Rituals of rebellion, protest and resistance deserve a book-length study.¹ This would be a demanding enterprise. The author of such a work would need the skills of a folklorist, an ethnographer and a social historian; and the work would have to transcend traditional chronological divisions between the medieval, early modern and modern periods.² This need to break down conventional periodization stems from the widespread recognition amongst historians that some rituals of rebellion persisted over long periods. These included, for instance, the rituals of inversion known to the French as charivari, or in the English West country as skimmingtons, in which men dressed as women and marched in rowdy processions while other members of the crowd beat pots and pans in what was known as ‘rough music’. This particular ritual form endured in some villages into the early twentieth century. Such rituals were intended to indicate that the social or moral order had been infringed or transgressed in some way – such as common land being enclosed, or men being beaten or scolded by what were regarded as inappropriately assertive wives. Some skimmingtons might end in a collective assault upon the transgressive individual.³ Following Max Gluckman’s classic thesis, we might therefore argue that ‘by allowing people to behave in normally prohibited ways’, skimmingtons ‘gave expression, in a reversed form, to the normal rightness of a particular kind of social order’. Thus, such rituals had the effect of ‘stating moral principles by reversal’.⁴ Similarly, annual perambulations of parochial boundaries during the ritual of Rogationtide, or the more infrequent perambulations
of manorial boundaries, sometimes provided a legitimating cover for the destruction of enclosures and for the assertion of collective rights over common land.5

Rituals of rebellion, then, are often presented as disorderly, festive occasions, in which crowds broke some rules in order to reassert others. For instance, in a society in which ‘quitetude’ was synonymous with order, noise was often a key element in collective disorder. In one Northamptonshire village in 1611, a land dispute led to crowd demonstrations in which the throng formed up ‘with bagg pipes playeing & ringing of bells by the space of one whole daye and a nighte w[i]th halloweinge and throwing upp of hatts from the top of the [Church] Steeple’.6 Kett’s rebels marched into Norwich through St Augustine’s gates ‘with a drum before them’.7 Festive culture provided rioters with a set of norms, symbols and rituals; football matches, themselves about the display of collective, youthful, playful, masculine violence sometimes provided the opportunity for enclosure riots or rebellions.8 Other local customs also fed into crowd violence; in the Derbyshire village of Ashford in 1604, a local gentleman was assaulted by the young men of the community, who beat drums as they marched down upon him; in their answer to this allegation, the young men denied the assault, saying that they marched through the town because it was Whitsunday, and that it was the custom that the ‘yo[u]ng peo[p]le’ went ‘amaying’ after evening prayer ‘as they many times doe in that c[o]untrey.’ Prior to the alleged assault, one of their number had suggested that they should go to Churchdale, where the alleged assault took place, ‘to make merry & to drinke ... as hath bin a long tyme accustomed of yo[u]nge peo[p]le’.9

Enclosure riots were about the ritualized transgression of closed space, and the reassertion of collective property; they were also about the delight that rioters might take in their sudden collective power. During riots in Gillingham forest (Dorset) in January and July 1644, the tanner John Phillippes rode on horseback amongst his fellow rioters, riding into enclosed land ‘from one close to another’ crying out ‘I Ride in, and I Ryde out, of these Grounds at my pleasure’10

In contrast to the emphasis upon inversive, festive crowd actions, this chapter looks at the presence of order within disorder, focusing upon case studies of two ritual forms which helped to control violence, structured the behaviour of crowds, and (in the second case) enabled rioters and rebels to communicate with their governors. No pretence, in other words, is made towards any overall coverage of rituals of rebellion. First of all, the chapter looks at the meaning of the military-style organization, rituals and behaviour which sometimes influenced the behaviour of rebels and rioters. Thereafter, it develops an interpretation of a ritual