Given, firstly, justifiable claims made by the editors of the complete works of the Digger leader Gerrard Winstanley, that he was not just the ‘foremost radical of the English Revolution’ but also one of the ‘finest writers’ of a ‘glorious age of English non-fictional prose’, and secondly, the important suggestion that Winstanley was a forerunner of Quakerism, indeed that his writings shaped the formation of Quaker thought, Winstanley’s potential reading of the German Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme deserves close attention. For more than a century scholars encompassing a range of backgrounds and ideological commitments have, with varying degrees of caution, drawn a number of rarely convincing and, unfortunately, usually ill-informed parallels between Boehme and Winstanley. As I will show, it seems certain that Winstanley did not consult any of Boehme’s works while writing his own. It also appears very probable that he never read Boehme. The disparities between them are far too great. Indeed, there is no analogue in the relevant texts by Boehme for a number of Winstanley’s doctrines and exhortations. Furthermore, Winstanley never quotes, paraphrases or alludes to Boehme. His prose style differs from the way in which Boehme’s translators rendered him into English. Nor does Winstanley adopt any of the neologisms introduced by these translators. Consequently I will suggest that since Winstanley most likely possessed only a handful of printed works or else a modest library, greater consideration needs to be given to how ideas were transmitted – not textually but orally, because it is probable that some of the seeds that germinated into Winstanley’s mature philosophy were sown in this manner.

Abstract

Given, firstly, justifiable claims made by the editors of the complete works of the Digger leader Gerrard Winstanley, that he was not just the ‘foremost radical of the English Revolution’ but also one of the ‘finest writers’ of a ‘glorious age of English non-fictional prose’, and secondly, the important suggestion that Winstanley was a forerunner of Quakerism, indeed that his writings shaped the formation of Quaker thought, Winstanley’s potential reading of the German Lutheran mystic Jacob Boehme deserves close attention. For more than a century scholars encompassing a range of backgrounds and ideological commitments have, with varying degrees of caution, drawn a number of rarely convincing and, unfortunately, usually ill-informed parallels between Boehme and Winstanley. As I will show, it seems certain that Winstanley did not consult any of Boehme’s works while writing his own. It also appears very probable that he never read Boehme. The disparities between them are far too great. Indeed, there is no analogue in the relevant texts by Boehme for a number of Winstanley’s doctrines and exhortations. Furthermore, Winstanley never quotes, paraphrases or alludes to Boehme. His prose style differs from the way in which Boehme’s translators rendered him into English. Nor does Winstanley adopt any of the neologisms introduced by these translators. Consequently I will suggest that since Winstanley most likely possessed only a handful of printed works or else a modest library, greater consideration needs to be given to how ideas were transmitted – not textually but orally, because it is probable that some of the seeds that germinated into Winstanley’s mature philosophy were sown in this manner.

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