

and repetitively for an avid, but evanescent, market.³² Nevertheless, it is intriguing how these fictions deploy images familiar from the Theophrastian character books, in particular the character of the athiest, and from the prodigy books of the early seventeenth century. All this fits the pattern of contraries and inversions so characteristic of the seventeenth century mind, as Stuart Clark, Michael Hunter and others are making clear to us.³³ As the athiest had warned people, anxious about irreverence, of the moral collapse which the inversion of true religion would bring, so the Ranter inverted sectarian seriousness and stood as a warning of sectarian excess. What is particularly striking, in this context, about the sensational literature is the image of the woman on top, which Natalie Zemon Davis has observed in early modern charivari.³⁴ Ranter women are sexually aggressive, defiant of their husbands and masters, of appetites unlimited. I suspect that, on this level, the Ranter phenomenon's legislative connection is, in fact, closer with the Adultery Act of 1650³⁵ than with the Blasphemy Act of the same year.

If the Ranter myth of 1649-50 was a projection relating to fears of sectarian deviance rather than its actuality in antinomian practice and pantheistic belief, what of the others, apart from Coppe, who have been alleged to be Ranter leaders and spokesmen? My readings again indicate the need for great caution. George Foster was a millennialist who believed that practical Christianity would lead to the sharing of possessions in equality³⁶; closer to Winstanley and Coppe than the stereotype of the Ranter. Joseph Salmon was a Seeker, advocate of the life of spiritual contemplation.³⁷ Richard Coppin, a perfectionist Arminian who stressed the legitimacy of the indwelling spirit, proved extremely difficult to convict of blasphemy in his own day, despite repeated and malicious attempts to do so.³⁸ Like Coppin and Foster, Jacob Bauthumley is best seen in the context of Winstanley. All four were concerned with the tensions of an inner dualism to which the imminent rise of the spirit of righteousness within each individual could bring an end. 'And so I see, that if men were acted and guided by that inward law of righteousness within, there need be no laws of men, to compel to restrain men, and I could wish that such a spirit of righteousness would appear, that men did not act or do things from externall rules, but from an internall law within.'³⁹ The words are Bauthumley's but they might easily be Winstanley's. As Lionel Lockier observed in 1652, 'Ranter' was a label used by formalists to discredit those who sought a true Christian community.⁴⁰ It is Laurence Clarkson, who, in *A Single Eye All Light* (1650), comes closest to the antinomian pantheism required of the Ranter type, but there is no evidence of any sustained connection between him and Coppe or