

Roger Crab: Opposition Hunger Artist in 1650s England

Roger Crab represents an extreme oppositional voice in the ideological wars of opinion that raged throughout the aftermath of civil war in seventeenth-century England. Defiantly political, angrily religious, celibately vegetarian, strangely mystical – to his contemporaries, criminally insane – Roger Crab published what he considered to be ‘rational’ and ‘reserved’ views and insisted that others agree with him. According to his first publisher, Crab approved of civil magistracy but positioned himself as ‘*neither for the Levellers, nor Quakers, nor Shakers, nor Ranters, but above Ordinances*’.¹ He was, however, clearly in favour of insistent and thoroughgoing opposition to the dominant cultural forces of his day. His publications include two rare quartos: *The English Hermite* (1655) and *Dagons-Downfall* (1657) and two rarer 1659 pieces: *Gentle Correction for the High-flown Backslider* and *A Tender Salutation*.² Through such controversialist publication, Roger Crab finds a voice that rises above the status of local village crackpot, and Crab’s agenda warrants attention both as ‘history from below’ and as early modern oppositional stance. In England’s fledgling republican atmosphere, an atmosphere suffused with contention, Roger Crab asserts himself as a nonaligned seventeenth-century voice for change.

In one of the very few serious appraisals of this figure, Christopher Hill writes: ‘Crab’s vegetarianism and teetotalism were part of a political and social programme.’³ And yet Hill perpetuates in many ways the convenient caricature of Crab as ‘Mad Hatter of Chesham’. Upon release from the army, Crab *did* deal in hats out of a shop in Chesham, Buckinghamshire. His extreme opinions no doubt helped to label him as mad as hatters were proverbially supposed to be.⁴ But Crab’s ‘programme’ also asserted poverty and self-abnegation as highest moral truth in addition to direct political action. Herein *less* is not only *more*, it is powerful and full of grace – a paradoxical state that looks beyond physical and material appearances. Granted, Crab is basically a scriptural literalist – he signally cites Mark 10:21, ‘sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in

Roger Crab that feeds on Herbs and Roots is here.
But I believe Diogenes had better Cheer. Rara avis in terris.



*Deep things more I have to tell, but I shall now forbear:
Lest some in wrath against me shall & do my body harm.*

Roger Crab, from *The English Hermite*, 1655, BL shelfmark G. 1024.
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heaven’—but his difference resides in the fact that he publishes his extreme positions in argumentative terms for popular consideration. Even though his argument, as he well knows, is very un-popular, he insists on conveying his opinion and registering his opposition. In effect, he fashions an unacceptable self and then upholds that position as the most acceptable self possible. His contemporaries would call such action heretical. A fuller understanding would recognize that his guiding principle involves radical religious mysticism in the service of social and political opposition.

Roger Crab’s political slogan might very well be the one issuing from his mouth in the woodcut frontispiece to *The English Hermite*: ‘Herbes and Roots!’ In his book, he claims to have found God in Nature and in overcoming his own preconversion fleshly extravagances. He is clearly pictured as singular, accentuating a bold praxis of defiance. Indeed, from the outset, his strange diet positions him as singular, controversial, and oppositional. As Colin Spencer points out in *The Heretic’s Feast: A History of Vegetarianism*: ‘What people eat is a symbol of what they believe’.⁵ Spencer goes on to credit Thomas Tryon (1634–1703) as England’s most ardent vegetarian during and after the English Civil War, mentioning also the vegetarian Ranter John Robins (known popularly and derisively as ‘the Ranters’ god’). But Roger Crab clearly deserves precedence as well as critical consideration. Imprisoned as a political offender and repeat Sabbath-breaker in the 1650s, Crab endured – even encouraged – much in the way of public rebuke and misunderstanding. And yet he was laid to rest at his death in 1680 with a remarkable amount of public sympathy. Local historians revived him in the nineteenth century as an eccentric amusement, an easily dismissed crackpot. Robert Gibbs, in *Worthies of Buckinghamshire*, called him a ‘poor imbecile’, adding that ‘his works show that he was simply insane’.⁶ The authoritative *Records of Buckinghamshire or Papers and Notes on the History, Antiquities, and Architecture of the County* called him an ‘ascetic humorist’,⁷ whereas *The Eccentric Mirror* positioned him between the notorious Southwark Miser and Peter the Wild Boy in a brief biographical summary true to its stated subtitle ‘*Lives and conduct of characters who have rendered themselves conspicuous by their eccentricities*’.⁸ Paul Sieveking errs in the other direction, calling him ‘Saint Roger’ in the title of his otherwise sensitive and informed 1988 piece.⁹

But much more remains to be considered, including Crab’s other writings, George Salter’s *An Answer to Roger Crabs Printed Paper* (1659), astrologer William Lilly’s curious contemporary citations, previously unconsidered newsbook items related to Crab and the contentiousness of his time, even fresh archival and archaeological evidence. I want to present Crab within the political and ideological ferment of his time and to identify him as a fundamentally and necessarily oppositional figure in early modern cultural commentary. I intend to argue the trajectory of Roger Crab’s career in historicized political and biographical terms, treating unconsidered material, including his two final works which have been completely overlooked.

By the standards of his community he was quite probably insane, but he was not 'simply' insane. He was insane in a complicated, articulate, and politically assertive way, a way deserving of attention and consideration that goes beyond a linguistic discourse of madness.¹⁰ With no formal training in religion, law, medicine, or politics, Crab insisted on registering his opinions based on scriptural interpretation and singularly tendentious belief. Inevitably he attracted followers, but that was not his primary intent. Indeed, contemporary gossip about Captain Norwood's death as a result of Crab's dietary instructions sounds completely apocryphal.¹¹ Rather, Crab wore his own behaviour like a badge, an outward symbol that declares its wearer's inner state. For Crab, radical postures and acts of abnegation declared his individuality, significance, value, and importance. And he insisted on reporting his positions. Throughout, and at some primary level, he was declaring himself to be a political force with distinctive significance. Combining under-class social commitments with unusual innerworldly perceptions, Crab constantly opposed the dominant cultural practices of his time.

From the very first, Crab represents a site of biographical contention, his unorthodox way of life combining various meanings related to power, hierarchy, and personal control, and complicating the emotional responses of others through its published reporting. He is 'The English Hermite', the 'Wonder of this Age'. The remarkable title page continues:

Being a relation of the life of ROGER CRAB, living neer *Uxbridg*, taken from his own mouth, shewing his strange reserved and unparallel'd kind of life, who counteth it a sin against his body and soule to eate any sort of Flesh, Fish, or living Creature, or to drinke any Wine, Ale, or Beere. He can live with three farthings a week. His constant food is Roots and Hearbs, as Cabbage, Turneps, Carrets, Dock-leaves, and Grasse; also Bread and Bran, without Butter or Cheese: His Cloathing is Sack-cloath. He left the Army, and kept a Shop at CHESHAM, and hath now left off that, and sold a considerable Estate to give to the Poore, shewing his reasons from the Scripture, *Mark. 10.21 Jer. 35.*¹²

All biographical accounts derive ultimately and, in the main, uncritically from this document. Of note is Crab's new location at Ickenham near Uxbridge. Having been denounced from the pulpit in Uxbridge, Crab felt moved to relocate there in order to confront his accuser. In a tone of confrontational irony, he even dedicates *The English Hermite* to his most ardent critic:

To Mr. *Godbold*, Preacher at *Uxbridge* in *Middlesex*, I dedicate this my Discourse, Because he was my friend to help conquer my old man, by informing my friends of *Chesham*, That I was a Witch, and was run away, and would never come againe. You being a publick Preacher may doe me greater service in helping me to dishonour him; for I have been almost 5 years conquering my old man by dishonour. Therefore if you can stirre up any more to forward this work, pray do, if it be not hurtfull to your self and they that do so.¹³

He relishes his own denunciation, reconfiguring it as moral support for his own acts of personal abnegation. In doing so, Crab effortlessly facilitates his opposition, an opposition that Thomas Godbould and other authorities doubtless found difficult to understand.¹⁴

Of Roger Crab's date and place of birth, no one is exactly sure. At burial in 1680 he was said to have died in his sixtieth year, so the *DNB* tentatively suggests 1621 as the year of Crab's birth and considers him to be a native of Buckinghamshire. No certain record survives. However, a previously unnoted Buckinghamshire baptismal entry for 13 November 1620 in the *Aylesbury Parish Register* is interesting: 'The Child of a condemned whore in the jale.'¹⁵ This unnamed child is unlikely to be Roger Crab but the entry is suggestive, especially since Crab, ever an autobiographical writer, has much to say about whoredom and social status throughout his work, notably in *Dagons-Downfall* where he declares: 'my Name is called upon the Whores account, *Roger Crab*, or *Mr. Crab*, or sometimes Devil, Rogue, or Witch; but my Name in the Book of Life is without Letter or form; and so I sing.'¹⁶ The 'Whore' of which he speaks refers to the institution of the Church which he criticizes throughout. And yet commentators enjoy taking Crab literally on the topic of his parentage. Even Sieveking and Hill echo the *DNB* quip that Crab claimed his mother had £20 a year or his father would never have married her. But the reference from *Dagons-Downfall* is suffused with allegorical first-person bitterness on the topic of the Church, its wealth, and its productions:

Thus was I begotten & brought forth far worse then the spawn of a Tode, and more ugly in the sight of God then the worst of creatures, and wider from the course of pure nature in Generation; and all through the corruption of the Parents mindes, which were desired by the Spirit of Lust and Covetousness and the Spirit of Ambition which had the predominant power in them both, and doth now more frequently reign throughout all the old Whores Dominion, even as it did then: For had not my natural Mother had twenty pounds a yeer, my Father and his Parents had not swopt.¹⁷

Rejecting his pre-politicized life, Crab claims that he was sold out spiritually from the first by institutionalized (*i.e.* parental) church associations. It's all a greedy fraud. He derides the Church and its institutionalized 'Pimps and Ponders' with their 'Shows and long Robes, and high Seats in the Synagogues, and the honorable Places at Feasts', not sparing to identify 'the Whores great eyes, which eyes are *Oxford* and *Cambridge*'.¹⁸ His apocalyptic allegorical voice as social and moral critic prefigures Bunyan at his most extreme. Whatever his literal parentage, Roger Crab clearly proceeds from a position of poverty, distress, and politicized disaffection.

Like Bunyan later, and many a sectarian at the time, Roger Crab endured time in gaol on principle as a political prisoner. But he was also a literal soldier in the 'holy war' that culminated in the execution of Charles I in 1649.

He claims to have been wounded in action, imprisoned by his own side, and even condemned to death by Cromwell, his own leader. Ever, it seems, fixated on personal testimony, Crab insists that he was misguided in all things during his pre-politicized life. Early on in *The English Hermite*, he adduces the parallel symbols of the Dove, the Lamb, and Christ in support of his recovered minimalist and pacifist existence, adding retrospectively:

Had my parents been so innocent as to have taught me this Doctrine in the time of my youth, I had saved my skull from being cloven to the braine in the late War for the Parliament against the King, and also saved my selfe from the Parliaments two years imprisonment which they gave me for my paines, and from my sentence to death in the Field by my Lord Protector.¹⁹

Hill claims that ‘punishments of such severity can only have been for political offences, and it may be suspected that Crab was involved in the Leveller agitation of 1647–9’.²⁰ Crab, of course, considered himself ‘above Ordinances’, but so did all the radical sectaries of the time. He fashions himself in opposition to known political subcultures such as the Levellers, Ranters, Seekers, Diggers, and others, even consciously avoiding the ‘assumed collective voice’ that Thomas Corns identifies as characteristic of Levellers in this period.²¹ And yet Crab’s voice of confirmed dissidence, fostered and politicized in anticlericalism and social reform, takes its place with those of Coppe, Bauthumley, Overton, and Winstanley.

Crab’s equally constant insubordination – no small thing in wartime, and a standard feature of contemporary Leveller rhetoric – seems to have informed his class-synoptic account of the Civil War, as itemized in *The English Hermite*:

1. The King and Bishops were exalted next to Christ.
2. The Parliament who found fault with them, not pulling the beame of Covetousnesse out of their owne eyes, and their Sects depending, were all exalted in stead of the other.
3. The Army with their Trades and Sects depending upon the same account, became exalted; so the Gentlemen and Farmers have had their turn in Offices and dearth of Corn, and now they will try inferiour Trades, as Journey-men and Day-labourers, and their associates depending, even to the Orphan and Alms-man, and now giveth them the fulnesse of bread, and cloathing, and silver, and all according to their respective place and capability they are in: So that now we look over all their proceedings and judg by their fruits, and it will be a hard matter for a low capacity to judge which of all these parties hath been most just: but I being of the lowest sort and unlearned, being amongst day-labourers and journeymen, have judgged my selfe with them the worst of all these parties.²²

Unsurprisingly, Crab reserves the final, paradoxical exaltation for himself, implicating himself in Leveller rhetoric even as he attempts to assert his own destitute singularity. His is a voice of politicized social strife, crying in the wilderness and updating the case of John the Baptist in terms of contemporary inequities:

Surely if *John* the Baptist should come forth againe, and call himself *Leveller*, and take such food as the wilderness yielded, and such cloathing, and Preach up his former Doctrine, *He that had two coats should give away one of them, and he that hath food should doe likewise*; How scornfully would our proud Gentlemen and Gallants look of him, that hath gotten three or four Coats with great gold and silver buttons, and halfe a score dainty dishes at his Table, besides his gallant house and his furniture therein.²³

Crab's tone of distress and disaffection is almost palpable. A 'Leveller' John the Baptist would cringe in the face of contemporary English smugness and materialism. Things have gone terribly wrong, as Crab bluntly puts it: 'The body of *England* is become a Monster'.²⁴ In saying so he effectively 'nationalizes' a widespread and well-reported popular trope of monstrous births, local apparitions, and strange anomalies of nature, demonstrating God's displeasure with the English body politic.²⁵ Crab voices a comprehensive indictment of his times in historical, political, and popular terms. And yet Hill trimly positions Crab in benign personal terms: 'Like many an ex-Leveller Quaker, he became a pacifist, and washed his hands of responsibility for civil government.'²⁶

However, like most extremist sectarians, Roger Crab has declared *himself* to be the government. And, as will be seen, his relationship to Quakers is decidedly problematic. Crab has gained dominion over his own body through a personal civil war, a war narrated in terms of experience far more immediate than the actual war in which he was a parliamentary footsoldier. Here, Crab the 'new' man defeats Crab the 'old' through a Godly-supervised starving out of his former 'pride, drunkenness, and gluttony, . . . dissembling and lying, cheating and cozening'.²⁷ He continues in *The English Hermite* as follows:

. . . instead of strong drinks and wines, I give the old man a cup of water; and instead of rost Mutton and Rabbets and other dainty dishes, I gave him broth thickned with bran, and pudding made with bran & Turnep leaves chop't together, and grass; at which the Old Man (meaning my body) being moved, would know what he had done, that I used him so hardly; then I shewed him his transgression as aforesaid: so the warrs began. *The law of the old man in my fleshly members rebelled against the law of my mind*, and had a shrewd skirmish; but the mind being well enlightened, held it, so that the old man grew sick and weak with the fluxe, like to fall to the dust; but the wonderful love of God well pleased with the Battle, raised him up againe, and filled him full of love, peace, and content in mind, and is now become more humble; for now he will eate Dock-leaves, Mallows, or Grasse, and yeelds that he ought to give God more thanks for it, then formerly for roast flesh and wines.²⁸

Roger Crab has won a significant war with himself. His insistent abnegations, including vegetarianism and teetotalism, register themselves as defining characteristics of his own political defiance in the world.

Herein, Crab's egalitarianism and self-preoccupation stems from a radical assertion of himself, a gaining of self-control despite the complex and

bewildering vagaries of the complicated political and social world which he inhabits. He, above all, is significant. He, above all, is behaved. Crab's radical self-fashioning runs counter to the bizarre experience of John Toldervy, as reported in his contemporary testimonial pamphlet *The Foot out of the Snare*.²⁹ Toldervy, spiritually ungenerous and radically anti-Quaker, reports his external application of Quaker humility, self-abnegation, and insubordination. He describes his egalitarian triumph in greeting Colonel Webb, his master and Surveyor-General for land sales under the Republic, familiarly as 'William Webbe', getting fired, and then returning to Webb's house that evening at dinner to sit at the head of Webb's table: 'giving him to know, That I was the servant of the living God, and he was not'.³⁰ Toldervy continues:

I was farther perswaded not to eat any thing that I loved, believing that what did set a Difference of any Creature stood in the Will; . . . so by degrees at the last, I was wrought upon to eat nothing but Crums, pickings of Bones when finished by others, with such Food that was destructive to my health, . . . so that I was made extream poor & so changed, as though I were not the same man.³¹

In attempting to overcome self will, Toldervy only becomes more confused, paranoically hearing voices, considering himself to be Christ, and engaging in self-mutilation. Roger Crab, by contrast but through a similar process, becomes more and more assured.

In fact, Crab seems to have sought out, or even challenged, the notorious contemporary astrologer William Lilly. Consulted especially by parliamentary forces in the civil war and authoritative with his annual published almanacs, Lilly provided guidance and formed opinion throughout the period. He advised parliamentary radicals and supporters such as Richard Overton, Denzil Holles, and Bulstrode Whitelocke, enjoying even the confidence of Oliver Cromwell.³² In August 1649, on a leaf of stamped horary outlines, he notes merely that he saw a 'R Crabb'. Five years later, and a mere three months before publication of *The English Hermite*, Lilly notes further in his casebook: 'De Revelation ex Oxbridge Rogerus Crabbe'.³³ This notation of 6 November 1654 accompanies a stamped horological figure with recondite numbers within the central square. Crab must have discussed his Uxbridge 'revelation' with Lilly. Lilly may even have suggested that he seek publication. Certainly Crab's conviction seems to have made an impression on the foremost public commentator of the time, even if Crab subsequently reports himself to be completely sceptical about astrology:

I considered the Scriptures where the Lord speaks against the Sooth-sayers and against Astrologers, Sorcerers, and wizards; all these I found to be the spirits of darknesse, and will reach no further then the old man in the flesh, yet very necessary to be known that we may avoid the evill thereof.³⁴

Crab has found a new paradigm along the lines of self-improvement. Stressing the benefits of minimalist vegetarianism and teetotalism, Crab claims that

he has often administered ‘physick’, has often – as he declares in *The English Hermite* – been consulted by others, having ‘a hundred or sixe-score Patients at once’.³⁵ As unlicensed practical physician, perhaps even rural cunning man, he dispenses advice from a politicized sense of public service combined with personal assertion.

Commentators other than William Lilly, however, were decidedly less-than-impressed with Roger Crab and his occult ‘revelation’. The weekly newsbook *A Perfect Account* for 10–16 January 1655 includes the following headline: ‘*the Tryal of Mr. Roger Crab, formerly an Agitator, but now a Hermit*’. The pro-government account that follows is dismissive:

Mr. Roger Crab (formerly an Agitator in the Army, but now one that hath betaken himself to a Hermits life) hath lately received a tryal before the Magistracy of this Nation; where he insisted much upon the Freedome of the Creature, and cleered himself of that particular wherein they charged him with a reflection upon the Government by notion of Tyranny. I shall not make any construction of this at present; but conclude that much might be said, was the time convenient.³⁶

On the same story, the rival newsbook *Every Dayes Intelligence* is more impartial: ‘From *Uxbridg* in the County of Middlesex we are certainly informed, that at a place called *Icknam* near that Town there is one *Roger Crab* who observes the strickest life of a Hermet that we have heard of.’³⁷ But contemporary accounts were inevitably muted at this time by general instability within London itself. In January 1655, Roger Crab competed for publicity with the widely-reported blasphemy trial of the hated and misunderstood Unitarian, John Biddle. Also current was the outrage created by Theaurau John, also known as Thomas Tany, according to the newsbook *The Perfect Diurnall* ‘a much distempered Brain sick man’,³⁸ who, heavily armed, had forced his way into Parliament and held the assembly hostage. A radical Ranter, Tany had recently changed his name again by divine command to Thau Ram Tonjah. He probably drowned later in 1655 on a self-appointed mission to ferry all the Dutch Jews home to Jerusalem.³⁹ Roger Crab’s acts of abnegation in the English countryside did not create a comparable effect. But they were comparable in their radical intentions concerning public consciousness, political defiance, and assertion of alternative values. As published protest, *The English Hermite* itself was news, having just been printed in January 1655 and clearly creating a measure of public interest.

Certainly Crab’s more recent confrontations with authority were as worthy of public notice as was his publisher’s report of them. According to his publisher’s preface in *The English Hermite*, Crab had been lately detained overnight on 17 January in Clerkenwell Prison. And, as always with Crab, something unusual occurred:

The next morning, being something hungry, walking in the Prison yard, there came a Spannell and walked after him three or foure turnes with a peece of bread in his mouth: He looked upon him and wondered why the Dog walked (as he

thought) with a Chip in his mouth: He looked at the Dogge, and he layd it downe: and perceiving it was bread, he walked away againe; and the Dog walked after him with it againe: then he stooped, and the Dog layd it downe to his hand; then he tooke and wiped it, and eate it.⁴⁰

God acting through nature? Humble manna from below? Certainly Crab would interpret it that way. Within the text of *The English Hermite*, Crab discusses his three-year observation of birds and their providential spiritual possibilities, adding: 'I considered that God made use of a bird to feed *Elias* the Prophet: by this I saw that he made use of naturall causes to fulfill naturall desires, so I came to know God in nature.'⁴¹ Like the Diggers of a few years before, Crab has discovered God in simple terms of honourable labour and honest nature.⁴² And although his discovery does not inspire communal agrarian effort, his second pamphlet, *Dagons-Downfall; Or, The great IDOL digged up Root and Branch*, relies heavily on a metaphor of righteous husbandry that describes 'The English Hermites Spade at the Ground and root of Idolatry'.

In *Dagons-Downfall*, Crab's observations become mystically apocalyptic, urging his readers, 'hearken thou to *John* in the *Revelations!*' and exhorting them: 'Oh! be you changed by renewing of your minde'.⁴³ Significantly, the title phrase 'root and branch' reaches all the way back to legislation of 1640–41 to abolish English episcopacy 'with all its dependencies, roots and branches'.⁴⁴ Crab's mind has certainly not changed on that emotional topic, but he has undergone a mystical change in other ways. Facing eastward while digging parsnips, he 'saw into the Paradise of God', and this epiphany informed his consciousness about 'seven predominant Spirits' that 'keep the body in good Tillage, and keep alive the five Sences, not that these seven Spirits or five Sences should predominate and inslave the body to the External World; but they are to be kept in their own Centure, doing only their Office in which they are set'.⁴⁵ This occult perception, rooted in the book of Revelation (1:4), owes something to the German mystic Jacob Boehme and his unifying theological assertion of seven fountain-spirits. Boehme's influence in England was powerful from the mid-1640s, with translations of his work appearing almost yearly. His prophetic book *The Aurora*, translated by John Sparrow, appeared in English the year before *Dagons-Downfall*.⁴⁶ The level of influence is difficult to quantify but an environment of radical religious mysticism is central to both, and both attempt to integrate the status of working-class realities within politicized spiritual hopes.

A shrewd questioner of authority, Crab demands to know in *Dagons-Downfall* how priests can accept payment for converting people if the Elect and Reprobate have already been distinguished before God. To Crab, the most significant differences are economic ones, as he puts it: 'the finer thou art in cloathes, Silver and Gold, fine Houses and Lands more then thy fellows

or thy neighbors, so much the more hath the Curse of God power over thee'.⁴⁷ Crab's advice is to reject externals, look within, change behaviour, and allow an innerworldly spirit to develop. He describes the process in mystical terms as when David called upon the Lord: 'Not that he thought that God was up in the clouds, or asleep in a bed; but he knew that there was a Talent of God hid in a Napkin, or in the Earth within him, which Talent must be raised up or discovered by throwing off the corruptions of his minde, that is to undo himself, and throw away all his own Works, that his Grain of Mustard-seed may grow, and come to be a Day-Star in the heart.'⁴⁸

Crab's provocative tone throughout *Dagons-Downfall* culminates in an account of principled Sabbath-breaking. He argues that Christian significance can only be discovered personally as 'light' within the heart, and he rejects social forms of worship as man-made fraud. He declares that the Sabbath in England has become an exploitative 'Priests Market-Day'.⁴⁹ Awakened both spiritually and socially, Crab vehemently defies clerical forms of Sabbath observance, demanding to know, 'Whether it be not as justifiable in the sight of God for one to buy a Bible on that day at the Stationers shop, as to give three times the worth of it to hear a Priest make one hours Discourse out of it?'⁵⁰

Dagons-Downfall itself is largely inspired by the persecutions Crab suffered as a result of social and political noncompliance. He even recounts with some pride that he had been tried four times for Sabbath-breaking, 'twice in the Country, and twice at *Hicks's-Hall* near London'.⁵¹ Ever against institutionalized authority, Crab clumsily but feelingly versifies:

Yet he doth more Religion break
To make God a Sabbath
By one Parliament Act,
Though God in his Soul doth it hate,
All Traditions of men are but a cheat.

When I was digging Pasnips
for my Meals
Then I discover'd these cheats,
For which I sate six hours by the heels
At Icnam Whore-house Gate.⁵²

The gate of the little medieval chapel of St Giles, Ickenham, certainly fronted the crossroads of the village centre right on the High Road.⁵³ Here, Crab could confront and be confronted. He could even hear a sermon. On the previous occasion returned to the stocks outside the church at Ickenham, Crab recounts the sermon to the magistrates with his own provocative emphasis: 'I rehearsed what the Parson preached from the Scriptures that day that I sate six hours by the heels; he told the people That in *Paul's* Epistle he found one man keep a Sabbath, & another thought every day alike; and charged them not one to judge the other.'⁵⁴ Finally, Crab exonerates himself with a powerful historicized appeal to authority, a political authority based on defiance

that reaches all the way back to his civil war experience and which he casts in the face of his accusers:

And they brought this Scripture, which saith, *Submit your selves to the Higher Powers*; then I replied to them again, That I with them have stood with my sword in my hand against the Highest Powers in England, namely the Kings and Bishops, upon which account ye sit here.⁵⁵

And yet, Crab recounts with a measure of disgust, the magistrates tried to buy him off with a five shilling fine. So much for spiritual transgression. He excoriates his accusers as worldly hypocrites who revel in Sabbath ceremony while neglecting the authentic spirit of introspection. Crab refuses absolutely to interact with their misguided activities. The fact that he had multiple charges brought against him suggests that he was a particularly effective Sabbath-breaker. Writing on the 'Failure of Godly Rule' in the period, Derek Hirst claims that in general 'swearers and prophaners of the sabbath seem to have been less subject to molestation in the 1650s than they had been before the war'.⁵⁶ But Crab insists on enduring public molestation and judicial strife as ratification in itself of his message for the necessity of innerworldly awakening. Moreover, in defiance of his previously bastardized political existence, Crab's final apocalyptic trope is a touching and antagonistic statement of his own legitimacy:

I am not ashamed to confess and profess my self to be Gods son, or son to the Eternal God, who hath begotten me in the Light of this day wherein I have had my new Birth, and wherein I have slighted my old man and prepared him for the Wilderness, a prey for the Lyons and Bares and a wonder for the Mungril Dogs to bark at; for it is their custom to bark at stangers, and it is my joy that the Lord hath made me a stranger to them.⁵⁷

Throughout both *Dagons-Downfall* and *The English Hermite*, Roger Crab positions himself as 'stranger', as oppositional other in egalitarian terms to current social, religious, and political forms. And just as he lives his defiance in terms of personal habits and behaviours informed by mystical perception, his published voice is a voice of radical protest based on introspective personal experience and conveyed through rational, even at times shrewd, argument.

But within a couple of years, it seems, things have changed. In 1659 Roger Crab declared himself a 'Rational'. At least that is how he identifies himself at the head of his curious anti-Quaker tract published in that year. The piece is titled as follows:

A Tender Salutation: or, The Substance of a *Letter* given forth by the *Rationals*, to the Despised Remnant, and Seed of GOD, in the People called QUAKERS.⁵⁸

The title-page attribution gives one pause: '*By him, of whom the World is not worthy known by the Name of Rodger Crabb, O.*' This brief two-page tract adopts the voice of God in explaining Quaker persecutions as trial for both

the persecuted Quakers and for the 'Children of Darkness' who persecute them. The final offer of hope is uncomfortable, even somewhat disturbing:

Therefore turn in, turn in, my Beloved One, look with a single Eye which pierceth through all Forms and Beloveds, and there shalt thou see that there is but one Power over all, though Darkness doth imagine many; for one Beloved have I yet to set up, which far exceeds all Beloveds that ever yet were in form: To all that behold him afar off he is terrible; he appears pale, and black as Hell: but if once they come to behold his Face, they will be ravished with his Beauty.⁵⁹

The more so when, at the conclusion, Crab is identified as spokesman for the word of God: '*This indited by my Servant, Rowedger Criop, O.*' Does the curious spelling represent phonetic rendering of God's voice? Does the 'O.' designate Crab as the 'One'? Despite this vociferous grandeur, Crab has clearly been in general sympathy with Quaker anticlericalism and opposition to tithes, his title-page identification as 'Rational' even suggesting something of Winstanley's mystical stress on God as the spirit of Reason.⁶⁰ In this current tract, Crab seems to be offering a strange form of peaceful coexistence, even collaboration. He enters into the political and religious fracas of the late Protectorate as a cryptic apostle.

Certainly the year 1659 saw renewed persecutions of the Friends all over England. In addition to increased popular hostility, xenophobia, and class hatred toward Quakers, Parliament itself declared its religious policy in increasingly conservative and pro-monarchist terms. The Quaker historian Barry Reay identifies the year 1659 as particularly disastrous to the movement.⁶¹ But the collapse of the Protectorate earlier in the year signalled a new burst of hope for all radicals and may have inspired Crab's return to print. His somewhat overwrought little tract was immediately responded to by the Quaker George Salter. Titled *An Answer to Roger Crabs printed paper to the Quakers*,⁶² the piece is remarkably balanced and gentle even within terms of its *ad hominem* riposte: 'Roger, thy wisdom hath perverted thee, and thy own confusions may make thee ashamed and keep silence'.⁶³ Quoting Crab's terminology back at him, Salter also presents a picture in terms much less flattering than the frontispiece that adorned *The English Hermite*:

Alack poor brat! how dost thou build and throw down, who art dashing thy selfe to pieces against the stones? If one look upon thy flesh, it is loathsome and would make one sick; read this in secret *Roger*, in patience, who art a corrupt bulk of Fog, who art like a quagmire that sucks up them that comes upon thee, that art not in the wisdom, which doth force to shun thy mire and clay.⁶⁴

Salter's response identifies Crab's physically emaciated distress, arguing by contrast that the Quakers are spiritually misunderstood and collectively, politically persecuted.

Crab responds in turn before the year 1659 is out. His *Gentle Correction for the High-flown Backslider* addresses itself personally to George Salter and generally to the Quakers of Middlesex and Buckinghamshire. But his

argument to Salter is strictly *tu quoque*: ‘Friend, it seems in my Letter I appear in thy eye in much confusion: And thou sayest I confute my self and my own principles: And therein thou sayest true. For to the eye that beholds confusion in another, and lives in it himself, to him I appear confused.’⁶⁵ Crab goes on to declare his focus by again adopting a divine voice and describing his emissary to a local Quaker meeting:

Have not I prepared a body and brought it forth, sounding out your plause and justification; and according to my order, he vindicated you with that wisdom and subtilty that I have prepared in him for the work of vindicating you against the world? But now, I having found you acting those things at one time, which your Ministry condemns at another; therefore I brought this body to try you, and to let you see where you are: and he has tried six of you, and five of you are found lyars and false accusars; four of you were found the last meeting at *Wendover* in lies and false accusations, fury, and rage, and uttered from their own mouths, That they had not patience to hear him speak.⁶⁶

Crab names names, but seems not to know George Salter personally. And Crab’s tone of detachment suggests a curious dis-embodied dualism throughout in his very language, especially in an offer to call another meeting: ‘I will prepare, and bring that body which they call *Roger Crabb*, to give them a meeting to make good the charge’.⁶⁷ Basically he charges local Quakers, as he does everyone else, with un-selfconscious hypocrisy.

But something significant has changed. Within the pamphlet skirmishes of 1659, these rare and previously unconsidered publications hardly register at all in significance. They reveal Crab’s continued opposition, but only within terms of local engagement. Moreover Crab’s sense of irony, even humour, toward his critics and accusers, such as Thomas Godbould and the Middlesex judiciary, has vanished. His broad arguments along the lines of personal control, social good, and religious observance, have narrowed to interpersonal name-calling and subtle points of practice. The tracts themselves have shrunk proportionally from richly-argued pamphlets of some twenty pages to one- or two-page missives. The body of Roger Crab, shrunken away on a starvation diet, seems mirrored in the opinions of Roger Crab that have dwindled down to personal rebuffs. Granted, he adopts a voice of powerful, even disturbingly divine proportions, but such procedure only undercuts his authority. His final publications in 1659 sound as desperate in tone as they are devoid of argued conscientious significance.

Significance, however, turned external in the watershed years of 1659 and 1660. A world of social contention collided with the restoration of the monarchy. Unprecedented upheaval was followed by unprecedented sectarian quietism as a king returned to the throne. Censorship of the press returned as well. Consequently, most political radicalism either cooled or decamped. Quakers themselves faced intensified oppression up until the Toleration Act of 1688. And Roger Crab offered nothing more in terms of

publications. Instead, he lapsed into silence and decamped personally to the then rural London of Bethnal Green, where he lived out his final twenty years of life in unreported obscurity.

In 1795, in an account of Stepney Parish, the London historian Daniel Lysons drew attention to ‘Roger Crab, Gent. of Bethnal Green, buried Sep. 14, 1680’.⁶⁸ This brief retrospective suggested that Crab, ‘one of the eccentric characters of the last century’, gained a reputation in later life for clean living and humility, quoting also the observation that ‘this Crab, they say, was a Philadelphian, or sweet singer’.⁶⁹ In the next century, ‘Philadelphian’ had come to be a generic term for Ranter-Leveller-Quaker dissent, for individualist experience in opposition to official creeds and institutionalized ministries linked especially to English ‘Behmenites’ such as John Pordage who followed the teachings of Jacob Boehme. Clearly, Crab’s associations with radical mysticism in the previous century had not been forgotten. In fact, linked to the spiritual and physical benefits of abstinence and vegetarianism, he may very well have returned to rural obscurity as unlicensed practical physician. At the time of Lysons’ writing, Crab’s monument in the churchyard of St Dunstan’s, Stepney, was still visible, although Lysons had to quote the epitaph from Strype’s earlier transcription. It identified Crab as follows:

A soul that stemmed opinion’s tide,
Did over sects in triumph ride;
Yet separate from the giddy croud,
And paths tradition had allowd.
Through good and ill reports he past,
Oft censur’d, yet approv’d at last.⁷⁰

It seems ironic that Crab, so averse to prevailing inequities of economic and social order, should gain gentle status retrospectively and be popularly approved.

Little considered in his own time and all but forgotten today, Roger Crab represents a key sense of sectarian assertion in the revolutionary years following the civil war in England. Collectively, Crab’s texts are a microcosm of the range and variety of radical opinion of that period, a period of contending published opinion unprecedented in English history. Herein, a newly-dominant political subculture of Parliament encountered a variety of subordinate subcultures, including Levellers, Ranters, Diggers, Quakers, and even the radically subjective dissent of Roger Crab. In fact, Crab’s conscious behaviour of starvation and noncompliance combined with his personal reportage clearly to declare a profound dissatisfaction, a hunger for something politically better, for something spiritually real. An ‘inner light’ stressed by all spiritual and social sects of the day animated Crab’s insistent mystical asceticism. Herein, Roger Crab was officially neither Ranter, nor Leveller, nor Quaker, nor Seeker, nor, even as reported, a Philadelphian. Rather, he

was *all* of them rolled into an irrational – and therefore pure – Opposition. His radical behaviour demonstrates and reflects the profound discontent of his time. Moreover, the fact that Crab identified himself finally with the hitherto unknown ‘Rationals’ suggests the extent of his radical otherness. Faced with the bewildering sectarianism of the 1650s in England, Roger Crab embraced opposition as the only sensible rationality.

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Notes

I am grateful to Bill Torrens, County Reference Library, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, and Gwyn Jones, Central Library, Uxbridge, Middlesex, for their help during my research visits, June–July 1998.

- 1 In the anonymous introduction to Roger Crab’s *The English Hermite* (London, 1655; Wing E3089), sig. A3v. Throughout, when quoting from original and old-spelling texts, I silently lighten awkward rhetorical pointing and regularize all *i/j* and *u/v* reversals as well as the use of long *s*.
- 2 In addition to the above-noted *The English Hermite*, Crab’s known publications include: *Dagons-Downfall* (London, 1657; Wing C6735); *Gentle Correction for the High-flown Backslider* (London, 1659; Wing C6737); and *A Tender Salutation* (1659; Wing C6738).
- 3 Christopher Hill, ‘The Mad Hatter’, in *Puritanism and Revolution: Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the 17th century* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), p. 319. On the social and political background of the English republic in relation to published controversy, see Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion 1640–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); also Thomas N. Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue: English Political Literature 1640–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). See also the *Biographical Dictionary of British Radicals in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Richard L. Greaves and Robert Zaller, 3 vols, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982). My argument for Crab’s form of opposition departs somewhat from Robert Kenny’s perspective on the millenarian preacher and Ranter, Abiezer Coppe. I locate Crab within a contemporary milieu of radical distress (as Kenny does with Coppe), but do not argue Crab’s effect in terms of symbolic social ritual; see ‘In These Last Dayes’: The Strange Work of Abiezer Coppe’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 13 (1998), 156–84.
- 4 Paul Sieveking, ‘Saint Roger or, The Song of the Hermit Crab’, *Fortean Times: The Journal of Strange Phenomena*, no. 50 (1988), 45–9, convincingly explains the connection between hatters and ‘madness’ by reference to symptoms of mercuric poisoning, and dashes the fanciful notion – first suggested in Margaret Verney’s *Bucks Biographies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), p. 141 – that Crab served as the original for Lewis Carroll’s ‘Mad Hatter’ character.

Builders in Chesham in 1996 unearthed parts of a High Street retail location dating from about the fifteenth century. As reported in the *Bucks Examiner*

- for 8 November 1996 (p. 6), a solid stone head used as a hatter's mould was found, raising questions about possible associations with Roger Crab and his business.
- 5 Colin Spencer, *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism* (Hanover, N.J.: University Press of New England, 1995), p. ix. Making mention of Crab, Keith Thomas also deals with early modern English asceticism and vegetarianism in *Man and the Natural World* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 287–300.
 - 6 Robert Gibbs, *Worthies of Buckinghamshire* (Aylesbury: Bucks Advertiser, 1888), pp. 116, 117.
 - 7 *Records of Buckinghamshire or Papers and Notes on the History, Antiquities, and Architecture of the County*, 3 (Aylesbury, 1863), 71.
 - 8 See G. H. Wilson, *The Eccentric Mirror* (London: James Cundee, 1806). 'Roger Crabb' appears late in the collection: vol. IX., pp. 46–8.
 - 9 Sieveking, 'Saint Roger', p. 45.
 - 10 Such an analysis (excluding any mention of Crab) is conducted by Tom Hayes, 'Diggers, Ranters, and Women Prophets: The Discourse of Madness and the Cartesian *Cogito* in Seventeenth-century England', *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*, 26 (1996), 29–50.
 - 11 Crab's publisher notes as follows in his Preface to *The English Hermite*: 'I have heard since this was in the Presse that Cap. Norwood was acquainted with Roger Crab, and being enclining to his opinion, began to follow the same poore diet till it cost him his life' (sig. A3v). A prolific Ranter author, Captain Robert Norwood, in 1650–51, had been discharged from Cromwell's army in a general purge of radicals. His subsequent legal battles in the press were notorious, and relating him to Roger Crab serves only to intensify the radical reputation of both figures. On Norwood, see Jerome Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality, and Anarchy: The Ranters and the English Revolution* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1987), pp. 198–216.
 - 12 Crab, *Hermite*, sig. A2r.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, sig. A4v.
 - 14 Of Godboulth himself, little is known. The local historian Carolynne Hearmon notes that Godboulth was the Puritan minister of St Margaret's, Uxbridge, from 1649 until 1662 when he was forcefully ejected from his living for failing to comply with the Clarendon Code at the Restoration. See Hearmon's *Uxbridge: A Concise History* (London: Hillingdon Libraries, 1982), p. 28.
 - 15 See the unpaginated *Aylesbury Parish Register: Baptisms & Burials 1564–1653* (Transcribed 1985), Buckinghamshire County Reference Library, Aylesbury, shelfmark L 372:96.
 - 16 Crab, *Dagons-Downfall*, p. 19.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
 - 19 Crab, *Hermite*, p. 4.
 - 20 Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, p. 315. No record of Crab's army service has been found. He does not seem to have been mustered in Buckinghamshire. A volume entitled 'Trained Bands of the Co. Bucks 1660/2', British Library (BL) Stowe Manuscript, 441, contains muster rolls of footsoldiers from Buckinghamshire through the late 1630s to 1649. No Roger Crab is listed. Nor does he appear in the 1639 Indenture rolls of mustered soldiers from Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire

- housed at the Public Record Office (PRO), London, SP.16/419, or 1640 Devon and Oxfordshire, PRO SP.16/462. The 'Muster Book, Co. Hertford 1640', BL, Harleian Manuscript, 2285, likewise contains no mention of Roger Crab. Prior to 1660, however, *no* systematic army records exist.
- 21 Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue*, p. 135.
 - 22 Crab, *Hermite*, pp. 6–7.
 - 23 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
 - 25 On the extensive literature of popular discontent in the period (excluding Crab), see Jerome Friedman, *Miracles and the Pulp Press during the English Revolution* (London: UCL Press, 1993).
 - 26 Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution*, p. 318. See also William Haller's introduction to *The Leveller Tracts 1647–1653* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).
 - 27 Crab, *Hermite*, p. 1.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
 - 29 John Toldervy, *The Foot out of the Snare* (London, 1656; Wing T1767). Hugh Barbour, in *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), identifies Toldervy as a Ranter who was 'clearly psychotic' (p. 119).
 - 30 Toldervy, *Foot*, pp. 17, 18. G. E. Aylmer identifies Webb in *The State's Servants: The Civil Service of the English Republic 1649–1660* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).
 - 31 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 - 32 See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 441–3.
 - 33 The notations occur in separate manuscript volumes at the Bodleian Library, specifically: Ashmolean Manuscript (Ash. Ms.) 210, fol.107v, and Ash. Ms. 427, fol.51v. The first-mentioned volume contains several manuscripts bound together, including fols100–163: 'Figures set on Horary Questions by William Lilly, from 30 July to 30 Oct. 1649'. The second: 'A Volume of Mr. Lilly's Figures set upon Horary questions From Midsomer 1654 to Sept 1656'. The best single-volume study of Lilly is by Ann Geneva, *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
 - 34 Crab, *Hermite*, p. 13.
 - 35 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
 - 36 *A Perfect Account*, no. 210, 10–16 January 1654 (o.s.), p. 1680. This issue is bound in the Thomason Collection, BL E.825.1. The headline appears on p. 1673.
 - 37 *Every Dayes Intelligence*, no. 79, 10–26 January 1654 (o.s.), p. 164. BL E.479.10.
 - 38 *The Perfect Diurnall*, no. 265, 1–8 January 1654 (o.s.), pp. 4061–2. BL .237.20. See also the accounts reported in *The Weekly Post*, no. 208, 2–9 January 1654 (o.s.). BL E.237.21.
 - 39 On Theaurau John (Thomas Tany), see Friedman, *Blasphemy, Immorality, and Anarchy*, pp. 167–91, also J. C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) who dissociates Tany completely from the Ranters.
 - 40 Crab, *Hermite*, sig. A4v.
 - 41 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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- 42 On the Diggers, see T. Wilson Hayes, *Winstanley the Digger* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), also John Gurney, 'Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger movement in Walton and Cobham', *The Historical Journal*, 37 (1994), 775–802.
- 43 Crab, *Dagons-Downfall*, p. 5.
- 44 On the Root and Branch petitions, see Anthony Fletcher, *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981), pp. 91–9.
- 45 *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 22–3.
- 46 On Boehme and his complex theology, see David Walsh, *The Mysticism of Inner-worldly Fulfillment: A Study of Jacob Boehme* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1983); John Joseph Stoudt, *Sunrise To Eternity: A Study in Jacob Boehme's Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957); and Margaret Lewis Bailey, *Milton and Jakob Boehme* (New York: Haskell House, 1964).
- 47 Crab, *Dagons-Downfall*, p. 13.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 27.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.
- 53 See Morris W. Hughes, *The Story of Ickenham* (London: Hillingdon Libraries, 1983). Hughes notes (p. 43) that offenders from Ickenham were routinely tried at the Middlesex County sessions held in Hickes Hall, Clerkenwell.
- 54 Crab, *Dagons-Downfall*, p. 27.
- 55 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 56 Derek Hirst, 'The Failure of Godly Rule in the English Republic', *Past and Present*, 132 (1991), 64. While arguing that incidents of Sabbath-breach were seen as particularly destabilizing, Leah Leneman also notes that they were punished at the discretion of local officials; see "'Prophaning" the Lord's Day: Sabbath Breach in Early Modern Scotland', *History*, 74 (1989), 217–31.
- 57 Crab, *Dagons-Downfall*, p. 29.
- 58 Crab, *Salutation*, p. 1.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 60 On Winstanley in this regard, see Hayes, *Winstanley the Digger*, pp. 85–7, 93–5.
- 61 See Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1985), especially chapters 4 and 5. See also Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (New York: Greenwood, 1988).
- 62 George Salter, *An Answer to Roger Crabs printed paper to the Quakers* (London, 1659; Wing S463).
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 65 Crab, *Correction*, p. 2.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 68 Daniel Lysons, *The Environs of London* (London: A. Strahan, 1795), III, 454.
- 69 *Ibid.*, pp. 454, 456.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 456.

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