Jonathan Swift didn’t like anyone, but he particularly loathed the Scots. Ridiculing the union of England with Scotland and Ireland, he compared Scotland to an unattractive lady who has a “natural Sluttiness; for she is always Lousy, and never without the Itch. . . . She is poor and beggarly, and gets a sorry Maintenance by pilfering wherever she comes.”¹

Scot Robert Burns had a different notion of his nation, but one of his most famous poems (translated here) describes a louse making its way across a Scotswoman:

You ugly, creeping, blasted wonder,
Detested, shunned by saint and sinner,
How dare you set your foot upon her—
Such fine a lady!
Go somewhere else and seek your dinner
On some poor body.

Off! in some beggar’s temples squat.²

Swift and Burns, in a few lines, set out many of the social meanings of lice: the creatures are the accomplices and companions of foreigners, women, and beggars. Even saints and sinners despise lice—whatever theological justifications they’d ever had no longer existed for these eighteenth-century wits.

Consequently, lice were the perfect weapon for satirists’ black comedies or acerbic poems. In early modern England, lice stirred laughs and even shrieks of delight. They were the paramount satirical insect, used to take any target down a peg. Lice were equal opportunity ammunition, aimed not only at kings and scientists but also at social outcasts, the people whose presence
most discomforted the affluent. Contemporary satirists loosed lice both at the poor and at anyone who thought himself better than the lowly.

Like bedbugs, lice crossed both the boundaries of skin and the borders of home and country. Bedbugs were loathed, but the people they infested were often portrayed as victims. Lice-ridden people or peoples, however, were considered accomplices, as deserving of disgust as any parasite. There was always a moral dimension to lice commentary, either humorous or serious. Although fleas “trouble us much,” pronounced the seventeenth-century natural historian Thomas Muffet, “yet they neither stink as Wall-lice [bedbugs] doe, nor is it any disgrace to a man to be troubled with them, as it is to be lowsie.”

The historian Keith Thomas notes, “it was a disgrace to be lousy, and employment was more readily available to those who were neatly turned out.” By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, lice were also emblems of poverty, signs of the bestiality and social degradation of their hosts. In contrast, during the Middle Ages, helping the poor was considered a good work, leading saints to embrace both the poor and their lice. But by 1500, the socially and morally fastidious distinguished between the “deserving” poor and “able-bodied” or “sturdy” beggars, able to work but refusing to do so. According to popular literature, such people bolstered their begging with fake disabilities and (very real) lice.

In an increasingly mobile and changing society, sturdy beggars represented a threat to those claiming civility and respectability—and, supposedly, freedom from lice. The disgrace of lice, and of those who had them, could threaten anyone claiming escape from the verminous stew of premodern living conditions and habits. Obsession with the down-and-outs, the homeless, and potentially dangerous social outliers was reflected in many books, ballads, and pamphlets devoted to them, perhaps because they seemed to enjoy a freedom from the social conventions confining the middle and upper classes. Upper-class individuals were expected to exercise self-control and not give into bodily demands. They were taught from childhood to feel embarrassment and shame for behaviors considered taboo in civilized society. The teenage George Washington copied out the following rule of decent behavior and courtesy: “Kill no Vermin, as Fleas, lice, ticks, etc. in the sight of others.” These rules were probably inspired by the Renaissance polymath Desiderius Erasmus’s The Civility of Childhood, first published in 1530 and quickly translated into English. Writing to a young prince, Erasmus advises, “There must be neither lice nor nits. Oftentimes to scratch the head in the presence of others is a thing not very decent nor honest: as to scratch the body with nails, is a foul and filthy thing.”
Clearly, anyone picking lice in public was open to social ostracism and moral condemnation, not to mention guffaws—and equally clearly, no matter how much they denied it, the upper classes still had lice. Even after the well-to-do started battling lice by shaving their heads and wearing wigs, they still suffered the ignominy of the creatures’ presence—making the haves as well as the have-nots targets of lice humor.

Lurking beneath the hair and clothes of early modern bodies, lice revealed the moral qualities of their hosts, uncovering filth of both body and behavior. Satire gets its bite from the moral outrage lurking beneath the joke. Both the morality and pretentiousness of Robert Burns’s Scottish lady are undercut by the louse meandering around her bonnet, breaking the boundaries of class and gender. The poet is at first appalled that the louse has dared to broach a fair miss’s headpiece, rather than a “an old wife’s flannel cap” or the undervest of “some small ragged boy,” but ultimately he names the lady as the cause of the lousy incursion: “O Jenny,” he chides her, “do not toss your head, / And set your beauties all abroad! / You little know what cursed speed / The blastie’s making!”

Burns’s litany of those deserving of the louse’s presence—poor old women, ragged boys, beggars, and young misses—demonstrates the range and potency of lousiness. One mark of social superiority was to designate the other, to whom one is superior. When that other bore the physical mark of otherness—the louse or its bite—a new and powerful social designator had been identified.

The louse’s accomplice in social branding was hair—the human head louse was a specialized creature, needing hair to live. Hair, along with skin, is the most malleable of human characteristics, alterable to change the social significance of its possessor. Different classes wear different hairstyles; different nations shave, chop, and color their hair in their own ways; and different haircuts distinguish various stages of human growth and signify different identities. Hair is a ready instrument to express social conformity or alienation. Hair accordingly gives not only a home but also meaning to lice, and lice in turn give meaning to hair. An exploration of the social significance of lice becomes thick and hirsute—Burns’s elegy to the louse ends with the famous lines, “O would some Power the gift to give us / To see ourselves as others see us!” For the poet, all people are ridden with self-delusion, revealed by the louse in its promiscuous wanderings. Men and women may change their hairstyles, but the audacious louse undermines their pretensions of cultural and aesthetic superiority. Hence it became ever more necessary to insist that these insect parasites are natural only to the underclasses, not to their well-coiffed betters.
Lice lived on beggars and thieves, and characterized any group the early modern English considered alien—including the neighboring Scots and Irish. Given the strong connection between lice and disgust, it was easy for the English to extend their antipathy for the lower classes to the inhabitants of other countries and continents. These peoples were “uncivilized,” according to their conquerors, because they were bestial—and instead of cultivating their manners and restraining their animalistic urges, they took no exception to having lice and even ate them. What greater proof could there be of the superiority of English civilization?

Lice therefore offered a gauge of the level of disdain directed at various targets in early modern times—particularly prisoners and paupers, social misfits, and foreigners. Sometimes even ridicule became too tame, and the lice ridden were simply condemned as revolting and vicious. Political animosity and social antipathies look particularly raw through the prism of lice.

**Satirical Lice**

Early modern satirists and moralists often took a dim view of humanity as a whole, a scorn expressed in lice allusions. In the 1637 *Tale of a Tub*, the dramatist Ben Jonson captured the lice–human relationship in the sneer, “I care not, I, not three skips of a Louse for you.” As Muffet would later say in his discussion of lice, “we have an English Proverb of a poor man, *He is not worth a Louse.*”

Turning this sentiment upside down could puncture pretension at all social levels: sometimes a man is not worth a louse because the louse is better than the man. The Dutch humanist Daniel Heinsius, who praised the “fricative” pleasure derived from scratching a louse bite, devoted a whole oration to lice’s wonderful qualities. *In Praise of the Louse (Laus Pediculi)*, published in 1635, features a lawyer defending a louse before the “Worshipfull Masters and Wardens of Beggars Hall”—an audience clearly well acquainted with the defendant. He praises the louse, man’s “ever trusty companion” that “suffers under the tyrannicall oppression of men, and is made by them as contemptibly infamous as they can.” Indeed, in many ways, lice are better than men because “Man . . . is borne of stone, but the Lice are borne of Man. So much the nobler in his originall, as a man is nobler then a stone.” This creature that dwells on the most rational part of man, Heinsius tells us, benefits from its good neighborhood and possesses understanding, prudence, and wisdom. In fact, the louse is most “busied in husbandry and domestique affaires, [and] all the spare time remaining from the exercise and care of feeding, it bestoweth
on contemplation, and rest.” These contemplative creatures are therefore almost Pythagorean in their silence while still being as sociable as Aristotle desired men to be, living and eating with their fellows and their human hosts. And unlike other beings, the louse does not abandon one in adversity but “is a true companion and attendant to poverty,” clinging to his host even when a man is in chains or on the gallows.12

Heinsius, contrasting the fidelity of lice with the faithlessness of people, was not alone in hurling the louse as a weapon against human pretentiousness. The poet Robert Heath (1575–1649), clearly inspired by the Laus Pedi-culi, praised the louse, urging men to “Observe his [the louse’s] generous disposition in his Sedate constancy of Affection, scorning to leave his friend in his worst of fortunes, but will faithfully accompany him from the Court even to the Camp or Prison. . . . next to Man, the Louse is the Noblest Creature.”13

In these descriptions, it seems that lice possess all the qualities of a good man, a litany of the aspirational traits of early modern Englishmen: courage in adversity, prudence in daily affairs, loyalty in all circumstances, sociability with their hosts and fellows, contemplative in times of rest. Lice keep faithful company with individuals of every social class, but especially those who fall into poverty or crime, who perhaps particularly need to remember the virtues possessed by the insect. On the wheel of fortune, a valued early modern image, the louse is the metaphoric linchpin, reminding kings that they can become beggars and beggars that they can become kings.

A number of early modern satirical works exploited this fear of boundary-jumping lice by following their wanderings up and down the social hierarchy. In one eighteenth-century tale, a louse proclaims that he was “Got in an Alley near St. Bow, born on a sturdy Beggar’s Smock” but deserted his birthplace to lodge on a lawyer—attitudes toward some professions are timeless—declaring, “I with wond’rous Art did bite/The Man who cozen’d all Mankind.” From the lawyer, the louse visited a judge, then climbed aboard a lady, and from her to a statesman to a coquette, and down the social scale to a servant and then a whore. The moral of the story is that, “So after all my Care and Strife, Pleas’d like mankind, like him in Pain, Both he and I must yield up Life, and quiet, turn to Dust again.” And so the louse is “Exempt from ev’ry Fear, But the untimely, deadly Crack.”14

Just a few years after that louse recalled his peregrinations, another sententious insect told a similar story. In the biweekly “Adventurer,” a louse sermonizes in a dream to the possessor of the head he now inhabits, teaching that “Life is a state of perpetual peril and inquietude.” Although the louse
“does not remember that I have brought calamity upon myself from any uncanny deviations from either virtue or prudence,” his wife and children were “crushed to atoms” when the head of the charity boy on which they lived was washed, and he himself was brushed by the boy into a basket of laundry. The louse travels from the linen to the neck of a “celebrated toast,” and from her to a “battered beau,” who nearly kills him with his primping at court. The louse then leaves the courtier for his valet, and after the servant is sacked for his new master, a barber. Further adventures drop him onto the head of an experimental philosopher—perhaps the louse was reading Hooke’s *Micrographia*—and then to a doctor whose nurse almost includes him in an antidote for jaundice (a spoonful of lice in milk), which she administers to a six-year-old boy. The barber shaves the boy, and the louse decamps for his shaving cloth and then to the writer of the essay. The tribulations of the louse cause the writer “to burst into a fit of immoderate laughter,” which is followed by the louse’s reflection that “The life of man is no less exposed to evil; and that all his expectations of security and happiness in temporal possessions, are equally chimerical and absurd.”

But lice did not always teach moral lessons. More often in satires, lice are identified with the loathsomeness of their hosts, a manifestation of the humans’ evil and base nature, as well as their sweat and bodily humors. In a fanciful pamphlet, the Jacobean dramatist Thomas Dekker (1572–1635) describes a meeting of the beggars of England: “They are the idle drones of a Countrie, the Caterpillers of a common wealth, and the Aegiptian lice of a Kingdome.” His evoking Egypt recalls both the scriptural role of lice and their association with Gypsies—then thought to come from Egypt—and paupers, whose effect on the body politic reflect lice’s impact on the human body. On this occasion, the beggars wear “hansome cleane linnen” unlike their usual lousy attire and are organized into ranks “according to degrees of Superioritie and Inferioritie in our Societie.” Ranked in a hierarchy like all classes of society in early modern England, beggars compose a corporate group, a “colledge.” They meet regularly in a “great Hall,” which on this occasion was “so full it swarmed with them,” a verb verminous in itself. The beggars “are a people for whom the world cares not, neither care they for the world: they are freemen, yet scorne to live in Cities: great travellers they are and yet never from home, poore they are, and yet have their dyet from the best mens tables.” Like lice, beggars live off others, benefitting from the society they scorn, and which scorns them in turn. The attitude, and even the image, might be familiar from our own politics.
Another satire, written by Edward Ward (1667–1731), a participant in the community of hack writers and impoverished journalists referred to as “Grub Street” in the eighteenth century, describes a club of beggars: “This Society of Old Bearded Hypocrites, Wooden leg’d Implores of good Christian Charity, strolling Clapperdudgeons, lymping Dissemblers, sham disabled Seamen, Blind Gunpowder-blasted Mumpers, and old broken limb’d Labourers” who entertain themselves by watching one of their fellows who “fell to fingering his Collar, conveying his little Foes that he happens to take Prisoner between Finger and Thumb, from his Neck to his Mouth, that he may bite the Biters which he dispatches so naturally, that it is hard to distinguish whether he is in Jest or in Earnest: Thus he recreates himself, and diverts the Company, who cannot forbear shrugging at the lousy Performance, as if they itch’d by Sympathy.”

The beggar “bites the biters” just as the beggars put on a verminous performance with fake disabilities and fraudulent social credentials, preying on the credulity and kindness of the society they despise. Similarly, criminals attack their social betters—and are also well acquainted with lice. In jail, a prisoner can expect the company of the parasite, even if he doesn’t quite share Heinsius’s appreciation for their fidelity. In an early seventeenth-century comedy, an imprisoned character refuses to give up his claim to marry a lady of substance: “First I will stinck in Jayle, be eaten with Lyce, Endure an object worse then the Devill himself, And that’s ten Sergeants peeping through the grates upon my lowsie linen.”

Newgate Prison was particularly notorious for its vermin. In one of William Hogarth’s most famous series of engravings, *Industry and Idleness* (1754), “The Idle ’Prentice” begins his downward spiral to Newgate and the gallows by watching an ignoble trio gamble on a coffin and scratching his head, while the righteous attend church in the background. The nineteenth-century editor of Hogarth’s works comments, “The hand of the boy, employed upon his head, and that of the shoe-black, in his bosom, are expressive of filth and vermin; and show that our hero is within a step of being overspread with the beggarly contagion.”

Prisoners and beggars are plagued with lice, but in the literature of early modern Europe, the lower classes are sometimes vermin’s accomplices rather than their victims. Both French and English works describe the down-and-outs weaponizing their creepy companions, just as eighteenth-century Londoners feared that their servants either knowingly or inadvertently contaminated their betters with bedbugs. In the sixteenth century, Francois Rabelais
(who knew something about satire) describes the practices of Panurge, a miscreant friend of the giant Pantagruel: “In another [pocket] he had a great many little horns full of fleas and lice, which he borrowed from the beggars of St. Innocent, and cast them with small canes or quills to write with into the necks of the daintiest Gentlewomen that he could finde, yea even in the Church.”20 A few years later, the English divine and historian Thomas Fuller (1608–61) reported on “Beggars, who breed Vermine in their own bodies, and then blow them on the cloaths of others.”21 In a late seventeenth-century story attributed to the Earl of Rochester, a pickpocket seeking to steal a watch comes up with a stratagem:

I had a Quill of living Lice in my Pocket, prepared for such a design, this I took out, and unstopping it at both ends, with a gentle blast fixed them upon the Back and Shoulders of my Spark: the six-footed animals no sooner found

themselves at liberty, but they began to crawl . . . so that they were soon perceived by the by-standers, some laughed, and others told him, he was well Guarded.

This diversion results in success for the thief, as his mark, attempting to knock the vermin off, is more than sufficiently distracted.22

Perhaps the most astonishing association of lice and weapons, likely inspired by Rabelais, occurs in Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables. Jean Valjean and Cosette observe a procession of prisoners chained together in an almost endless line, wearing wretched rags barely covering their red and unhealthy skin (des dartres et des rougeurs malsines)—perhaps the legacy of body lice. The convicts, angered by the jeering crowd around them, “had quill pipes through which they blew vermin at the crowd, singling out the women” (avaient à la bouche des tuyaux de plume d’où ils soufflaient de la vermine sur la foule, choisissant les femmes). Les Misérables was published in 1862 and translated into English the next year. In reclaiming agency for the convicts, Hugo implicitly condemns the bourgeoisie who watch them with expressions of “moronic bliss”—in some ways the spectators are, if in a different sense, as lousy as the convicts. When Cosette asks Jean Valjean, “Father, are these men?” the former convict, subdued by the memory of his own captivity, responds, “At times.”23

Hair, Lice, and Civilization

We saw in chapter 3 how lice could be used in political and religious diatribes, employed to attack the foibles and follicles of kings or the hirsute habits of political and religious adversaries. The presence of lice in pubic hair enabled both the participants in sexual dalliances and their critics to link pornography and women with vermin. Hair is a weighty cultural commodity, and those claiming social preeminence wanted to dislodge the vermin that inhabited their coiffures and wigs, something not easily done before the arrival of modern hygiene.

The shame generated by lice in one’s hair was something new and modern, demonstrating how much the upper classes wanted to control their bodies. By the late seventeenth century, hygiene became both a private occupation and a defense against social disgrace. Before then, communal delousing was a common practice. People sat around picking lice off each other. The image on page 92, from a late fifteenth-century health manual, shows an upper-class woman delousing a man. Both seem pretty happy about it.
The French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie describes familial delousing in a fourteenth-century French village: “Benete and Alazais Rives were being deloused in the sun by their daughters.” 24 And the fifteenth-century Englishwoman Margery Kempe (ca. 1373 to ca. 1438) told of a group of poor people she met in Germany while on pilgrimage to Jerusalem: “her companions took off their clothes, and, sitting around naked, picked themselves for vermin. This creature [Margery] was afraid to take off her clothes as her fellows did, and therefore, through mixing with them was dreadfully bitten and stung both day and night.” 25

Margery may have been particularly afraid of lice because women, perhaps because of their long hair, were considered especially prone to the vermin. The medical understanding of hair in premodern times usually related it to the theory of the four humors, whose balance or imbalance was thought to produce health or ill health. In the eighteenth century, the theory reinforced the rising tide of civility and hygiene. Aristotle’s New Book of Problems, published anonymously in 1725, maintained that hair is “an Excrement generated and form’d of the most gross and earthly Superfluities of the third
Concoction; The Benefit of it is, that consuming the gross, fuliginous, and sooty Excrements of the Brain, it becomes a Cover and Ornament to the Head, and finding there its most proper matter for encrease, it grows very long, especially in Women, who have moister Brains than Men.”

Moist brains breed lice, as Dr. Culpeper explained in chapter 3, but even men could become prey to the bloodsucking insect. The danger of lice to members of the middling and upper classes is depicted in this eighteenth-century woodcut.

The above proverb, going back to the seventeenth century, is meant as advice to the legal profession not to go after the indigent, but it might also warn of the ease with which lice can pass from beggar to gentleman, cutting right through the social order. The lawyer in the engraving holds a wig—a symbol of his status—as he scratches his shaven head, revealing that lice are no respecters of class. Wigs and hair reveal how much new ideals of civility had taken hold by the late seventeenth century, but they also reveal anxiety about social class, and the engraving shows how little protection wigs could provide.

In 1662, as seen in chapter 1, the famous diarist Samuel Pepys could laugh at lice. But later in the decade, the creatures left him less lighthearted. Pepys
had constant trouble in obtaining a vermin-free wig; on one occasion in 1664, he went to his barber “to have my Periwigg he lately made me cleansed of its nits, which vexed me cruelly that he should put such a thing into my hands.”

Still, the prospect of infestation—Pepys also worried that the hair used in wig making could carry the plague—did not prevent him or many others from adopting the fashion, which became prevalent in all classes of society in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Since it was not yet common to wash hair with water—which many at the time considered dangerous, not always wrongly—wigs freed their owners from needing to powder their own greasy hair.

Pepys may have been amused by his lousy accommodations while traveling, but his forbearance ran out when the parasite appeared in his own home. In 1663, he berated his wife for the house’s lack of cleanliness, calling her a “beggar,” and she retaliated by calling him a “pricklouse, which vexed me.”

Both husband and wife were invoking lice’s low-class aura against each other, and the insults were calculated to sting: Elizabeth Pepys, if not a beggar, came from a lower-middle-class family, and Pepys himself was the son of a tailor. “Pricklouse” was a slang term for a tailor in the seventeenth century, referring either to tailors’ remaking lice-ridden clothes or to the prick of the needle resembling the bite of the insect. Tailors were socially inferior to other craft guilds and all merchant guilds. Thus Pepys’s wife was reminding him of his own ignoble, not to say verminous, origins, as well as his lack of cleanliness.

Pepys became Clerk of the Acts of the Navy Board in 1661 and was extremely sensitive about his roots, a sensitivity reflected in his constant efforts to create an ordered—and presumably lice-free—environment in his home. He lamented that a serving girl had run away after “being cleansed this day of lice by my wife, and good, new clothes put on her.” And he was himself humiliated when he was “mightily troubled with an itching all over my body,” which he took to be the result of lice bites: “I found this afternoon that all my body is inflamed, and my face in a sad redness and swelling and pimpled, so that I was . . . not only sick but ashamed of my self to see myself so changed in countenance.”

His exasperation came to a head, so to speak, in 1669, with the following incident:

So to my wife’s chamber, and there supped, and got her [to] cut my hair and look [at] my shirt, for I have itched mightily these 6 or 7 days, and when all comes to all she finds that I am lousy, having found in my head and body about
twenty lice, little and great, which I wonder at, being more than I have had I believe these 20 years. . . . So how they come I know not, but presently did shift myself, and so shall be rid of them, and cut my hair close to my head, and so with much content to bed.  

Clearly, the civilizing process had done its work on Samuel Pepys. If the revulsion caused by bedbugs was a sign of modernity, the shame and embarrassment caused by lice showed the surfacing of bourgeois respectability, a sensibility that turned morality into manners. One could argue that the vision of the proper English gentleman (or at least one proper Englishman)—well educated, well spoken, and newly clean (notably of lice)—emerged between 1662, when Pepys was amused by his lousy bedding, and 1669, when he went to bed deloused and content.

Pepys’s exchanges with his wigmaker show that the new standards of civility generated a new profession. Just as exterminators would later appear, applying their expertise to bug catching, professional hairdressers and wig-makers started to advertise their services at the end of the seventeenth century. By the end of the next century, reported one contemporary, England had twenty thousand hairdressers. The number may be exaggerated, but a 1795 tax on hair powder brought in £210,136. (Unfortunately for the Crown’s revenue, after the French Revolution, the fashion of powdering wigs—and the tax on powder—disappeared.)

During the eighteenth century, men of all classes wore powdered wigs, and upper-class women sported really big hair—towers of hair. “For those of the higher orders,” recounts the historian Don Herzog, “hairdressing was an elaborate business. Hair was plastered, powdered (up to two pounds of powder per head), curled, and lubricated with pomatum or bear grease or Macassar oil. This mass of stuff had to be combed out and reapplied daily—it must have gotten horribly messy while sleeping, and anyway it must have supported an imposing population of flora and fauna—which made for lively demand for hairdressers, the more expert the better.”

Fashion demanded sacrifice. Through the molds and hair pieces used to produce the towering effect, big hair reopened the gates to the verminous enemy that the new standards were seeking so hard to expel from the body.

On page 96, the 1779 portrait of Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, captures the heights to which these hairstyles rose. The portraitist Lady Diana Beauclerk (1734–1808) surely knew the dangers inherent in tall hair—and not from just falling over. She was married to the infamous Topham
Beauclerk, a man renowned for his filthiness. One story about him brings together many of the patterns found in the history of lice:

The elegant and accomplished gentleman . . . was . . . what the French call *cynique* in his personal habits beyond what one would have thought possible in anyone but a beggar or a gypsy. He and Lady Di made part of a great Christmas party at Blenheim, where soon after the company were all met, they all found themselves as strangely annoyed as the Court of Pharaoh were of old by certain
visitants—“in all their quarters”—It was in the days of powder and pomatum, when stiff frizzling and curling, with hot irons and black pins, made the entrance of combs extremely difficult—in short, the distress became unspeakable.\textsuperscript{36}

But despite multiple reports of vermin in upper-class English coiffures—only their hairdressers knew for sure, and they weren’t talking—the English nevertheless condemned other peoples for their lack of hygiene and failure to comb their hair. This condemnation incorporated not only ethnic and nationalistic strains but also religious prejudices and judgments about who was and wasn’t civilized. Pepys notes that on another walk, “drinking my morning draft of whay, by the way, to York House, where the Russia Embassador do lie; and there I saw his people go up and down louseing themselves.”\textsuperscript{37} For Pepys, delousing was necessarily private to avoid the shame associated with vermin; the public personal cleansing by the members of the Russian mission clearly indicated that they were not yet part of civilized society. Some forty years later, the czar Peter the Great would agree. As part of his effort to Westernize Russia, he ordered his nobles to shave off their beards or pay a hefty fine—presumably razing some densely populated verminous habitats.

But the lash of lousiness could still be directed against the English themselves. In Jonathan Swift’s \textit{Gulliver’s Travels}, the king of the giant Brobdingnagians imagines Europeans, whom Gulliver had described to the monarch as “the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.” But the giant foreigners, used by Swift to mock his own countrymen, have their own species of lice. Gulliver relates, “the most hateful Sight of all was the Lice crawling on their Cloaths. I could see distinctly the Limbs of these Vermin with my naked Eye, much better than those of an European Louse through a Microscope, and their Snouts with which they rooted like Swine.”\textsuperscript{38} In the mythical geography of \textit{Gulliver’s Travels}, the country of Brobdingnag is a peninsula off the northwestern coast of North America. Apparently, lice were a universal phenomenon that the English would find wherever they went.

\textbf{Foreign Lice and the Lousy Other}

If hair itself signified difference, not surprisingly, the perceived relationship between foreigners or natives of new places and the insects inhabiting their hair and bodies also justified English and American aggression and expansion. Other societies could, and should, be exploited because they were bestial, like apes who picked lice out of their hair. From early on, the English charac-
terized the subjugated Irish, Scots, and Africans as bug ridden. Thomas Muffet, managing to disparage both Irish and Africans, believed “that the Blackmoors [of St. Thomas] there are full of Lice, but the white men are free of that trouble: All Ireland is noted for this, that it swarms almost with Lice.”39 Edmund Spenser shared a similar attitude toward the Irish, reflecting his time there as Lord Lieutenant; after his description of the mantles worn by dissolute Irish women, he adds, “And as for all other good women which love to doe but little worke, how handsome it is to lye in and sleepe, or to louse themselves in the Sun-shine.”40

Another sixteenth-century author repeated the truism that Ireland was free of snakes but noted, “the men are not free from lice, which cometh of sluttish and filthy use.”41 The English were clearly refining the moral judgments that would shape their later views of other foreigners: they are dirty, sexually promiscuous, and lazy, and share many of the qualities of beggars—including taking pleasure in delousing themselves. By the seventeenth century, one account suggests, the English simply concluded the Irish were themselves lice. Oliver Cromwell is often credited with the saying, “nits make Lice,” which he supposedly used at the Battle of Drogheda in 1649 to justify the killing of women and children as well as rebellious Irish warriors. Modern Cromwell fans deny that he was ever so heartless and genocidal, but a mid-seventeenth-century English poet said of one of Cromwell’s commanders in the massacre of Irish Catholics: “brave Sir Charles Coote . . . by (by good advice), Did kill the Nitts, that they might not growe Lice.”42

Similar, if not quite so deadly, assumptions characterize English attitudes toward the Scots. In beggars’ cant, the language of beggars and thieves, Scotland was referred to as “louse land.” Since beggars themselves were considered the epitome of lousiness, it seems even the lowest of English society cherished a verminous view of their northern neighbors. As one early eighteenth-century wit recounted, “Unkle Dering of mine was wont to say, that he had been a fortnight in Scotland, and yet had got their present State at his fingers end. I was not so afraid of being lousie. Since tis well known, that set a louse upon a table, and he shall dutifully direct his course Northward towards his Mother Country. So I was sure if I caught any, to leave ’em behind me.”43

Just as English travelers to Ireland and Scotland expected to find disgusting habits and practices among their Celtic neighbors, they also anticipated them when journeying farther afield. Travelers’ tales, going back to Odys-
seus in antiquity and Marco Polo and John Mandeville in the Middle Ages, are filled with wondrous monsters and exotic human beings. Encounters with the other, wherever the other might be found, both affirmed the superiority of the English traveler (and reader) and provided a source of horrified entertainment. The strange and distant—the exotic—enthralled the homebound. In the many travelers’ accounts of their experiences, featuring varying degrees of accuracy and fantasy, lice frequently crept in—and as one would expect, not in a way to compliment the locals.

Not surprisingly, accounts of the disgusting habits of lice-bearing peoples frequently focused on their hair, often the most obvious marker of cultural differences. Eastern Europeans were believed to be subject to a particularly disgusting, lice-inflected display called the *plica polonica*, or Polish plait. A plica was a long lock of hair growing in one or two clumps that, according to eastern European folkloric beliefs, had to be left unwashed or uncut to protect the body from disease. If it were cut, blood would swell from the spot, and swellings and fever would result.

Westerners reversed the etiology and believed that the plica itself caused serious illness. According to a seventeenth-century text, “The Russians and the Cossacks are afflicted with a disease called by the Physitians, *Plica*, and in the language of the Countrey Goschest, [when] they are seized with it, loose the use of their Limbs, as Paralitical persons doe, feeling great pains in their Nerves.” Unlike phthiriasis, the lousy disease, this was a real condition, which modern epidemiologists say develops “as a result of an immune response of the human body to head lice bites.” In early modern times, the English observers of this disease knew that it was associated with lice but thought that the parasites were the result rather than the cause of the problem. Thus the Scottish physician Andrew Duncan (1773–1832) described it as “a disease endemic in Poland, and the neighbouring countries, in which a morbid matter is critically deposited upon the hair, and binds it together in such a manner, that it becomes impossible to unravel it.” He continued, “If the whole hair be affected, it forms a kind of cap; if it flows out only from single hairs, then several rope-like plicas are produced. Some days after it has been formed, it begins to smell something like rancid fat; and upon being touched, causes a prickling, unpleasant sensation in the fingers. At the same time, lice suddenly appear in such disgusting numbers, that the patient suffers more from them than from the disease.”

Most commentators thought that the Russians and Poles had acquired the
custom of growing plaits from the Tartars, viewed as an even more disgusting society. The geographer Michael Adams argued, using anthropological rather than medical criteria,

Some of the tribes [of Tartary] are far more filthy than others, and in this particular none exceed the Kamtschatkans, who are said never to wash their hands or face, nor cut their nails . . . Both men and women plait their hair in two locks, binding the ends with small cords. If any hair happens to start up, they sew it down with thread, to make it lie close, which means their heads swarm with vermin, which they scrape off with their hands.48

Thus this eighteenth-century version of dreadlocks invoked the same kind of condemnations that some observers feel for the current hairstyle. Even the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society condemned it as a condition produced by “nastiness, from not combing their hair,” and a German doctor writing to the society observed in 1724:

The great number of people in Poland, who are troubled with this plica, first made me reflect, whether it was a real distemper or not? But I am now convinced, that their swinest way of living, and the common opinion of the people, namely, that this lock of hair cannot be taken off without danger of their lives, have contributed more to this complaint than any real indisposition of the body; considering that it is the middling or poorer sort of people who are troubled with it, who one cannot see without horror. But no German, of who great numbers live in that country, ever has such a thing grow.49

Perhaps no German was ever afflicted with this condition, but it was not completely unknown in England, where the matted hair was referred to as an elflock. Romeo and Juliet cites the style during a speech by Mercutio full of insect allusions:

This is that very Mab
That plats the manes of horses in the night,
And bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs,
Which once untangled, much misfortune bodes. (1.4.93–6)

Mab was Queen of the Fairies, so this condition had magical and perhaps devilish connotations for the English. Thomas Hall (1610–65), a Puritan preacher, included a reference to the Polish plica in his condemnation of long hair, where he insists that this loathsome and un-Christian disease now afflicts the English as well as the Poles:
Have you not been inform’ o th’ hand
Of God on Poland lately laid;
Enough to make all Lands afraid,
And your long dangles stand on end?
Feare him that did that Plica send,
And those sad Crawlers: and hath more
Unheard of Judgements still in store,
Than the vast Heaven hath glorious stars,
Or those your delicate Heads have hairs.⁵⁰

The plica did not appear among the long-haired English, however, whatever Puritans might hope, and by the 1700s it was associated only with eastern Europeans, especially the Jews of Poland and Russia. The traveler Andrew Duncan wrote in 1796, “The Jews, the most bigoted of all beings, have their own customs and cures: they never permit it to be cut off; and nothing can be more disgusting, than one whose beard and whiskers are affected with this disease.”⁵¹

The disgust that Jews and Poles generated in Anglo-Saxon writers would be echoed in subsequent centuries by racists who associated inferior peoples with vermin. By the twentieth century, Jews were often linked with lice, until the insecticide developed during the First World War to destroy lice in the trenches was employed by the Nazis to kill Jews in the gas chambers. Although most historians of anti-Semitism distinguish between the religious prejudices of earlier Europe and the racial attitudes of modern times, the attitudes about lice and Jews, and lice and Poles, and lice and Tartars reveal a direct line of verminous vitriol directed at the other. It is, after all, the Germans living in Poland who escape lice.

But at least eastern Europeans and Jews were never accused of eating their lice, a common theme in accounts of exotic non-Europeans. The Spanish historian Peter Martyr d’Anghiera (1452–1526) may have begun the legend of lice-eating natives. In his description of Latin America, he wrote, “When these Indians are infected with this filthiness, they dresse and cleanse one another. And they that exercise this, are for the most part women, who eat all they take.”⁵² Similarly, the French Jesuit explorer Louis Hennepin (1626–1705) recounted that when exploring what is now the northern United States, “I was also much surpriz’d one day to see an Old decrepit Woman, who was employ’d in biting a Child’s hair and devouring the Lice that were in it.”⁵³ In an account of an expedition seeking the Northwest Passage in northern Can-
ada, the explorer and naturalist Samuel Hearne (1745–92) tells a similar tale of Eskimos:

Their clothing, which chiefly consists of deer skins . . . makes them very subject to be lousy; but that is so far from being thought a disgrace, that the best among them amuse themselves with catching and eating these vermin. . . . My old guide, Matonabbee, was so remarkably fond of those little vermin, that he frequently set five or six of his strapping wives to work to louse their hairy deer-skins, the produce of which being always very considerable, he eagerly received with both hands, and licked them in as fast, and with as good a grace, as any European epicure would the mites in a cheese. . . . I had no inclination to accustom myself to such dainties.54

According to travel accounts, European lice avoided the fate of their foreign brethren by deserting their hosts when the voyagers passed the equator. The Spanish explorer Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y Valdés (1478–1557) mentions that during a journey along the coast of Latin America, the lice on soldiers “died and forsook them, [but] sodainly in their repassing by the same clime (as though these Lice had tarried for them in that place) they can by no meanes avoide them for the space of certaine daies, although they change their shirts two or three times in a day.”55 This legend found its way into literature when Don Quixote instructs Sancho about the fate of European lice:

You shall understand Sancho, that when the Spanyards, and those that imbarque themselves at Cadiz, to goe to the East Indies, one of the greatest signes they have, to know whether they have passed the aequinoctial, is, that all men that are in the Ship, their Lice die upon them, and not one remaines with them, not in the Vessel, though they would give their weight in gold for him: so that Sancho, thou maist put thy hand to thy thigh, and if thou meet with any live thing, we shall be out of doubt; if thou findest nothing, then we have passed the Line.56

The Spanish weren’t the only ones to experience the peregrinations of lice. In the seventeenth century, the Dutch and the English began a process of seizing and exploiting the lands of tribes they called the “Hottentots” in South Africa. The Hottentots, according to one eighteenth-century source, “swarm with lice,” although “none will live on the body of a European at the cape.” Moreover, “whatever place one of these insects alight on, is deemed sacred by the Hottentots.” He declared that “the Hottentots are certainly the lousiest people in the world.” They, of course, “devour” lice out of a sense of
revenge. And they are not ashamed about delousing themselves in public “but pursue the Game, let who will appear before ’em, with as much Countenance as we do the most laudable Employments or Diversions.” Once again, the bestiality of the foreigner is indicated by the presence of lice on their bodies and their menu, while lice avoid civilized people.

But as John Southall found out when he visited Jamaica and learned the secret of his bedbug-killing elixir, sometimes the natives knew more than their European betters. When another supposed traveler in Africa, after spending the night in bed with sand lice, found himself covered with red and purple spots that itched terribly, he showed “my old host the marks they had left upon me, which made him laugh; but he gave me some elephant’s fat, and told me I must anoint myself.” This travel account was actually fraudulent, but its illustration of European and English attitudes toward Africans, and lice, was unquestionable.

As the so-called civilized British and American societies became increasingly concerned with manners and appearance, they could not tolerate association with their one-time personal guest, the louse. Their dismissal of outsider groups within their own societies as lousy expanded to cover entire nations, groups, and continents. Like the Irish, the Scots, and English beggars, the alien peoples were without appropriate shame and deserved the condemnation of the civilized. Their appearance and appetites testified to their bestiality and otherness. Although lice had been a way to satirize the pretentious and teach a lesson about the fragility of borders in any society, increasingly they became a signifier of immorality, inferiority, and otherness. In the nineteenth century, lice figure prominently in the emerging debate about racial types, even in the scientific musings of Charles Darwin. By the twentieth century, the presence of lice made the battlefields of Europe particularly loathsome. And by the time of the Second World War, lice played an even more prominent role in the genocidal imagination of the Nazis—“nits become lice” evolved into the belief that Jews, Gypsies, and the mentally handicapped were simply forms of lice that required extermination.