can teach us about

the political, religious and social atmosphere of the early Interregnum. As Kathryn Gucer

has pointed out, "historians who argued over whether language about Ranters could be

said to prove their existence in the mid-1980s missed the significance of this

distinction."[3] She is arguing that the language contained in polemic works about the

Ranters provides historians with a unique opportunity to examine how religious diversity

was comprehended as a way to "critique social authority" during the early years of the

Interregnum.[4]

Gucer's article primarily deals with the contemporary polemical works written

about the Ranters, which have attracted particular attention from historians, as have the

works of individual Ranters such as Abiezer Coppe and Lawrence Clarkson. Less studied

have been the responses to the Ranter threat on the part of the authorities, including the

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[2] The primary works involved in this debate are A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970); Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1972); J.F. McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters." in *Radical Religion in the English Revolution,* ed. J.F. McGregor and B. Reay (London: Oxford University Press, 1984), 121-139 and J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[3] Kathryn Gucer, "'Not Heretofore Extant in Print': Where the Mad Ranters Are." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no.1 (January 2000): 94. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/3654043

[4] Ibid.

Rump Parliament. In order to truly uncover the historical significance of the Ranters, this paper will argue that a close examination of the content and the context of all three of these types of sources is necessary. This paper will therefore claim that the historical significance of the Ranters lies, not in their actual existence, but rather in the ways in which they were perceived by contemporaries. Furthermore, it will explain how this approach provides historians with a fascinating glimpse into a society grappling with a period of intense change and shifting concepts of authority following the upheaval of the Civil Wars and the regicide.

*ii. The Historians*

Up until the 1960s Ranters were largely ignored by historians, except as a radical fringe group whose behaviour undermined moral order. During the sexual and social revolution of the 1960s, however, the Ranters were championed by a number of social historians who viewed Ranters as precursors to their own social movements and their own preoccupation with sexual liberty and social equality. By 1970 A.L. Morton had produced the first intensive study of Ranters, entitled *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution.*[5] In this work Morton states that Ranterism was most likely "a movement, rather than a sect" which nevertheless merited study in its own right.[6] Here Morton is specifically emphasizing the social program of the Ranters, rather than their religious beliefs. Such an emphasis demonstrates the secular audience Morton

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[5] A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970).

[6] Ibid., 17.

was writing for in a period in which social deviance was viewed as more shocking than religious pluralism. In his 1972 work, *The World Turned Upside Down,* Christopher Hill praises Morton and claims that he "knows more about the Ranters than anyone else."[7] Like Morton, Hill concedes that Ranters did not constitute an organized sect in the way that other groups, such as the Quakers, did.[8] He understands that the Ranters did not have a "recognized leader or theoretician" and that there was never "a Ranter organization."[9] Nevertheless, Hill argues that, from 1649 to 1651, contemporaries were able to identify a group of individuals collectively referred to as members of a Ranter movement and, as a result, Hill feels confident in identifying these individuals as a movement.[10]

This fascination with Ranters continued into the 1980s. In 1983 Nigel Smith released *A Collection of Ranter Writings*, which included an in-depth introduction to the movement, followed by the works of individual Ranters.[11] In this collection, Smith is essentially expressing the opinion, similar to Hill's, that "an identifiable body of individuals" was present from 1649 to 1651, a body whose existence can be recognized by the governmental persecution they received.[12] In 1987 Jerome Friedman's book, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy: The Ranters and the English Revolution,* divided the Ranters into a number of arbitrary categories to help the reader understand the

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[7] Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1972), 163.

[8] Ibid., 305.

[9] Ibid., 163.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Nigel Smith, *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century* (London: Junction Books, 1983).

[12] Ibid., 7.

diversity amongst the views of these individuals.[13] Despite this diversity, however, Friedman does not question the existence of Ranters as a sect; rather, he believes Ranters are an understudied group warranting greater historical attention.[14]

By the time Friedman published *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy,* the historians who had previously written about the Ranters were starting to be criticized for being anachronistic in their approach, due to their imposition of their own concepts of class conflict and Marxism onto these seventeenth-century individuals. While the 1980s saw a continued interest in Ranters, it therefore also witnessed a step back from such enthusiasm and the introduction of a more cautious approach to the topic. In his 1983 chapter "Seekers and Ranters," rather than conceptualizing the Ranters as a group of individuals sharing a set of religious convictions, J. F. McGregor argues that they were "largely artificial products of the Puritan heresiographers."[15] McGregor does recognize a few figures, specifically Abiezer Coppe, Lawrence Clarkson, Jacob Bauthumley, Joseph Salmon and the anonymous author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew*, as espousing a cohesive Ranter doctrine.[16] He ultimately argues, however, that the importance of this small collection of individuals was largely exaggerated in the imaginations of contemporaries and that their significance lay "in their ability to instil the fear of anarchy

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[13] Jerome Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy: The Ranters and the English Revolution* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987), xiii.

[14] Ibid., 7.

[15] J.F. McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters." in *Radical Religion in the English Revolution,* ed. J.F. McGregor and B. Reay (London: Oxford University Press,1984), 122.

[16] Ibid., 129.

in the minds of those…who sought stability in the flux of revolution," rather in the actual reality of their threat.[17]

In 1986, J.C. Davis complicated the historical understanding of Ranters even further in his work, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians*.[18] In a book review of Davis' work, Richard L. Greaves states that, following the publication of this book, the previous understanding of the Ranter phenomenon, as articulated by social historians such as Morton, Hill, Smith and Friedman, became untenable.[19] Davis claims that "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."[20] Rather, much like McGregor, Davis argues that these Ranters were largely the creation of pamphleteers and heresiographers who were utilizing the term Ranter as a propaganda device. While Davis recognizes that scholars such as Hill and Morton were "sensible, skilled and mature historians," he still believes that they made a mistake in taking the works of heresiographers and polemical pamphlets as accurate descriptions of the movement.[21] Davis argues that such evidence should not have been accepted by these historians as providing accurate descriptions of the past, as these works were extremely biased and greatly exaggerated reality.[22]

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[17] McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters," 139.

[18] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*.

[19] Richard L. Greaves, Review of *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and Their Historians,* by J. C. Davis, *Church History* 57, no. 3 (September 1988): 378.

[20] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History,* 75.

[21] Ibid., 128.

[22] Ibid., 129.

Furthermore, Davis argues that these historians were negatively influenced by their own

ideological perceptions of the world.

Writing in the 1970s and 80s, these historians were experiencing massive social

change. In his 1971 article "The Ranters Ranting: Reflections on a Ranting Counter

Culture," G.F.S. Ellens draws a parallel between Ranters and Hippies.[23] He argues that

both these groups "manifestly 'dropped out' from society at large," rejecting conventional

societal norms in a primarily pacifistic manner.[24] Furthermore, he claims that these

movements were both a reaction to their circumstances, which were defined by conflict

and change.[25] In the late 60s and 70s, this conflict was often defined in the context of the

conflicting ideologies of communism and capitalism.[26] The historians writing at this time

were often influenced by Marxism, which sometimes resulted in them anachronistically

looking for class conflict in the past where it may not have existed, or at least not have

been understood or articulated in modern ways. Davis explains how both Hill and Morton

were "members of the Community Party Historians' Group between 1946 and 1956,"

thus implying that their political views influenced the way they approached their

studies.[27] Davis was not alone in critiquing the ideological bias present in twentieth-

century Ranter historiography. In 1998 Robert Kenny argued that the neo-Marxist

historians writing in the 1970s desired "to convert the 'Great Rebellion' of England into a

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[23] G.F.S. Ellens, "The Ranters Ranting: Reflections on a Ranting Counter Culture." *Church History* 40 (January 1971): 105. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/3163110

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 107.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History,* 130.

'class-revolution'" and therefore found in Ranters such as Coppe "an extreme

revolutionary intent on creating an 'apostolic, egalitarian communism'", when this may

not have been the case.[28] Kenny ultimately explains how the twentieth-century

historiography about Ranters has turned these religious radicals into "a wild, but blurred,

article, sparkling with ideological suggestion."[29]

Hill immediately responded to Davis, arguing that the latter's allegation of

Marxist bias influencing the rediscovery of Ranters in the 1970s did not even warrant

comment.[30] However, *The World Turned Upside Down* certainly testifies to the degree to

which Hill was influenced by an emphasis on ideas surrounding class conflict.

Throughout this work, Hill is examining "the revolt within the revolution," a revolt which

is described as involving attempts by the lower classes of society to undermine their

current system.[31] Moreover, at the end of his work, Hill explains how the suppression of

radical groups and the subsequent disappearance of the Ranters was a sign that "property

triumphed" and that any chance at radically restructuring society was lost for many

generations to come.[32] Other historians writing near the end of the twentieth century

similarly link Ranters to class conflict. Friedman explicitly argues that the Ranters were

the first movement to expound ideas that can be recognized as "class conscious

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[28] Robert Kenny, "'In These Last Dayes': The Strange Work of Abiezer Coppe," *The Seventeenth Century* 13, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 157. ProQuest.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Christopher Hill, 'The Lost Ranters? A Critique of J.C. Davis,' *History Workshop* no. 24 (Autumn 1987): 139-140. http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/4288784

[31] Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down,* 12.

[32] Ibid., 306.

anarchism."[33] These works must therefore be approached cautiously and with a recognition of the ideological agendas of the authors. We have to recognize that this agenda is problematic due to the fact that, by imposing such modern conceptions of society upon seventeenth-century people, these historians are distorting the experience of these individuals. We must appreciate that people from the past were different not only due to the events occurring around them but also in their mentalities and the ways they understood their surroundings. However, we do not necessarily have to dismiss out of hand, as does Davis, the arguments advanced by these historians. The pamphlets and Parliamentary Acts of the time do demonstrate that contemporaries at least believed there were Ranters and this has to count for something. Furthermore, while Kenny recognizes the importance of Davis' warning, he argues that Davis overlooks the evidence that in 1650 the activities of Ranters were indeed extreme and that the arrests of accused Ranters, such as Coppe, were "a response to his being seen as a threat to the regime."[34] The fact that a defined group of Ranters cannot easily be found in historical records does not therefore preclude the possibility that there may have been Ranters or, more importantly, that they have historical significance.

In a recent article, Evan Labuzetta has claimed that historians have now reached the conclusion that Ranters did not exist as an organized sect with defined leaders and that the prevalence of their ideas were greatly exaggerated by contemporaries.[35] David

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[33] Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality and Anarchy,* xi.

[34] Kenny, "In These Last Dayes," 157.

[35] Evan Labuzetta,"'This Diabolical Generation'-The Ranters and the Devil," *Literature Compass* 5, issue 3 (May 2008): 593. http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2008.00539.x

Loewenstein, however, has argued that the Ranters were more than simply "the

propaganda fabrication of a paranoid regime or of the scurrilous press projecting Civil

War stereotypes."[36] Recent historiography surrounding Ranters therefore represents "an

explanatory middle ground between Morton and Davis."[37] Greaves claims that historians

now must return to the primary sources pertaining to the Ranters.[38] The following

sections of this paper will therefore critically assess three different types of sources

pertaining to the Ranters - their own works, polemical works of contemporaries and

Parliamentary responses to this threat - not only to engage with this historiographical

debate but also to demonstrate how we must now move past this debate and refocus our

analysis onto what these sources can teach us about the social, religious and political

atmosphere of the early Interregnum.

*iii. The Ranters*

Since the 1970s, historians have conceded that the classification of Ranters is an

extremely difficult task.[39] The two individuals most commonly associated with Ranterism

are Abiezer Coppe and Lawrence Clarkson.[40] In one seventeenth-century pamphlet the

Ranters were even described as "Coppanits, or Claxtonians."[41] Other members, such as

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[36] David Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 94/5.

[37] Labuzetta, "This Diabolical Generation," 593.

[38] Greaves, review of *Fear, Myth and History,* 378.

[39] Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down,* 163.

[40] In much of the contemporary literature Clarkson is also referred to as Claxton and Coppe as Copp.

[41] *The Routing of the Ranters,*1650. British Library, Thomason collection, E.616[9], 1.

those referenced briefly in pamphlets, however, are much harder to identify. Often no written record of the works of these individuals exist and it is therefore hard to trace what their true actions and beliefs were, as opposed to what was written about them by pamphleteers. This paper will therefore examine the Ranters identified by McGregor, and subsequently disputed by Davis, when discussing the views of Ranters expressed in print.[42] While Davis claims that the works of these figures does not provide evidence of a cohesive set of beliefs, it is still possible to recognize certain themes throughout their writing, themes which provide insight into the beliefs and attitudes of these individuals. Furthermore, these works demonstrate the ways in which individuals were questioning social, religious and political authority during this period, in the context of the uncertainty following the execution of Charles and widespread belief in the impending Millennium.

Hill effectively demonstrates how the Interregnum period was a time in which "old institutions, old beliefs, [and] old values came into question" as tradition was replaced by uncertainty.[43]  As will be discussed below, such uncertainty often resulted in a great deal of fear. It could also, however, be interpreted by contemporaries as an opportunity. This was a brief period, before the re-establishment of control under Cromwell's Protectorate, in which anything and everything seemed possible.[44] Hill further expands on how this questioning was not confined to this world but rather

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[42] This group includes Coppe, Clarkson, Bauthumley, Salmon and the anonymous author of *A Justification of the Mad Crew*; McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters," 129.

[43] Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down,* 12.

[44] Ibid.

extended into the next as individuals began to debate the very nature and source of religious authority and knowledge of one's election: many radical Protestant sectarians, like Lawrence Clarkson, for instance, believed that scriptural law no longer applied to them, as they had direct access to divine knowledge; i.e., personal revelation.[45] This unique historical moment therefore allowed radical soteriological views such as those expressed by the Ranters to form and gain traction.

Many Ranters experimented with different religious denominations before arriving at Ranterism. In his autobiography, *The Lost Sheep Found*, Clarkson describes his time experimenting with six other groups, including Anglicans, Presbyterians, Anabaptists and Seekers, before becoming "Captain of the Rant."[46] Likewise, before becoming a Ranter, Coppe had been raised as a moderate Presbyterian.[47] Contrary to Hill's claim that the Ranters emerged from highly uneducated portions of society, Coppe actually attended All Souls College at Oxford, although he did not complete a degree due to the outbreak of war.[48] Coppe's initial arrest and imprisonment, sometime in the mid 1640s, was actually a result of his Anabaptist activities.[49] It is in Coppe's 1649 *A Fiery Flying Roll,*, that he reveals his transformation into a Ranter.[50] In this work Coppe

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[45] Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down,* 146.

[46] Lawrence Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found,* in *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies,* ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (1998), 186.

[47] Kenny, "In These Last Dayes," 160.

[48] Ariel Hessayon, "The Making of Abiezer Coppe." *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 62, no. 1 (January 2011): 44. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1017/S0022046909991333

[49] Nicholas McDowell, "A Ranter Reconsidered: Abiezer Coppe and Civil War Stereotypes," *The Seventeenth Century* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 174. ProQuest.

[50] Abiezer Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll.* in *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century,* ed. Nigel Smith (London: Junction Books, 1983.): 82.

describes his transformative vision during which he "was utterly plagued, consumed, damned, rammed, and sunke into nothing…" before remerging, as though reborn, crying "Amen, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Amen."[51] During this vision, God supposedly spoke to Coppe from within him, and the purpose of *A Fiery Flying Roll* is therefore to share God's message with the world as God intended Coppe to do.[52] In this work, as well as the preceding *A Second Fiery Flying Roule*, printed later in 1649, Coppe addresses the masses in order to share God's message with the world and enlighten them on the true ways of God.[53] In this work Coppe directly laments the defeat of the Levellers, proving that his God was sympathetic to the levelling cause of creating a more egalitarian society.[54]

Following the removal of the monarch it seemed, for a moment, as though a new society would emerge. Following the establishment of the authority of Parliament, however, many, including Ranters, were unsatisfied. In his work *A Rout, A Rout*, Joseph Salmon describes how God previously "dwelt amongst us in the darkness of absolute and arbitrary Monarchy."[55] He argues that this existence was tyrannical and evil and separated Man from God in an undesirable manner.[56] He then proceeds, however, to criticize Parliament for taking the role previously held by the monarch, arguing that it made itself

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[51] Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, 82.

[52] Ibid., 83.

[53] Abiezer Coppe, *A Second Fiery Flying Roule. In A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century,* ed. Nigel Smith ( London: Junction Books. 1983): 98.

[54] Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, 94.

[55] Joseph Salmon, *A Rout, A Rout,* in *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century,* ed. Nigel Smith (London: Junction Books, 1983), 193.

[56] Ibid.

"as absolute and tyrannical as ever the King in his reign."[57] One way in which Ranters criticized authority, therefore, was in terms of its inability to meet their desires for a post-monarchical society, one which was essentially more egalitarian. Coppe further expresses his desire for social equality when he argues that every time one sees a Beggar "you must Fall down before him, kisse him in the street."[58] Such an egalitarian perspective on society, which was shared by other sectarians such as the Quakers, can largely be attributed to Ranter antinomianism. As Jacob Bauthumley expresses in *The Light and Dark sides of God*, God is present "in all Creatures, Man and Beast, Fish and Fowle, and every green thing, from the highest Cedar to the Ivey on the wall."[59] It is this presence of God in all things that results in the Ranters viewing everything as equal and both divine authority and the bounties of nature as common to and accessible to all. This emphasis on natural law was contrary to the desires of Parliament who, as demonstrated in the Putney Debates, continued to defend property and social hierarchy in order to maintain their own power, despite similar opposition from Levellers and Diggers. Ranter antinomianism, however, can also be used to undermine the societal norms propounded by the authorities in other more radical ways, specifically in terms of rejecting conventional moral behaviour.

[57] Salmon, *A Rout, A Rout,* 193.

[58] Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll*, 90.

[59] Jacob Bauthumley, *The Light and Dark Sides of God.* in *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century,* ed. Nigel Smith (London: Junction Books, 1983.), 232.

Both Coppe and Clarkson include the biblical phrase "to the pure all things are pure" in their writings.[60] The way in which they interpret this statement often alarmed contemporaries. Coppe follows this statement by arguing that it logically follows that God therefore permits some to curse and swear and that, for these faithful individuals, cursing "is more glorious then praying and preaching in others."[61] Coppe is therefore propounding a belief that being saved is all that matters and that as long as one is elect and recognizes their divine inner light, then their individual actions are not important. Clarkson essentially argues that God rules over both good and evil and that "Scripture, Churches, Saints and Devils," are meaningless in comparison to God's authority. Such a statement was an extremely alarming form of moral relativism to many at this time. During this period many people believed in divine Providentialism in the form of a "living God." In another work, Davis explains how people in seventeenth-century England believed that God had a "constant participatory presence" in the world and that nothing happened on Earth which was not touched by God's influence.[62] For those who believed in this "living God," however, radical groups, such as the Ranters, were highly disturbing, as they were believed to be offending God by their aberrant beliefs. In our more modern secular era it is easy to forget how alarming Ranter antinomianism would therefore have been to contemporaries as it was viewed as blasphemous and heretical.

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[60] Titus 1:15; Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll,* 92.; Clarkson, Lawrence. *A Single Eye: All Light, no Darkness; or Light and Darkness One.* in *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17th Century,* ed. Nigel Smith (London: Junction Books, 1983.), 163/4.

[61] Coppe, *A Fiery Flying Roll,* 92.

[62] J.C. Davis, "Living with the living God: radical religion and the English Revolution." in *Religion in Revolutionary England,* ed. Christopher Durston and Judith Maltby (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 21.

In his 1660 autobiography, Clarkson describes his time as the "Captain of the Rant" when many "principle [sic] women came to [his] lodging for knowledge."[63] Clarkson's justification for this sexual liberty lies in his extreme antinomian conception of sin. Clarkson ultimately believed "that there was no sin, but as man esteemed it sin, and therefore none can be free from sin, till in purity it be acted as no sin."[64] It is this reasoning that alarmed contemporaries, especially as Clarkson himself proudly announced that he was therefore permitted to (and did) "brake the Law in all points (murder excepted:) and the ground of this my judgement was, God had made all things good, so nothing evil but as man judged it; for I apprehended there was no such thing as theft, cheat or a lie, but as man made it so."[65]

Similar views were expressed by Bauthumley and Salmon. Bauthumley argues that "sin is a living out of the will of God," and it therefore falls "in compliance with the glory of God, as well as that which we call grace and goodnesse."[66] Furthermore, he justifies disregarding Scripture on the grounds that he has "the mind of God within," and therefore does not require a written work to validate his decisions.[67] Such a doctrine

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[63] Clarkson, *The Lost Sheep Found,* 186.

[64] Ibid., 185.

[65] Ibid.,186/7.

[66] Bauthumley, *The Light and Dark sides of God*, 242/3.

[67] Ibid., 258.

could, therefore, unsurprisingly instil fear of a breakdown of societal conventions and the

prospect of anarchy.[68]

Beginning in the 1990s, historians have tended to see the Ranters as products of

their age, as the result of contemporary religious and political conflict and regicide.

Kenny argues that it is impossible to understand Coppe's move to radicalism without

looking at what was occurring around him and the lack of a prevailing authoritative

structure, real or imagined, in England at this time.[69] Such an examination of the context

in which the Ranters were writing led Loewenstein to argue that Ranter works,

specifically those by Coppe, can be used to illustrate their radical attempts "to reinterpret,

by means of startling symbolic gestures and arresting prophetic language, the processes

of social and political revolution."[70] Bernard Capp describes the Interregnum as a

"culture war" in which "the puritan ethos of godly discipline and moral

reformation….was pitted against a rival ethos of good fellowship and festive

traditions."[71] The works of Ranters, therefore, can ultimately be seen as a part of this

culture war as a form of rebellion against Puritan values and conventional practices

which were grounded in a strict concept of acceptable manners, rejecting "immorality,

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[68] Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* was published in 1651. In this work Hobbes describes a state of nature in which life is "nasty, brutish and short." It is in order to prevent this state of nature that Hobbes argues rational human agents establish contracts with one another. As antinomians, however, the Ranters are rejecting the contracts proposed by Hobbes and are therefore returning the world to a state of nature, as in order for this state to be avoided everyone must abide by the contracts. While it is not explicitly stated that Hobbes ever knows or discuss the Ranters, Hobbes' outlook is likely to mimic many of the fears of contemporaries over the danger of Ranterism.

[69] Kenny, "In These Last Dayes," 165.

[70] Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution,* 92.

[71] Bernard Capp, *England's Culture Wars: Puritan Reformation and its Enemies in the Interregnum, 1649-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

drunkenness, and the like."[72] Puritans cared very deeply about the dangers of "sins committed against God himself."[73] These sins are those contained in the first table of sins of the Ten Commandments, and include blasphemy.[74] The Ranters, therefore, emerged as an opposition to, and a reaction against, the period of rebellion they had so recently experienced and the atmosphere of uncertainty it had left in its wake.[75]

Hill argues that the radical beliefs of "the generation of the 1640s" were often encouraged by the millenarian enthusiasm of the period.[76] Christian millenarianism refers to a particular interpretation, by some Christians, of the book of Revelation which leads them to believe that, following the Second Coming of Christ, a messianic kingdom will be established on earth which Christ will reign over for the thousand years preceding the Last Judgement.[77] Norman Cohn was the first to recognize the millenarian nature of the Ranter tracts.[78] Moreover, Kenny argues that Coppe's conversion to millenarianism was a result of the dramatic division between the old and the new as caused by the regicide.[79] He claims that "Coppe experienced a separation from his past which marked that the millennium had already come to his transcendent soul."[80] These ideas of the impending

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[72] Capp, *England's Culture Wars,* 87.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution,* 96.

[76] Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down,* 154.

[77] Norman, Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (London: Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1970), 13.

[78] Ibid., 287.

[79] Kenny, "In These Last Dayes," 166.

[80] Ibid.

millennium were also encouraged by the Civil War atmosphere. The works of Ranters can

therefore be understood as their way of trying to make sense of the world around them,

and the possible future, in a time of massive change. They attacked conventional

seventeenth-century conceptions of social hierarchy, based on property ownership, a code

of morality which viewed sex outside of marriage as a threat to the moral and social order

and the legitimate transmission of property; most shocking of all, they questioned not

only conventional church teachings but traditional religious authority based in scripture.

They were, therefore, ultimately using religion as a way in which to both criticize and

comprehend the role of political and religious authority within their own society.


*iv. The Polemic Works of Contemporaries*

     Much scholarly work has focused on polemical primary sources concerning the

Ranters. While these sources initially contributed greatly to the rediscovery of the Ranters

in the works of Morton, Cohn and Hill, they later came under intense criticism from

historians such as Davis. These sources are primarily made up of polemic pamphlets and

heresiographies. William Lamont once pointed out that such pamphlets are often

deceiving as they contain theological terms, such as antinomian, "which convey a

delusive air of precision and even science about them," when in fact they are greatly

simplifying an array of complex concepts in order to appeal to a wide readership.[81]

Furthermore, recent historians have begun to recognize that heresiographers often had

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[81] William Lamont, "Pamphleteering, the Protestant consensus and the English Revolution," in *Freedom and the English Revolution: Essays in history and literature,* ed. R.C. Richardson and G.M. Ridden (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 84,

ulterior motives in critiquing Ranters, which calls into question the accuracy of their

statements.[82] Both these types of polemical sources, however, still contribute to the

ongoing debate surrounding the existence of the Ranters. A close examination of the

underlying sentiments and reasoning behind the production of such works also gives

historians great insight into understanding the opposition to Ranters during the

Interregnum. These sources, therefore, demonstrate the fears many contemporaries had

concerning the deterioration of the religious and moral order of England following the

Civil Wars and regicide and show the fragmented nature of the nation at this time.

Contemporaries, many of whom believed in the living God, really were fearful of the

radical ideas propounded by Ranters, especially those concerning sexual liberty. Adultery

and pre-marital sex were alarming concepts to contemporaries and the Ranters'

acceptance of such behaviour therefore threatened their religious views and the basis on

which their understanding of morality rested.

In 1650 an anonymous pamphlet, *The Ranters Religion,* was released. In this

pamphlet the author describes the Ranters as being "Monsters of Mankind," or "Devils

clad in flesh" and clearly expresses their opinion of the Ranters by arguing that they

deserve "to bee thrown out, and to be betrodden under the foot of men."[83] This pamphlet

also contains an outline of five qualities of the Ranter sect and some verses which were

supposedly "found in the pocket of one of the prime Ranters…"[84] Another anonymous

pamphlet, *The arraignment and tryall with a declaration of the Ranters,* traces the roots

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[82] McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters," 122.

[83] *The Ranters Religion,* British Library, Thomason collection, E.619[8], 8, 1650.

[84] Ibid., 7.

of Ranter ideas back to a number of other radical groups, beginning with the Donatists of

353.[85] This pamphlet conceptualizes the Ranters as a continuation of previous radicalism

which had risen to prominence once again following the conflict of the preceding decade.

This pamphlet discusses the "principal Ring-leaders" of the Ranters and specifically

identifies a number of individuals as Ranters. Upon reading these pamphlets it therefore

seems evident that the Ranters were an organized sect with defined leaders and a clear,

blasphemous, doctrine. These are merely two examples of a great number of pamphlets

published during the Interregnum which discussed the Ranters in such a way.

     Davis ultimately argues that it was only the pamphlets that emerged during the

three-month period from October 1650 to January 1651 that succeeded in creating what

he terms the "Ranter sensation."[86] He describes this "sensation" as the contemporary

moral panic concerning the "antinomian flouting of moral conventions, systematic

impiety and pantheistic complacency" of the Ranters.[87] He believes that although the

term Ranter was still used in polemical works after this three-month period it no longer

referred to a specific doctrine but had rather become a term used to tarnish the reputation

of any individuals partaking in undesirable behaviour.[88] One pamphlet, *The Prime work

of the first tripple-Parlament,* published in 1654, mentions the Ranters in a section

alongside Atheists, Anabaptists, Hereticks, Quakers and Blasphemers.[89] The anonymous

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[85] *The arraignment and tryall with a declaration of the Ranters,* British Library, Thomason collection, E. 620[3], 4, 1650.

[86] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History,* 83.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid.

[89] *The Prime work of the first tripple-Parlament,* British Library, Thomason collection, E.809[13], 8, 1654.

author of this pamphlet does not make any distinction between these terms but is rather

placing all of them under the overarching umbrella of general blasphemies, thus

supporting Davis' argument.[90] In order to understand what makes the earlier pamphlets -

those referring to a defined Ranter sect rather than a general polemic term - unique, one

must therefore return to the sources Davis includes in this three-month period and attempt

to discern the movement they are describing.

Davis argues that the Ranter "sensation" began with the appearance of the

aforementioned pamphlet *The Ranters Religion*.[91] As previously stated, this pamphlet

was targeting a very clearly defined group. Davis explains how the title page of *The*

*Ranters Religion* "was adorned with a woodcut of naked men and women" and how the

pamphlet was ultimately intended to depict the Ranters "as believing that God is pleased

by acts of sin."[92] Likewise, in most of the pamphlets released during this brief period,

Ranters are usually portrayed as dangerous blasphemers who deserve to be punished by

the authorities. The pamphleteers primarily focused on the sexual permissiveness and

drunken and disorderly behaviour the Ranters. In *The Ranters Recantation*, the

anonymous author describes a Ranter meeting in Whitechapel on 17 December 1650 of

around sixty people.[93] The author discusses the outrageous behaviour of one Mrs Hull,

who supposedly partook in "uncivil action" by being "set on her head, to go about the

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[90] Ibid.

[91] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History,* 77

[92] Ibid., 78.

[93] *The Ranters Recantation,* British Library, Thomason collection, E.620[10], 1, 1650.

room on her hands, with her coat about her ears."[94] This tale is not only sexually

suggestive, it is also representative of a world turned upside-down, in which sexual

functions replace rational faculties. Similarly in *The Ranters Declaration,* which was

supposedly published by the late fellow-Ranter M. Stubs, another Ranter meeting is

described in which it was affirmed

> that that man who tipples deepest, swears the frequentest, commits adultery,
> incest, or buggers the oftenest, blasphemes the impudentest, and perpetrates the
> most notorious crimes, with the highest hand…is the dearest darling to be
> gloriously placed in the tribunal Throne of Heaven.[95]

The concerns of the pamphlets which Davis describes as being a part of the Ranter

"sensation" are therefore primarily concerned with the deviant, and usually sexual,

behaviour of the Ranters. To these pamphleteers, the Ranters signified the disintegration

of the moral fabric of the nation and the fear that a social collapse would result.

These pamphlets ultimately served as explicit warnings to their readers against the

threats posed by Ranters. In *The Ranters Religion*, the author directly address the "good

reader" and explains that this pamphlet is intended to uncover the "filthiness" of the

Ranters so that "though mayest be incited the more heartily to abominate it."[96] Likewise,

the author of *The Ranters creed,* makes the same case by arguing that by exposing the

Ranters "stupidity…their folly may be avoided."[97] Furthermore, *The Ranter Recantation*

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[94] *The Ranters Recantation,* 2.

[95] *The Ranters Declaration,* British Library, Thomason collection, E.620[2], 2, 1650.

[96] *The Ranters Religion,* 3.

[97] *The Ranters creed,* Union Theological Seminary (New York, N.Y.) Library, Wing catalogue, R250, 2, 1651.

is specifically advertised "as a Warning-piece to the English Nation."[98] These pamphlets uncover the fact that fears over the spreading of supposed Ranter ideals were so much of a threat that many were willing to pick up their pens in order to warn against the Ranters. In the seventeenth-century the Ranters were not merely viewed as potentially deranged individuals espousing bizarre beliefs, as they sometimes are by historians; rather, they were understood as a real danger to society. In the context of the war-torn seventeenth century in which English society was trying to return itself to order, the shocking ideas professed by the Ranters were viewed as a threat to a fragile religious and political détente.

In *The Ranters Recantation,* the author professes concern at the blasphemous speech of one Arthingworth, who proclaimed that "he was both King, Priest, and Prophet."[99] *The Ranters creed* claims to be "a true copie of the examinations of a blasphemous sort of people, commonly called ranters."[100] This pamphlet focuses specifically on the examination of a number of individuals who were collectively under the impression that one John Robbins was

> God Almighty, and that he [was] the eternal God, and Father of Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ is now in the womb of [his wife] Joan Robins…and that he shall be born of her about five weeks hence; and she looks to be saved by none other God, but her God John Robbins.[101]

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[98] *The Ranters Recantation,* 1.

[99] Ibid., 2.

[100] *The Ranters creed,* 1.

[101] Ibid.

These pamphlets ultimately express concern over both the outrageous behaviour of the Ranters and their claims that God was within them. These two concerns together were often the defining features of the Ranters and what thus made them such a threat to contemporaries who desired to create a peaceful and godly society following the years of conflict.

After discussing these polemic pamphlets, Davis turns to what he describes as "more serious accounts" written about Ranters during the Interregnum.[102] Some of these accounts are those written by reputable figures in society, from a variety of different religious groups, who were all attempting to discredit the Ranters. McGregor has provided a great deal of insight into these sources. He ultimately comes to the conclusion that Ranters were used by Puritan heresiographers as "convenient categories in which to dispose of some of the bewildering variety of enthusiastic speculation."[103] He argues that the reputation of the notorious Ranters "was nourished for its polemical utility in the religious controversies of the Revolution."[104] The seventeenth-century Puritan heresiographies written about Ranters therefore contain a rejection of their behaviours as a result of the external pressures of revolution as well as the authors' personal convictions.

These Puritan heresiographies deal with radical religion in general and often mention the Ranters as merely one of the sects disrupting society at the time. Thomas Edwards and Ephraim Pagitt are two heresiographers who discussed the Ranters. Gucer

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[102] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History,* 83.

[103] McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters," 122.

[104] Ibid., 131.

recognizes how both these writers invoke imagery relating to "mass pestilence and disease" when discussing radical religious sects.[105] In Edwards' work these sects were portrayed as a gangrene; in Pagitt's as a "plague of locusts,"-thus both representing "a festering infection eating away at the religious health of society."[106] These heresiographies therefore, much like the pamphlets, discussed Ranters in terms of the role they played in the disintegration of the moral, religious and political order of mid-seventeenth-century England. It was not only Puritans, however, who discussed the Ranters in a polemic manner. As has previously been mentioned, the execution of the head of the Church of England and the deterioration of the national church had left behind a religious vacuum. There was therefore a great deal of conflict amongst different religious sects as they fought over who would fill this vacuum.

As has already been explained, later in 1651 the term Ranter began to evolve into a generic term of opprobrium, synonymous with bad behaviour and a breakdown of societal morals. As a result, associating others with Ranterish beliefs could be used as a weapon to dismiss the validity of their views. McGregor explains how, not only did Puritans accuse Baptists of being Ranters, but the Baptists then linked Ranterism with Seekers and Familists.[107] Moreover, the Quakers, responding to similar allegations of Ranterism, argued that Ranters represented "the logical extreme of Calvinist predestination."[108] In their 1654 work *A word from the Lord,* Quakers George Fox and

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[105] Gucer, "Not Heretofore Extant in Print," 84.

[106] Ibid.

[107] McGregor, "Seekers and Ranters," 131.

[108] Ibid.

James Naylor critique a number of contemporary religious sects in order to prove the supremacy of their own beliefs. Fox and Naylor specifically refer to "Anabaptists, Independents, Presbyterians, Levellers and Ranters."[109] They claim that the Ranters, though starting on the right path, strayed off course and ended up turning "the grace of God into wantonness," resulting in "drunkenness, and cursed speaking."[110] This work is ultimately an attempt to dismiss other religious ideals by portraying them as undesirable alternatives in order to promote the Quaker doctrine.

The Digger Gerrard Winstanley also critiques the Ranters in his *A Vindication of Those, Whose endeavours is only to make the Earth a common treasury, called Diggers.* He argues that Diggers looked disdainfully upon the practices of the Ranters.[111] He then identifies eleven in-depth criticisms of the Ranters and follows these with two statements which support the Digger position.[112] The first of these statements shows how, once again, a criticism of the Ranters is being used as an attempt to vindicate the author's own group by comparing them to what many would consider a greater evil. Winstanley is explicitly making the case for the Diggers when he states that

> every one that intends to live in peace, [should] set themselves with diligent labour to Till, Digge, and Plow, the Common and barren Land, to get their bread with righteous moderate working, long a moderat minded people, this prevents the evill of Idlenesse, and the danger of the Ranting power.[113]

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[109] George Fox and James Naylor, *A word from the Lord,* British Library, Wing catalogue (CD-ROM), F1992, 3, 1654.

[110] Ibid., 13.

[111] Gerrard Winstanley, *A Vindication of those whose Endeavors is only to make the earth a common treasury, called Diggers,* 1650. Bodleian Library, Thomason collection, E.1365[1], 1.

[112] Ibid.

[113] Ibid., 6.

Ranters therefore served a purpose beyond their mere existence in their ability to be

utilized as a tool to advance the agenda of other sects during the Interregnum, and thus

tell us about the broader issues, debates and anxieties of contemporaries.

In her article, "'Not Heretofore Extant in Print': Where the Mad Ranters Are,"

Gucer argues that a study of the Ranters can expose "the process by which pamphleteers

invented a linguistic means of talking about religious diversity before it was an accepted

feature of English society."[114] Furthermore, she links this discussion of religious diversity

to the political upheaval of the period. She explains how the literature pertaining to

Ranters was utilized to analyze the ways in which religious radicals used their reason to

criticise authority.[115] She suggests that the contemporary discussion of the Ranters

illuminates the "*inchoate* nature of political groups in the period."[116] Gucer therefore

shifts the discussion of the Ranters away from questions over their literal existence

towards recognizing their historical significance in terms of the truths they can reveal

about the early years of the Interregnum. Her research contributes to the recognition that

the Ranters were being used by contemporaries as a way in which to comprehend the

atmosphere of the period they were living in and come to terms with the radical

restructuring taking place around them.

Davis ultimately recognizes that Ranters could also be used within sects as a

warning to individual members of when an action became too radical. Davis argues that

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[114] Gucer, "Not Heretofore Extant in Print," 75.

[115] Ibid., 94.

[116] Ibid., 77.

such a tool could be utilized to "induce conformity" within the sects.[117] The very existence of contemporary polemical works concerning the Ranters, therefore, provides historians with a glimpse into the instability of the early Interregnum. Not only were sects attempting to protect themselves from outsiders; they were also scrambling to maintain the loyalty of their own members. In this period Ranters were utilized, as Gucer articulates, as "deliberately crafted rhetorical weapon[s]."[118] Ranters can therefore teach us a great deal about the past, regardless of whether or not they existed. Contemporaries acted as if they existed and these polemic responses alone reveal the overall atmosphere of fear present during the early Interregnum. Authority was being questioned in new ways and the Ranters demonstrate how contemporaries attempted to come to terms with the opposition to the new authority of Parliament without a monarch and a national church. They ultimately demonstrate that the reported activities of Ranters clearly shocked the sensibilities of most people at the time. At the same time, however, they demonstrate how blasphemy and such opposition to authority was now being openly being discussed. This was a period in which the previous political and religious authority had been completely overthrown. Establishing a legitimate authority to fill its place was thus a difficult and contentious issue and the Ranters demonstrate a way in which these questions surrounding authority were being discussed by contemporaries.

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[117] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History,* 110.

[118] Gucer, "Not Heretofore Extant in Print," 78.

*v. The Official Response*

The contemporary polemic literature surrounding the Ranters suggests that Ranters were viewed as a real threat during the early years of the Interregnum, whether or not this fear was rational. Likewise, upon examining the House of Commons records, it becomes clear that contemporary authorities also viewed the Ranters as a legitimate concern and therefore acted accordingly. Nevertheless, Davis points out how, with the exception of Bauthumley, the punishments dealt out to supposed Ranters were minimal and, furthermore, these punishments were very rare.[119] When examining the treatment of blasphemers during the Interregnum scholars often think of the flogging and branding of the Quaker James Naylor, a punishment so severe he never fully recovered.[120] Naylor's principal offence was his 1656 arrival in Bristol on the back of a donkey, accompanied by a number of women who were strewing palms in front of him as if he were the Messiah.[121] Hill argues that the brutality of Parliament's retaliation against Naylor was due to the danger he posed as the leader of a coordinated sect with expanding influence.[122] One may then be lead to believe that the Ranters were treated less severely due to the fact that they posed less of a threat to authority. The following section, however, will argue that the Ranters were indeed viewed as a destabilizing and thus dangerous factor by the Rump Parliament. The Ranters are frequently mentioned in the

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[119] Davis, *Fear, Myth and History,* 136.
Bauthumley had his tongue bored through as a result of his blasphemous opinions. Bauthumley's punishment was dealt with by the Army, however, and will therefore not be discussed in this paper.

[120] Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down,* 200.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

Journal of the House of Commons and their threat was largely responsible for the

implementation of the August 1650 "Act against several Atheistical, Blasphemous and

Execrable Opinions, derogatory to the honour of God, and destructive to human Society,"

now on referred to as the Blasphemy Act.[123] It will, therefore, be argued that the Ranters

were dealt with more leniently than Naylor, not because they did not alarm authorities,

but rather, due to the unique political period in which they were active, when Parliament

was still struggling to come to terms with the very nature and extent of its own increased

authority and still exercising a degree of religious toleration in regard to non-episcopalian

Protestantism.

The role of Parliament was transformed by the English Civil Wars. Before 1640

Parliament had only met for rare and brief periods and had exerted very "little direct

influence on the policies, and held no direct share in the executive powers, of

governments which could dismiss them at will."[124] After 1640, however, the Long

Parliament achieved the unthinkable by establishing a republic in which power was

centered in the hands of the House of Commons. The Rump Parliament, composed of the

remaining members of the Long Parliament following Pride's Purge, sat from 1648 until

1653. Pride's Purge took place on 6 December 1648, the day after the House of

Commons voted to continue negotiations with the King.[125] The Purge was essentially

intended to remove the moderates who were encouraging such negotiations from

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[123] "House of Commons Journal Volume 6: 9 August 1650," in *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 6, 1648-1651*, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1802): 454.

[124] Worden, Blair, *The Rump Parliament 1648-1653,* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974): 2.

[125] Ibid., 23.

Parliament and ultimately resulted in the exclusion of half the members of the Commons.[126] It was this Rump Parliament which then facilitated the regicide. The Rump is often believed to have been an extremely radical, although ultimately failed, political entity. As Blair Worden has pointed out, however, contemporary M.P.s of the Rump did not believe themselves to be part of a "political entity distinct in membership, aims and character from the Long Parliament of the 1640s."[127] Worden portrays the Rump as "an uneasy coalition of interests whose members shared little beyond a willingness to sit in it."[128] Furthermore, despite facilitating the regicide, the Rump was much less revolutionary than has been traditionally assumed.

While the execution of Charles and the resulting regime was celebrated as a symbol of liberation by many, and thus often supported by radical Protestant sectarians, Worden explains how the regicide marked the end of revolutionary measures, rather than the beginning, and that after this point "the regime left in its wake a trail of disillusionment and resentment among the advocates of social and religious reform."[129] The execution of Charles, however, was viewed by many as merely the most efficient way to restore peace to England following the Civil Wars, not necessarily the most appealing. While there was, therefore, at least some cohesion amongst those who supported the regicide, this cohesion was not mirrored in the views of individual M.P.s as to what political, social and religious policies should be put in place following the

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[126] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 23..

[127] Ibid., 25/6.

[128] Ibid., 26.

[129] Ibid., 40.

regicide, or how revolutionary these policies should be. Oliver Cromwell, who is seen as both the "architect" and "the destroyer" of the Rump, should ultimately be given a great deal of credit for this confusion within the Rump.[130] While the Rump had been Cromwell's "conservative solution to the problems of 1648-9," he still expected it to display his "reforming idealism."[131] These conflicting notions, however, were impossible to reconcile and the Rump was ultimately viewed as a failure in terms of both bringing about reform and maintaining order.

This lack of cohesion within the Rump is evident by their failure to "implement a programme of social reform."[132] In the Putney Debates of late 1647, Cromwell and his son-in-law Henry Ireton clearly describe their objection to the Leveller desire to expand suffrage to non-property owning individuals.[133] Ireton and Cromwell's open rejection of this doctrine is largely based on their conviction that such an increase in suffrage would lead to a denial of all property ownership which would then overturn the social hierarchy of England and threaten the ruling elite's own status and authority.[134] In the case of repressing the Levellers, the gentry were therefore acting in their own best interests in order to maintain the preexisting power relations within English society. The Leveller threat ultimately strengthened the Rump's desire to pursue a more moderate agenda.[135]

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[130] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 384.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid., 56.

[133] "The Putney Debates," in *The Good Old Cause: the English Revolution of 1640-1660,* ed. Christopher Hill and Edmund Dell, 2nd edition (1969), 352.

[134] Ibid., 356.

[135] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 190.

Moreover, following the unpopular reception of the regicide, the Rump was further encouraged to approach change with "caution rather than experiment."[136] The discussions and decisions surrounding the Ranters, therefore, provide intriguing insight into the preoccupations of the Rump during its early years and its attempts to come to terms with its position in relation to maintaining moral, as well as political, order in the nation following the regicide. Furthermore, they demonstrate the Rump's manner of approaching radicalism with moderation, not as a planned method, but rather as haphazard way in which to legitimize their own authority and return order to England.

Both Coppe and Clarkson are directly discussed during the House of Commons debates in 1649 and/or 1650. Coppe is first mentioned on 1 February 1649 in regards to the blasphemies expressed in *A Fiery Flying Roll*.[137] *A Fiery Flying Roll* was here described as containing "damnable and detestable Opinions, to be abhorred by all good and godly People," and it was thus ordered that all copies of the work be burnt.[138] Furthermore, it was referred to the Council of the State to look into Coppe himself.[139] Likewise, on 27 September 1650, during a discussion surrounding "obnoxious publications," the "Committee for suppressing licentious and impious Practices, under Pretence of Religion" reported on both *The Single Eye* and *The Fiery Flying Roll*.[140] At this same meeting it was decided that Clarkson should be "sent to the House of

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[136] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 57.

[137] "House of Commons Journal Volume 6: 1 February 1650," in *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 6, 1648-1651*, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1802): 354.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Ibid.

[140] "House of Commons Journal Volume 6: 27 September 1650," in *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 6, 1648-1651*, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1802): 474/5.

Correction: there to be kept to Labour for one Month; and from that Time to be banished out of this Commonwealth, and the Territories, thereof…not to return, upon Pain of Death."[141] Furthermore, it was ordered that all copies of *The Single Eye* be burnt.[142] At this same meeting the Committee was given one week to look into Coppe, with "power to send for persons and witnesses," before reporting their findings back to the House the following week.[143]

On this same day, 27 September 1650, the Rump also put in place its sole act of religious toleration.[144] This "Act for Relief of religious and peaceable People from the Rigour of former Acts of Parliament, in Matters of Religion," had been previously debated in the Commons but was ordered to be printed and published in the discussion shortly following those about Clarkson and Coppe.[145] The juxtaposition of these two discussions provides insight into the limits of the Rump's idea of toleration. Worden notes that both the political magazine *Mercurius Politicus* and the daily recording of Parliamentary proceedings, *A Perfect Diurnal,* failed to record "the toleration act among the events of 27 September" but rather "concentrated on the Rump's moves against the Ranters."[146] The issue of religious toleration was extremely problematic throughout the Interregnum and divided many political allies. Cromwell himself had initially propounded a degree of religious toleration. Worden goes so far as to describe him as the

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[141] "House of Commons Journal Volume 6: 27 September 1650," 474.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 239.

[145] "House of Commons Journal Volume 6: 27 September 1650," 474.

[146] Worden, *The Rump Parliament*, 239.

"patron of the sects."[147]  As the period advanced, however, even previous advocates of

religious toleration, such as Cromwell's chaplain, John Owen, went from scorning "the

notion that the state should impose 'fundamentals' in religion" to eventually "seeking to

impose them himself."[148] This switch in attitudes was largely a result of the extremism of

the religious sects, such as the Ranters, which had emerged, or were emerging, by the

early 1650s. Furthermore, it represents a response to the political realities of the day, in

which concessions to religious and social reform were not granted due to political

concerns about preventing the outbreak of another civil war.

The extent of the religious radicalism experienced in the early 1650s alarmed

even those who would usually accept a degree of religious toleration. The Rump

ultimately desired "to dissociate itself from [these] growing and alarming manifestations

of religious extremism," whose focus on a guiding "inner light" could ultimately lead to a

rejection of Parliamentary authority.[149] Furthermore, there was a fear that permitting

religious toleration would alienate Presbyterians who might then "be tempted to support

the royalist cause."[150] The main religious disagreement between Presbyterians and

Independents concerned the importance of a national church. Following the regicide and

Civil Wars, which resulted in the dissolution of the national church, these differences

were accentuated. Independents, unlike Presbyterians, did not believe that a national

church was necessary and rather supported autonomous local congregations whose

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[147] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 129.

[148] Ibid., 137.

[149] Ibid., 232.

[150] Ibid., 234.

membership was based on voluntary association.[151] The Rump's reluctance to adopt

revolutionary measures promoting religious toleration can therefore be understood as a

result of their desire to prevent possible retaliation and ultimately maintain their own hold

on power.

The main piece of legislation against the Ranters, the Blasphemy Act, was

implemented by the House of Commons on 9 August 1650, following two months of

debate and deliberation.[152] In this Act it was decided that any person who maintained the

opinions enumerated in the Act would be sentenced to six months of imprisonment

without bail.[153] The Act was the culmination of a number of discussions in the House of

Commons, begun on 14 June, 1650, and within an appointed Committee, with the explicit

intention of "suppressing the Ranters."[154] These discussions and the resulting Act

demonstrate that the Ranters were indeed viewed as a real threat to authorities during the

Interregnum. The measures put in place to suppress this group, as well as other Acts and

Ordinances implemented near the beginning of the Interregnum reveal some of the fears

officials and Parliamentarians had in regard to the threat Ranters posed to their own

uncertain authority. Before the late 1640s and early 1650s religious debates had usually

"been conducted on the familiar territory of biblical quotation and counter-quotation."[155]

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[151] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 23. 6.

[152] "House of Commons Journal Volume 6: 9 August 1650," 453.

[153] "August 1650: An Act against several Atheistical, Blasphemous and Execrable Opinions, derogatory to the honor of God, and destructive to humane Society," in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, ed. C H Firth and R S Rait (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1911): 409-412.

[154] "House of Commons Journal Volume 6: 14 June 1650," in *Journal of the House of Commons: Volume 6, 1648-1651* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1802): 423.

[155] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 292.

Later beliefs, such as those of the Ranters, however, were viewed as even more

destabilizing due to the fact that they appealed to completely different sources of

authority, such as the "inner light of the spirit," and thus rejected conventional social

understandings of authority.[156] The Blasphemy Act was specifically intended to punish

any sane individual who espoused the belief, either in writing or speech, that they

themselves, "or any other meer Creature," is God.[157] It was argued that these individuals'

rejection of the "use of any Gospel Ordinances" was also a denial of "the necessity of

Civil and Moral righteousness among men."[158] The fear here is that the belief in personal

revelation would allow radicals such as the Ranters to proclaim that there is no such thing

as sin, as we have already seen Clarkson and Bauthumley do, and would thus lead to an

acceptance of "the acts of Lying, Stealing, Cousening and Defrauding others; of the acts

of Murder, Adultery,  Incest, Fornication, Uncleanness, Sodomy, Drunkenness, filthy and

lascivious Speaking," on the grounds that they themselves are not "shameful, wicked,

sinful, impious, abominable and detestable in any person."[159] In an era lacking a national

church, the search for religious - as well as political - authority became even more urgent,

and the Ranters therefore proved an even more intense threat to Parliament's attempts to

fill this void.

The Blasphemy Act demonstrates how during the Interregnum Parliament, in the

absence of a national church, and church courts, was beginning to take a leadership role

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[156] Worden, *The Rump Parliament,* 292.

[157] "August 1650: An Act against several Atheistical, Blasphemous and Execrable Opinions," 409-412.

[158] Ibid.

[159] Ibid.

as the exemplar of moral behaviour in the nation - moral behaviour which was

understood through religion and which was ultimately being challenged by the Ranters. It

was therefore the morals, or lack thereof, of the Ranters which were being directly

attacked by Parliament due to the threat that they posed. From "1570-1640 the church

courts…consistently upheld the immorality of incest, adultery and fornication and

facilitated the decline in the incidence of illegitimacy which occurred in the early

seventeenth century."[160] The absence of these church courts during the Interregnum

therefore left a gap in the nation's centre for religious authority, a gap which the Rump

attempted to fill. In the preamble to the Blasphemy Act it is specifically articulated that

Parliament was implementing this Act because they viewed it as their duty, as leaders of

the nation, "to propagate the Gospel in this Commonwealth, to advance Religion in all

Sincerity, Godliness, and Honesty."[161] Parliament aimed to further the "Reformation, in

Doctrine and Maners," according to their own conceptions of acceptable behaviour.[162]

A similar pattern can be recognized in the Adultery Act which had been

implemented on 10 May 1650.[163] Historians have recognized that up until this point the

enforcement of sexual morality had not fallen under the purview of Parliamentary

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[160] Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 366.

[161] "August 1650: An Act against several Atheistical, Blasphemous and Execrable Opinions," 409-412.

[162] Ibid.

[163] "May 1650: An Act for suppressing the detestable sins of Incest, Adultery and Fornication," in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, ed. C H Firth and R S Rait (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1911): 387-389.

legislation.[164] Adultery had been a crime only in the eyes of clerics, not Parliament, and

had therefore fallen under the jurisdiction of the now-defunct church courts.[165] Keith

Thomas argues that the Interregnum was therefore a unique point in the history of

England in which "spiritual misdemeanours were reclassified as secular crimes and

severe penalties prescribed for behaviour which had previously been left to the informal

sanctions of neighbourly disapproval or the milder censures of the ecclesiastical

courts."[166] Furthermore, Thomas claims that the Adultery Act was merely one portion of

a much larger campaign encouraging moral reform throughout England.[167] The

Blasphemy Act can therefore be viewed as an intrinsic component of this process of

moral reformation.

As Davis argues, the punishments awarded to Coppe and Clarkson were relatively

light. Neither was actually banished from England and both were able to live out their

lives in peace following their Ranter days. Even following the Blasphemy Act, which

established clear punishments for blasphemers, it does not appear that suspected Ranters

received punishments nearly as harsh as mandated by law. In regards to the Rump's

treatment of Coppe, Kenny makes an intriguing claim.[168] He does recognize that Coppe's

arrest was part of Parliament's overall attempt to stifle unconstrained religious freedom

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[164] Keith Thomas, "Puritans and Adultery: The Act of 1650 Reconsidered," in *Puritans and Revolutionaries: Essays in Seventeenth-Century History presented to Christopher Hill,* ed. Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 257

[165] Ibid.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid., 274.

[168] Kenny, "In These Last Dayes," 169.

during the Interregnum.[169] He argues, however, that the relative lightness of Coppe's

punishment was due to the Rump's desire not to simply get rid of such radicals but rather

to "bring them back into the fold" through repentance.[170] He views the threat of

extremists such as the Ranters as being tied to Parliament's worries over how

"unrestrained toleration" could dissuade "many of the more orthodox, in particular

presbyterians, from supporting the regime."[171] Parliament's main concern, as articulated

by Kenny, was therefore the maintenance of unity in their regime following conflict and

regicide with the larger purpose of establishing the legitimacy of their rule.[172]

Kenny's observation highlights how a study of the Ranters can reveal a great deal

about the political condition of the early Interregnum. It is clear from examining the

House of Commons discussion surrounding the Ranters and the Acts they implemented in

order to rein in this radicalism that they were fearful of what the Ranters could do to

destabilize their regime. Furthermore, they provide insight into the way in which the role

of Parliament was changing at this time as its authority expanded to incorporate the moral

concerns of society. During the early years of the Interregnum, the Rump Parliament was

just as uncertain about the future of authority in England as was any individual in the

nation. Responses to the Ranters can therefore be understood as one of the ways in which

they came to understand their own authority and attempted to balance the implementation

of this authority with a recognition of the political realities of the day.

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[169] Kenny, "In These Last Dayes," 169.

[170] Ibid.

[171] Ibid., 168.

[172] Ibid., 173.

*Conclusion*

The Interregnum was a period in which perceptions of authority were constantly being questioned. Previous political and religious authorities had been overthrown and thus left behind a vacuum and a great deal of uncertainty. This paper has argued that the historical significance of the Ranters goes beyond questions of their actual existence. Moreover, it has shown how the contemporary sources pertaining to Ranters provide a fascinating glimpse into the post-regicide attempts of both individuals and the Rump Parliament to reconceptualize the composition and role of a legitimate source of authority within society. It becomes clear from reading Ranter literature that certain individuals were indeed professing radical antinomian beliefs by the beginning of the 1650s. The polemic works by contemporaries then proves how these Ranters were feared during their own time due to the way in which their beliefs concerning property ownership, sexual liberty, and an "inner light" ran contrary to the way many contemporaries understood their own society. Finally, the responses to the Ranters by Cromwell and the Rump uncover the ways in which officials were attempting to navigate their way through this period of political and religious uncertainty while still retaining their own power.

The Interregnum is often viewed as a failed experiment in republican rule in England. Studying the contemporary discourse surrounding the Ranters highlights some of the problems which came to prominence immediately following the regicide. These sources uncover the great instability and uncertainty present at this time and how such an atmosphere was tied to a general confusion about the limits of both political and religious authority following the removal of the monarch. The Ranter discourse can therefore serve

an important historical purpose in uncovering some of the deep rooted problems underlying the Rump Parliament's inability to gain widespread support. The plurality of ideas which thrived following the regicide were ultimately too widespread to be contained by a Parliament who was not yet even sure how to understand its own role. The Ranters represent one way in which to critique this new authority, as well as the dangers that emerge from overturning both the monarchy and the traditional sources of religious and moral authority. The responses to them, both polemic and Parliamentary, then represent the ways in which others tried to counter these beliefs through their own conceptions of appropriate opinions and actions stemming from their understanding of legitimate authority. Overall, the Ranter discourse allows historians to examine a unique period in English history when political and religious norms were being attacked. The historical significance of the Ranters, therefore, lies in what they reveal about the variety of different attitudes of individuals towards authority during the early years of the Rump and how these competing attitudes contributed to the ultimately unsustainable nature of the Interregnum.

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