

Hester Pulter and the Depiction of Vermin in Early Modern Culture



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Abstract

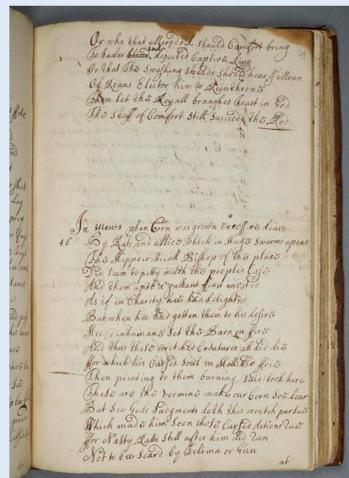
This project began by taking a close look at seventeenth-century woman poet Hester Pulter's emblematic poem, "The Bishop and the Rats" (Emblem 46), as part of the larger, ongoing Pulter Project. This poem included particular emphasis on rats and other vermin to serve as metaphor. Thus raising the question: how were rats and other vermin depicted in early modern culture? I will pay extra attention to fables and emblem books which would have served culturally significant roles and were recognized by many people throughout the period. In addition to primary emblems and fables, my research will draw from contemporary sources, such as Mary Fissell's "Imagining Vermin in Early Modern England," to distinguish between our modern notion of vermin as compared to how those of Pulter's time would have understood vermin. The difference between how one in the early modern period would have thought of vermin and how we think of vermin today is an important distinction in framing our thinking about the culture connected to the depiction of such creatures.

Methodology

My project began with close reading Pulter's poem "The Bishop and the Rats" in the Pulter Project website. My first step was transcribing the poem by looking at a scanned copy of Pulter's original text. Once I had my transcription, Dr. Hand and I discussed the best way to put together an amplified edition of this poem for a broader audience. We came to the conclusion that maintaining Pulter's original spelling and grammar would be the most beneficial way to add to the ongoing Pulter Project. The next phase of my research entailed using various databases such as *Early English Books Online* to locate emblems and fables that contained related themes and depictions of vermin to Pulter's poem. I then continued working in the databases to find contemporary scholarly sources, such as Mary Fissell's "Imagining Vermin in Early Modern England," to add context to the early modern idea of vermin as compared to our current understanding of the term.

The Poet and her Poem

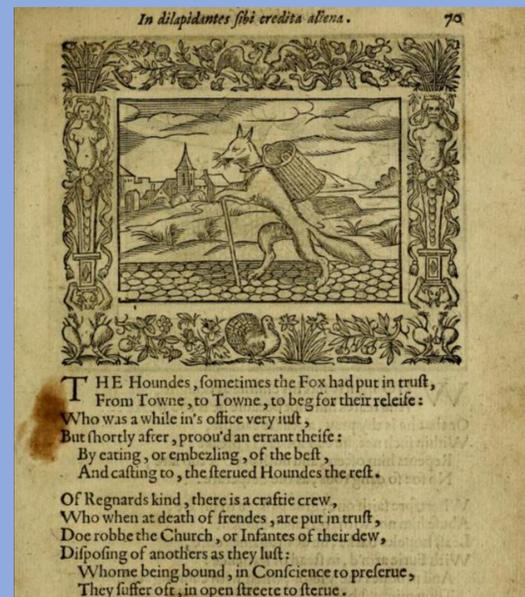
Pulter's manuscript includes numerous poems as well as an unfinished prose romance. Much of this work was probably written in the 1640s and 50s, with some pieces dating from the 1660s (Knight and Wall). There are no records of the manuscript's location or ownership from 1700 to 1975 (Knight and Wall). Since being rediscovered, scholarship surrounding Pulter's works has increased. She and her works are unique for several reasons. For one, "Pulter's poems [are] the only known example of an English emblem book authored by a woman" and her emblems had several differences from earlier emblems, including not ending with an appeal to the audience's morals and ending with her personally addressing God; she was particularly unique for writing "the only known example [of moralizing emblem books] in manuscript or print from the Interregnum" (Dunn 56-66). "The Bishop and the Rats" includes several mentions of vermin, most notably rats, but also insects and reptiles. The vermin are described in terms such as "nasty" and "wretched," and they are blamed for food shortages. Such depictions support the notion that early modern people had of vermin as a threat to their way of life, sometimes serving as direct competitors for food.



Part of "The Bishop and the Rats" from Pulter's Manuscript, taken from *The Pulter Project*



Emblem from George Wither's collection of emblems. Shows a cat trapped in a cage by mice.



Emblem from Henry Peacham's collection of emblems. Depicts a fox walking upright.



Corresponding image with the ballad "The Famous Ratcatcher, with his Trauels."

Vermin in Early Modern Culture

Today's notion of vermin is often one of dirty nuisance animals like rats and mice. In the early modern period, however, vermin were seen in a much more nuanced way. In many cases, especially in regards to the rise of scientific thinking in the period, vermin were viewed as "the 'other' against which the 'human' was defined" (Cole 137). In this way, vermin became a sort of foil to humans. The term vermin "signals a category of nonhuman animal that not only is in opposition to the order and security of the *domus*, but also is actively intending to harm it" (de Saillan-Olsen 2). Rats have become synonymous with the term vermin in contemporary thought, and "in the early modern period, the rat was the ubiquitous verminous pest that plagued human habitations... And if vermin are represented in early modern texts as cunning tricksters, anthropomorphized as possessing human-like intelligence and the greedy desire to consume materials essential to human existence, then the rat more than any other animal in the category represents the archetype" (de Saillan-Olsen 250). In categorizing vermin, there are similar traits that they all shared in the early modern period. These traits were that vermin consumed, or stole, human food; vermin were smart and cunning; vermin could understand symbols and language; and notably, unlike today, vermin were not necessarily linked with filth and disgust (Fissell 1-2, 22).

Conclusion

The idea of vermin has shifted and become less complex in today's view as compared to how vermin were considered in the early modern period. Today, vermin are seen as dirty, annoying pests. In the early modern period, they were thought of in more complicated ways. Vermin were often associated with negatively-connotated human characteristics, such as greed, and were seen as threats to and competitors with humans. A point was made to create a distinction between man and vermin, and the use of the term vermin in relation to a person often served to dehumanize or highlight unsavory characteristics. Vermin were viewed as a threat, especially in regards to resources, were often described with human traits such as greed and wit and cunning, and their primary association in the human consciousness was not to dirt and filth. In thinking about works like Hester Pulter's, it is crucial to remove our modern biases of what certain words mean in contemporary culture and instead imagine ourselves in the mindset of the culture we are researching.

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