Getting Under Our Skin

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Sarasohn, Lisa T.
Getting Under Our Skin: The Cultural and Social History of Vermin.

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In 1797, the moralist and evangelist Hannah More described one of the less desirable members of society, a thief and ratcatcher named Black Giles:

Among the many trades which Giles professed, he sometimes practised that of a rat catcher; but he was addicted to so many tricks that he never followed the same trade long. Whenever he was sent for to a farm-house, his custom was to kill a few of the old rats, always taking care to leave a little stock of young ones alive sufficient to keep up the breed; for, said he, “If I were to be such a fool as to clear a house or a barn at once, how would my trade be carried on?” And where any barn was overstocked, he used to borrow a few from thence just to people a neighbouring granary which had none; and he might have gone on till now, had he not unluckily been caught one evening emptying his cage of young rats under Parson Wilson’s barn-door.¹

Black Giles encapsulates all the qualities of the rats he pretends to pursue: he is sly as well as a thief and a breaker of boundaries. The underlying theme of every rat narrative in premodern Europe and America is that rats are dangerous, and that rat-like people share rats’ power to destroy or pervert man and nature. In Macbeth, the First Witch promises, “And, like a rat without a tail, I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do.”² What she will do is “Maleficia,” or cause harm or death to property or people. In King Lear, Edgar, feigning madness, claims that when he is under the grip of “the foul fiend,” he eats “mice and rats, and such small deer, / Have been Tom’s food for seven long year.”³ Such a diet is clearly unnatural. In the King James Bible, Leviticus enjoins, “These also shall be unclean unto you among the creeping things that creep upon the earth; the weasel, and the mouse, and the tortoise after his kind” (11:29). Mice and rats were considered the same species in King James’s England, so this prohibi-
tion told believers that eating these creatures was not only disgusting but also heretical.4

The dangerous qualities of rats and their hunters were often portrayed in legends and folktales. Not surprisingly, when the witch craze raged through Europe in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century, rats were linked with the devil, just like lice and fleas. Religious leaders did not hesitate to claim that Catholics or Protestants or Anabaptists worshipped Satan and that their demon familiars appeared in the shape of rats. The medieval story of the Pied Piper, who rid the German town of Hamelin of its rats—and, after the city leaders refused to pay him, of its children—spread quickly throughout Europe and was told in England by the beginning of the seventeenth century.5

Whether rats are associated with the supernatural, with witchcraft, with folklore (as in the Pied Piper legend), with religion or politics, or with social upheaval, they represent a force out of control. Alternatively, they are controllable only by a power that is more than human—Satan or God, witch or angel—or by a power that seems less than human—the ratcatcher. Rats are the ultimate other; they signify a part of nature that is unnatural and can turn on nature itself, even to the extent of cannibalizing their own species.

We know now that one of the most calamitous events in human history—the bubonic plague—was the gift of flea-infected rats to humankind, but this knowledge came only at the very end of the nineteenth century.6 In a practical sense, during early modern times rats were despised as major competitors for human food resources. The historian Mary Fissell highlights this aspect of the rat–human relationship. Rather than responding with disgust to the filthy habits of rats, which “perhaps . . . is something of a luxury” only possible in recent times, earlier people considered rats and other creatures to be verminous because they “poached human food, often items which were ready for human consumption; vermin ate things in which humans had already invested considerable time and effort.”7 Edward Topsell, a seventeenth-century naturalist and one of the few writers who distinguished between rats and mice, complained that rats “are more noysome [noisome] then the little Mouse, for they live by stelth, and feed upon the same meat that they feede upon, and therefore as they exceed in quantity [i.e., they are bigger than mice], so they devourre more, and doe farre more harme.”8

In their efforts to purloin human food, rats are stealthy and extremely difficult to catch.9 The cunning of rats is a truism—and perhaps a truth—going back to antiquity and confirmed in modern laboratory studies. Francis Bacon, the father of empirical science, stated the common belief, “It is the Wise-
dome of Rats, that will be sure to leave a House somewhat before it fall.” Legendarily, rats will also desert a sinking ship, creating an adage often applied to humans as well. Thus many politicians and courtiers, throughout early modern times, were viewed as detestable rats who put their own interests first. This analogy crossed the ocean to the United States; in early America the Vermont Republican declared: “It is a maxim among sailors that before the vessel is to be lost the Rats will desert her. There has been a wonderful desertion of Rats lately from the Federal Ship.”

Hatred of rats in England increased when the brown rat (Mus norvegicus) displaced the black rat (Rattus rattus) in the eighteenth century, at almost the same time as the perceived arrival of the bedbug. The eighteenth-century writer Oliver Goldsmith, after describing the blood struggle between native black rats and invading brown rats, explained, “The Norway rat has the same disposition to injure us [as the black rat], with much greater powers of mischief. . . . But nothing that can be eaten seems to escape its rapacity.” Fortunately, these rats “eat and destroy each other;” thus limiting their “amazing propagation” and preventing their ravages from destroying humanity. Goldsmith’s source for this claim was one of the most important naturalists of the nineteenth century, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, whose description of rat cannibalism is downright terrifying: “When a famine is created by too great a number being crowded into one place, the strong kill the weak, open their heads, and first eat the brain, and then the rest of the body. Next day, the war is renewed, and continues in the same manner till most of them are destroyed.”

The English feared that they were under attack by the natural world; rats seemed to undermine traditional hierarchies in politics, society, and nature. Some naturalists thought that the brown rat arrived in ships from Norway in the 1730s, but this species was also referred to as the Hanoverian rat, linked with the despised Hanover dynasty, which had taken the British throne in 1714. Just as their new monarchs were considered foreigners who despoiled the country, their eponymous rodents were eating the British Isles out of house and home. Sometime between 1750 and 1770, the brown rats arrived in America, shipping out in British ships with their fellow colonists.

In earlier times, even the less threatening black rat was associated with those who were undermining the political and religious status quo; three of Richard III’s hated councilors, William Catesby, Richard Ratcliffe, and Francis Lovell (whose heraldic symbol was a wolfhound), were attacked by a me-
dieval punster, William Collingbourne, as “The Catte, the Ratte, and Lovell our dogge.” This was not meant to be complimentary.

The only way to control rats was through ratcatchers, but these destroyers of rodents were often considered dangerous themselves. They shared the characteristics of their prey. Like rats, they undermined hierarchies. They roamed from place to place and were therefore outsiders, even if they spoke English. Instead of running from rats, they seemed to embrace them—their
depictions reflected their intimacy with the enemy. In this nineteenth-century drawing, the ratcatcher is plainly a vagabond who alerts his clients to his business by having live rats swarming around his body. He seems to be looking around warily, perhaps anticipating the antipathy his profession arouses, even if his actions helped his customers.

Rats were omnipresent in the fields and towns of Europe, and efforts to control them were prominent in society, religion, politics, and literature. Like other vermin, rats swarmed across boundaries, seeming to enjoy living with human beings, eating their crops, invading their homes and biting their children. Next to domesticated animals—often used to hunt and destroy them—rats were the mammals most familiar to people. When natives of farms and towns moved into British cities, the rats moved with them, exchanging hayricks for sewers and basements.

**Fabulous Rats**

Rats had a particularly bad reputation in early modern England. In a 1608 play by John Day, a husband decides to have his wife, a “she rat,” killed because of her supposed adultery; moreover, a friend urges him to kill her with “rats bane,” a form of arsenic because “This she Rat is a Devill.” It all turns out well in the end—it is a comedy—but the symbolic resonances of “rat” remain clear.

The lascivious nature of rats made them natural allies of the devil and his minions on earth, the witches. Both learned and common people believed that witches had sexual relations with demons who took the forms of different animals, including rats. In the play *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), the so-called witch, an old lady named Elizabeth Sawyer, sells her soul to the devil to get revenge on her neighbors. She proclaims,

> I have heard old Beldames  
> Talk of Familiars in the shape of Mice,  
> Rats, Ferrets, Weasels, and I wot not,  
> That have appear’d, and suck’d, some say, their blood.

The creatures that suck the women’s blood are penetrating the bodies of the witches and essentially having sex with them. Like them, the witch of Edmonton will chose evil:

> Abjure all goodness: be at hate with prayer;  
> And study Curses, Imprecations,
Blasphemous speeches, Oaths, detested Oaths,
Or any thing that’s ill; so I might work
Revenge upon this Miser, this black Cur.15

The play *The Witch of Edmonton*, written in 1621 and published in 1658, was based on a true story, the arrest and execution of Elizabeth Sawyer for witchcraft in 1621. In her confession at the trial, Sawyer admitted that the devil came to her and sucked her just above her fundament, or backside, from a teat. Whether the devil takes the form of a rat in the actual act is not mentioned in the confession, but another confession by another accused witch is more precise. According to Philippa Flowers at her trial,

shee hath a Spirit sucking on her in the forme of a white Rat, which keepeth her left breast, and hath so done for three or foure yeares, and concerning the agreement betwixt her Spirit and her selfe, she confesseth and saith, that when it came first vnto her, shee gaue her Soule to it, and it promised to doe her good, and cause Thomas Simpson to love her, if shee would suffer it to sucke her.16

Philippa lusted after Thomas Simpson, who “presumed to say, that she had bewitched him; for he had no power to leave her” and the devil lusted after her, coming to her in the form of a white rat. But Philippa was not the only one in her family who gave her soul to the devil. Her sister Margaret and her mother Joan also agreed to worship him when he came to them in the “pretty” forms of a rat or a dog or a toad, and their compacts “were ratified with abominable kisses, and an odious sacrifice of blood.”17 Another friend of theirs, Joan Willimot, also had a rat familiar. Collectively, these women are known as the Witches of Belvoir.

Diabolical rats and other familiars gave women power, if only in the minds of their neighbors and employers. Joan Flowers was so ugly and abusive her neighbors believed she was a witch even before the trial began: “yea some neighbours dared to affirme that shee dealt with familiar spirits, and terrified them all with curses and threatning of reuenge.” But the major cause of the charge of witchcraft was because Sir Francis Manners, Sixth Earl of Rutland, and his wife believed that the Flowers had caused the deaths of their male children and the infertility of the wife.18

Historians have proposed many reasons for the persecution of witches, including the belief that women—and especially old women—were sexually voracious and the fear that women might undo the traditional patriarchy. Some women were marginalized in the village economy because they were
widows or spinsters living in poverty who may have supplemented their meagre earnings with love or healing potions or as midwives.\textsuperscript{19} The charge of witchcraft often reflected the notion that women had subverted their maternal role, nurturing “demonic imps” rather than nourishing their own children.\textsuperscript{20} But these interpretations do not explain why rats or mice or weasels or dogs or cats were associated with witchcraft. These animals share a taste for human food and cross lines to get it. They suck nourishment from the provender that is supposed to nourish man and beast, just as witches allow their familiars to suck their blood and body, subverting nursing into a diabolical activity. Rats especially have a reputation for unbounded lust and procreation. Mice, rats, and weasels were all considered verminous, and by association, the creatures that hunted them—cats and dogs—could also be considered unclean.\textsuperscript{21}

One belief in early modern Britain reflected the threat rodents posed to the poor, as well the connection between rodents and sex. According to Topsell, “in general all Mice, and not only the white Mouse, are most desirous of copulation. And when they are in copulation, they embrace with their tails, filling one another without all delay. By tasting of Salt, they are made very fruitful . . . by the licking of Salt, do ingender and conceive with young without any other copulation.”\textsuperscript{22} The power of salt in conception was a belief going back to antiquity and may be associated with the fact that semen and urine are salty.\textsuperscript{23}

Moreover, the linking of rodent procreation with mice’s long tails—rats have even longer ones—clearly has phallic meaning. The nursery rhyme “Three Blind Mice” reflects this association, although somewhat obliquely. The first appearance of the rhyme was in a collection of songs published by Thomas Ravenscroft in 1609: “Three blinde Mice, three blinde Mice, Dame Iulian, Dame Iulian, the Miller and his merry olde Wife, shee scrapte her tripe [and] licke thou the knife.”\textsuperscript{24} In medieval and early modern England, millers were often associated with lust, as Chaucer’s \textit{Miller’s Tale} famously demonstrates, and they were often accused of stealing wheat or taking an unfair amount as their payment.\textsuperscript{25} In this way, they were like rats and mice. Old women were considered especially lustful, as we saw in the accusations of witchcraft. In this iteration, the merry old wife is scraping the tripe, a part of the animal associated with the buttocks, a part of the devil’s body that the witch was often accused of kissing. Then, in a change of subject, we discover that mice have been blinded because they licked her knife, yet another phallic refer-
ence. Presumably, a seventeenth-century audience would have understood the song’s sexual connotations.

Another ballad, “The famous Ratketcher, with his travels into France, and of his return to London,” also played on the powers of rats. The ratcatcher is “The soundest blade of all his trade” who “Upon a Poale he carried/Full fourty fulsome Vermine.” The ratcatcher is well endowed with blades and poles to kill rats but “Whose cursed lives without any Knives,/To take he did determine.” Instead of using knives, he kills his vermin with arsenic and poppies, a drug taught to him by an African, and other herbs he learned in India. This master of rats is somehow foreign and dangerous, especially to women. In London, he so lusts after a maiden that he baits her with a food that “would kill no Rats nor Mice”; the bait is clearly his penis:

And on the Baite she nibled
So pleasing in her taste,
She lick so long, that the Pyson [poison] strong,
Did make her swell I’th waste [waist].

The “waste” that swells should be read as “waist”—the lecherous ratcatcher has left the woman pregnant. He flees to the countryside to avoid responsibility, carouses with rogues and Gypsies, and is such a prodigious drinker “that it was doubtful whether,/He taught the Rats, or the Rats taught him/To be druncke as Rats, together.” Unfortunately, his adventures leave him with a sore “bag” and “flag,” that is, scrotum and penis. On repairing to France, he consults another ratcatcher about his “fiery burning” and just “as Witches common,/must use anothers ayying [aiding],” the Frenchman (the French are experts on the French disease, or syphilis) gives him a potion to cure his problem. Home he goes to England, where he finds “An Ugly Wench . . . whose Nose was knawne [gnawed] with Vermin.” Whether this syphilitic woman is the one responsible for his disease is left unclear, but in the rest of the ballad, the ratcatcher continues on his merry way, refusing to aid any maiden or woman unless she sleeps with him.

Samuel Pepys owned a copy of “The Famous Ratketcher,” which was probably first written down at the beginning of the seventeenth century. We can imagine the famous, and famously bawdy, diarist guffawing over its lyrics. Pepys belonged to the Royal Society, whose members were not as amused by the antics associated with rats. Robert Boyle (1627–91), next to Isaac Newton the most important member of the Society in the seventeenth century, re-
counts the experience of “a Gentleman, a strong and resolute Man, who had been long a Souldier” who “was strangely fearful of Rats, and could not endure the sight of them.” This gentleman, who had been ill for a long time and traveled extensively to find a cure, “coming at length accidently and suddenly into a place where a great Rat was in a corner . . . he furiously leap’d upon him . . . and thereby put him into a fright which freed him from the Ague [i.e., illness].” The idea that fright could cure a disease seems no more scientific than the belief in witchcraft, but Boyle credited its possibility because a gentleman he knew testified to experiencing this cure. Boyle felt that “witnessing” by reliable observers established truth. So, at least indirectly, rats could help effect a medical cure.

Boyle believed that it was necessary to dissect animals, including rats and mice, to understand nature and God’s plan for the natural world. Unlike René Descartes, who maintained that animals were automata, like machines, and could not experience feelings, Boyle acknowledged that animals could feel pain. The fabulist Jean de la Fontaine (1621–95) took issue with Descartes when he published his version of Aesop’s *Fables* between 1668 and 1694. Although his work was not translated into English at this time, most educated Englishmen could read French. In “The Two Rats, the Fox, and the Egg,” La Fontaine argued that while animals may not possess the same kind of rationality as men, they still think and feel. To prove this, he told of two rats who find an egg and in order to protect their meal from an encroaching fox, “one of them lay upon his back and took the egg safely between his arms whilst the other, in spite of sundry shocks and a few slips, dragged him home by the tail.” And so, he concluded, “After this recital, let any one who dare maintain that animals have no power of reason.”

La Fontaine’s endorsement of animal rationality was based on the great chain of being: “We must allow to the beast a higher plane than that of plants, notwithstanding the fact that plants breathe.” The fabulist was quite serious about this argument, reflecting hundreds of years of French, German, and Italian legal history, treating rats as animals who could understand enough human language to obey an order to appear in an ecclesiastical court on a charge of destroying fields and to abandon those fields when so ordered. Historians and anthropologists have argued about the meaning of animal trials since E. P. Evans first wrote about them in 1906; he saw them as “magical hocus-pocus” and held “in the interest of ecclesiastical dignities to keep up this parody and perversion . . . since it strengthened their influence and extended their authority by subjecting even the caterpillar and the canker-worm
to their dominion and control.”

Most recent writers dispute this univocal—and prejudicial—explanation of this practice and emphasize the role of trials in establishing a sense of order and control in a population trying to understand disasters caused by hungry vermin. As is often the case in the anthropomorphizing of animals, their resemblance to human beings is not simply metaphorical but even literal—at least to those making the analogy.

Animal sentience and rationality were recognized as part of the order of nature both in England and on the continent. The English domestic guide *The Vermin Killer* (1680) went a step further, by assuming that rats and mice are naturally altruistic. The author advises those who want to get rid of the vermin to heat water in an earthen pot and throw two or three live rats or mice into it, “and all the Rats and Mice in the house, hearing the Cry of those in the Pot will run immediately to the Place . . . as if they intend by force to deliver the Rats and Mice in the Pot.” He also suggests putting the dregs of oil in a brass or copper pot, placing it in the middle of the room, and “all the Rats and Mice will make their Appearance, as if it were to be an Assembly of an Army of Rats and Mice.” Why a copper or brass pot does the trick is not explained—perhaps it’s a reference to the cauldrons used by witches—but once the rats are gathered, either by pot or sympathy, they can be exterminated.

Another method for killing rodents in *The Vermin Killer* speaks directly to the witch connection: “Take the Head of a Rat or Mouse, pull the Skin from it, and carry the Head where the Mice and Rats usually come, and they will immediately be gone from thence, Running altogether as if they were bewitched, and come no more.” Mary Fissell comments on this advice, “This display of the tiny head reminds one of the contemporaneous human executions for treason, when Londoners routinely saw the heads of the executed stuck on pikes as dreadful warnings.” When rats are bewitched, they become like witches; they are enemies to God and therefore deserve death by execution.

The reference to assemblies and armies in *The Vermin Killer* also implies a political dimension to rat incursions. By 1680, when *The Vermin Killer* was first published, the English feared the accession of the Duke of York, later James II, to the English throne. And the memory of the execution of Charles I in 1649 was also clear. Politics, religion, and rats had a new lease on life.

**King Rat: Rodent Religion and Politics**

In the Middle Ages, there was a saint for almost everything, and rats shared in the religious bounty. A seventh-century Flemish nun, St. Gertrude of Nev-
ille (629–59), is considered the patron saint of rats and mice, with whom she is often depicted—they represent the souls she was said to protect on their journey through Purgatory, or perhaps her protection of crops from their ravages. Another rat-focused religious personage was the German Bishop Hatto of Mayence in the tenth century, about whom no one had anything good to say. During a famine, instead of sharing his grain with starving peasants, he gathered them in a barn and burnt them alive, and, according to the account by Oliver Cromwell’s teacher, the theologian Thomas Beard:

But God that had regard and respect unto those poore wretches, tooke their cause into his hand, to quitt this proud Prelate with just revenge for his outrage committed against them; sending towards him an army of rats and mice to lay siege against him with the engines of their teeth on all sides, which when this cursed wretch perceived, he removed into a tower that standeth in the midst of Rhine, not far from Bing, whither hee presumed this host of rats could not pursue him; but he was deceived: for they swum over Rhine thick and threefold, and got into his tower with such strange fury, that in very short space they had consumed him to nothing; in memoriall whereof, this tower was ever after called the tower of rats. And this was the tragedy of that bloody archbutcher that compared poore Christian soules to brutish and base creatures, and therefore became himselfe a prey unto them. 

Calvinists during the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century did not hesitate to use lives of saints and prelates to vilify the Catholic Church. Bishop Hatto was an easy target, a sinful prelate justly destroyed by rats. (The cleric who sparked the Reformation, Martin Luther, described the apex of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church as “the Pope, the king of rats right at the top.”) Beard also brought rodents into an attack on the Catholic mass, demanding, “Whether if a Rat eate the Host, he be thereby sanctified and, and made an holy Rat?” Calvinist authors condemned even the presumably sweet St. Gertrude, sneering that she was “worshipt by superstitious people, because (as they say) she preserves them from rats and mice.”

Linking theological enemies to rats was common to all sides in the religious wars of the seventeenth century. Sir John Denham (1615–69), an Anglican poet and royalist who lost his estates and position during the English Civil War, wrote a long satirical poem about English Calvinists trying to install their church in Ireland; it starred a rat named Rattamountain, “a Ratt of Fame . . . He all the Rules and Tricks could show, /Both Arts of War, and Peace did know,/ To cheat a Friend or spoil a Foe.” Deciding to go to war,
Rattamountain rallies his forces by invoking the rodent victory over Bishop Hatto: “And did we not neer Mentz devour, / Their Prelate (Maugre [in spite of] all his power).” The rats will triumph, he promises, because they are so fertile their females will produce an endless supply of soldiers, and, moreover, the rats will ally with mice against the Irish cats. In their newly formed Presbyterian Parliament, the rats will become the peers and the mice the commons, and Rattamountain will be king. All the playhouses will close (as Cromwell did in England) and be replaced by conventicles.\textsuperscript{39}

Denham’s rats possess many of the negative qualities associated with rats and with people having rat-like characteristics: they are cunning, incredibly fecund, and upset the traditional balance of nature and society. Both sides of the English Civil War, the royalist Cavaliers and the parliamentary Roundheads, were driven by religious passions, producing atrocities with rat-like resonances. One parliamentary supporter charged that William Smith, Charles I’s keeper of the prison in Oxford, threatened Roundhead prisoners that unless they signed a royalist loyalty oath, “he would make us to shit as small as a Rat.”\textsuperscript{40} Presumably, that was because their prison diet would produce a certain excretory result, but the threat also speaks to the view that enemies were a kind of rat. Once again, dehumanizing the other means verminizing them.

Oliver Cromwell even saw rodent identity in a supporter Edmund Harvey, who “being accused of fraudulent dealings . . . was discarded by Cromwell. . . . I never heard any that could speak of his honesty or courage, being as to the last a little inconsiderable ratt, and as to the other a factious Rumper, and one of his Majesties cruell Judges.”\textsuperscript{41} After switching sides several times, Harvey ultimately supported parliament against the king but was afterward convicted of malfeasance and stripped of the offices he had been granted by Cromwell. At the Restoration, he was denied indemnity and spent the rest of his life in prison.

If Charles I had known of Harvey’s fate, he might have taken some satisfaction at this rat getting his just reward. In the \textit{Eikon Basilike}, a spiritual autobiography attributed to the king and published in 1649 just ten days after his beheading, Charles supposedly wrote, “I see Vengeance pursues and overtakes (as the Mice and Rats are said to have done the Bishop in Germany) them that thought to have escaped and fortified themselves most impregnable against it both by their Multitude and Compliance. Whom the Laws cannot, God will punish, by their own Crimes and hands.”\textsuperscript{42} Thus awareness of Bishop Hatto and his rat-bitten finish reached even to the highest seat of power, at least until it became an ejection seat. The regicides are rats, rodents
who have deserted their sovereign; they are, according to the spiritual auto-
biography, “guilty of prodigious insolencies; when as before, they were counted
as Friends and necessary Assistants.” Or perhaps they are rats, as is their
proverbial custom, deserting a sinking ship or a burning house.

By 1660, the fire seemed to have been put out. The Restoration of Charles II
opened a period of peace and seeming tolerance for religious differences. The
king was a pragmatist who avoided open conflict on religious questions. But
many of his subjects did not share his temperate attitude. Serenus Cressy,
an English convert to Catholicism who later became a Benedictine monk,
accused the Anglican clergyman Edward Stillingfleet of being like a rat who
“foresees, or shrewdly suspects some danger to the Ship [of state]” and aban-
dons it and “therefore provides for his own safety, by returning to the same
Sects which incessantly plot against it,” notably the radical Protestants re-
sponsible for the execution of Charles I. Not surprisingly, Stillingfleet an-
swered by linking Cressy with the Jesuits—not popular in England at any
time—who “like Rats have forsaken a sinking ship? It would be a great Joy to
the whole Nation, to hear we were so well rid of them.”

Rats raised their snouts politically again after the Glorious Revolution,
when the Catholic James II was booted out in favor of his daughter Mary and
her husband, William of Orange, who became joint sovereigns of England. In
a fable written in 1698 but credited to Aesop, “The Weasel, Rats, and Mice,” a
crafty and power-hungry weasel-king decides to augment his power by de-
stroying the mice who might challenge him. He consults an “aged Rat”

And ask’d him his advice,
Whether a Project mayn’t be try’d
To eat up all the Mice.
Ay, quoth the Rat, your Majesty
May be well satisfy’d.
Mice haters are of Monarchy,
And Regal State deride.

Together, King Weasel, his weasel followers, and the rats devour all the mice.
But it was a bad bargain for the rats, which the weasels now devour:

Kings must have sumptuous Meat.
The Rats now all do go to pot:
Some Bak’d, some Boil’d, some Roasted;
’Tis hop’d they had not then forgot
How they the Mice accosted.
Thus some Men oft by Tyrant Power.
Their Kindred, Subject Slaves devour,
Do all the Villanies are done
To prop a beastly Tyrant Throne;
Tho’ others Blood the Tyrant fill’d,
They must at length to’s Fury yield;
Nought stops a Tyrant’s Course but Decollation,
Or else a modern Abdication.\(^{46}\)

So, tyrants get their due either by decollation—meaning decapitation—or abdication, after they seek to destroy their subjects. Such were the fates of Charles I and James II.

Rats continued to surface politically, but more as a metaphor for inept or corrupt government than for doctrinal controversy. This is particularly evident in the response to the new Hanoverian dynasty that began in 1714 with the accession of George I, the German-speaking Elector of Hanover. Unfortunately for him, his accession coincided with the spread of the brown or Norway rat, which rapidly displaced the black rat and came to be called by royal critics of the monarchy: the Hanover rat.

In his parody of a learned scientific treatise, *An Attempt towards a Natural History of the Hanover Rat*, published anonymously in 1744, Henry Fielding capitalized on the brown rat’s appearance to attack the second Hanoverian king, George II (r. 1727–60).\(^{47}\) His narrator begins by mentioning that this type of rat first appeared about thirty years before the treatise’s publication—in 1714—the date of George I’s accession. The narrator explains that the rat came from Germany and its favorite food is pumpernickel, and although it was “very lean,” its voracious appetite soon makes it grow to the size of an elephant. In fact, the more it was fed, “the more greedy it grew,” especially devouring the goods of “the middling rank” and country gentlemen.\(^{48}\) In the complex English politics of the mid-eighteenth century, these were the groups that would generally oppose Robert Walpole, the first English Prime Minister, who dominated English politics between 1721 and 1742.

According to Fielding’s satire, the Hanover rat hoards what it takes and “will not allow an English Rat, if it were starving, to touch one of their Hoards.”\(^{49}\) The Hanover rat is aided in its depredations by English accomplices or “Providers,” and together they “immediately fell to undermining a large Building near the Thames, which was said to be raised upon such a solid
Foundation that nothing can hurt it; and has always before served as a safe Retreat for our English Rats when exposed to any extraordinary Danger.”

The large building is clearly the Houses of Parliament, where its English ministers now aid the Hanover rat in its voracious gulping of the resources of the country. It seems, our scientific gentleman argues, that England has lost all the ratcatchers who previously would have poisoned any rat “as have dared to peep out of its Hole, after it had taken any Thing from the Granary, Warehouse, or Shop; but now these Hanover Rats swarm to such a Degree, that we may truly say, the Farmer ploughs and sows, and the industrious Part of the Nation labour to feed Rats.”

The unpopularity of the Hanoverians and their English allies surfaced in Fielding’s better-known Tom Jones, published in 1749 under his own name, in a speech from Squire Allworthy, Tom Jones’s kindly benefactor:

Pox! The world is coming to a fine pass indeed, if we are all fools except a parcel of roundheads and Hanover rats. Pox! I hope the times are a coming when we shall make fools of them, and every man shall enjoy his own. . . . I hope to see it, sister, before the Hanover rats have eaten up all our corn, and left us nothing but turneps to feed upon.

The Hanoverian monarchs also caused another eighteenth-century literary heavyweight to think of rats eating away at the resources of the kingdom. In “A Letter to Mr. Harding,” published anonymously in the Drapier’s Letters (1724), Jonathan Swift denounced the corruptly acquired grant of a patent to William Wood to mint copper coins to use in Ireland. “It is no loss of honour to submit to the lion,” declared the letter, “but who, with the figure of a man, can think with patience of being devoured alive by a rat.”

In Gulliver’s Travels, published two years later in 1726, the author’s protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, does indeed fight rats, presumably reducing him to the status of the rodent. In the novel, Gulliver journeys to the Kingdom of Brobdignag, where he is captured by a farmer, made into a kind of toy by his daughter, Glumdalclitch, and put on display for the entertainment of the Brobdignagians. While in their custody, he does battle with two rats:

While I was under these circumstances, two rats crept up the curtains, and ran smelling backwards and forwards on the bed. One of them came up almost to my face, whereupon I rose in a fright, and drew out my hanger [his sword] to defend myself. These horrible animals had the boldness to attack me on both sides, and one of them held his fore-feet at my collar; but I had the good for-
tune to rip up his belly before he could do me any mischief. He fell down at
my feet; and the other, seeing the fate of his comrade, made his escape, but
not without one good wound on the back, which I gave him as he fled, and
made the blood run trickling from him.\textsuperscript{54}

The rats are the epitome of every awful thing that can happen to a man
who has devolved to the level, or at least the size, of a rodent. Gulliver’s sim-
ilarity to a rat becomes even more evident after he has been taken to the royal
palace. The queen commissions “her own cabinet-maker to contrive a box”
to serve as the traveler’s bedchamber. The box is “sixteen feet square, and
twelve high, with sash-windows, a door, and two closets, like a London bed-
chamber. The board, that made the ceiling, was to be lifted up and down by
two hinges, to put in a bed ready furnished by her majesty’s upholsterer.”\textsuperscript{55}
The ceiling is fitted with a lock to prevent rats and mice from coming in or
perhaps to prevent the prisoner from getting out, since it is has a lock that
Glumdalclitch secures every night. In other words, it is essentially identical
to the cages that ratcatchers used to display their captives and prove their
skill at catching rats, like the example on page 192.

Swift himself felt like a rat due to his self-described exile in Ireland as
dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin. He wrote to his friend Henry St.
John, Viscount Bolingbroke, “It is time for me to have done with the world
. . . and not die here in a rage, like a poisoned rat in a hole.”\textsuperscript{56} One of the rea-
sons Swift was fated to die in Ireland like a rat in a hole was his antipathy
for the political leaders of his time. Like Fielding, he had no love for Robert
Walpole, although he did support the Hanoverians for religious reasons. In
\textit{Gulliver’s Travels}, the Brobdingnagian king informs Gulliver:

\begin{quote}
you have made a most admirable panegyric upon your country; you have
clearly proved, that ignorance, idleness, and vice, are the proper ingredients
for qualifying a legislator; that laws are best explained, interpreted, and
applied, by those whose interest and abilities lie in perverting, confounding,
and eluding them. I observe among you some lines of an institution, which,
in its original, might have been tolerable, but these half erased, and the rest
wholly blurred and blotted by corruptions.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

And so the king finds “your natives to be the most pernicious race of little
odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the
earth.” Even an imaginary king in an imaginary place knows the power of
calling people vermin.
Political rats became an even more popular device of British satirical discourse in the later eighteenth century. In an anonymous caricature (page 193), Lord Frederick North, the English Prime Minister from 1770 to 1782, is portrayed as a ratcatcher, holding a box that would have made Gulliver feel at home.

The text of the magazine explains that this Political Rat Catcher may seem to be imaginary but actually exists and “is a person of no small consequence in the state. Indeed, when it comes to rats, he “can gratify the most voracious, tame the wildest, and silence the most noisy,” with a powder that contains “the elixir of office, or the essence of pension.” He is wily enough to let the rats loose periodically and establishes his reputation by quelling the resulting tumult. If anyone wants to see this remarkable personage, “he may be almost certain of meeting him any day during the sitting of Parliament.”\textsuperscript{58}

Lord North was not the only politician to get the rat treatment. John Rob-
inson was a member of parliament and secretary of the treasury under Lord North but did not follow him into the opposition in 1782 when the American Revolution drove Lord North from office. Robinson’s followers were called “Robinson’s Rats.” The illustration on page 194 indicates him watching them contentedly while he catches them in his traps, labeled with the various enticements he used to gain their support: promises of advancement in rank for the naval officer, a seat in parliament for another, and a pension of £1,000 for a third supporter. A shredded Magna Carta is pinned up on the wall,
while a drawing of William III is covered with a cobweb. The political rat-catcher is evidently happy to desert his previous party for his own political advancement—he is a rat seeking the patronage of the new prime minister, William Pitt the Younger. The poem underneath the picture reads:

Thus when Renegado sees a Rat
In the traps in the morning taken
With pleasure he goes to Master Pit to pat
And swears he will save his Bacon.\(^{59}\)

Satirists, including Swift and these cartoonists, were well aware of the negative stereotypes connected to the rat-catching profession. Ratcatchers were the lowest of the low in the English social hierarchy. As early as the seventeenth century, the dramatist John Day had a character ironically describe his “good breeding”: “My great Grandfather was a Rat-catcher, my Grandsire a Hangman, my father a Promoter, and my selfe an Informer.”\(^{60}\) Colloquially, a ratcatcher was someone who ratted on or destroyed another person for the
benefit of himself or the authorities. Like hangmen, and those who informed on their neighbors, they were marginalized figures, sometimes equated with rogues and thieves.\textsuperscript{61} As we saw earlier in the ballad “The Famous Ratketcher,” that ratcatcher “can Colloque with any Rogue, / and Cant with any Gipsie.” He also “Full often with a Negro, / The juice of Poppies drunke hee.” The racist connotations attached to the figure of the ratcatcher are clear here; by associating with Black people and Gypsies, the Ratketcher is put on a level with those most despised in English society. The Ratketcher is also such a drinker: “it is doubtful whether / He taught the Rats, or the Rats taught him / to be druncke as Rats together.” This analogy should be read as the equivalent of the more recent “drunk as a skunk,” but it also implies that the ratcatcher gets down and dirty with the rats, almost becoming one of them.\textsuperscript{62}

The negative stereotype of ratcatchers continued into the nineteenth century, when the sport of rat baiting or ratting became popular after 1835, when baiting larger animals was prohibited by an act of parliament. It was the rodents’ aggressiveness that led to rats becoming something like entertainers. We saw that flea circuses subjugated fleas but also portrayed them in heroic, or at least benign, ways. Rats, however, were used to satisfy the bloodlust of their audience, forced into rat pits and massacred by dogs, while viewers bet on how many the dogs could kill, and how quickly.

The most famous account of this bloodthirsty activity was by the journalist and social critic Henry Mayhew, the interviewer of Mr. Tiffin, the Bug Destroyer to Her Majesty. In \textit{London Labour and the London Poor}, the proto-social scientist spent many pages describing ratcatchers, including a sewer-man “who combed through the muck to find rats to sell for the rat pit.” This man’s house “is swarming with children,” a veritable rat’s nest, and the sewer man’s “eyes have assumed a \textit{peering} kind of look, that is quite rat-like in its furtiveness.”\textsuperscript{63}

But Mayhew also recognized that rat catching was becoming professionalized, mimicking the rising occupation of exterminator in the eighteenth century. Professional ratcatchers were eager to claim membership in the rising middle class, negating their former bad image. Mayhew interviewed at length the ratcatcher Jack Black, who described himself as “Rat Catcher to the Queen” and dressed accordingly.

Jack Black’s sash, decorated with rats (cast from his wife’s copper pots—she was not happy about that), reads “V-R,” for Victoria Regina. He began his career as a child around 1800, catching rats around Regent’s Park, then still meadows and fields, and three times he nearly died from rat bites. But by the
time he started supplying rats for the rat pits in the 1830s, he had learned how to handle them: “I found,” he told Mayhew, “I was quite the master of the rat, and could do pretty well what I liked with him.” Realizing he could prosper from his trade, both by killing and selling rats, Black had his costume made and started selling rat poison from a cart, perfecting an act during which he began “the show by putting rats inside my shirt next to my buzzum [bosom], or in my coat and breeches pockets, or on my shoulder... I used to handle the rats on every possible manner, letting ’em run up my arm, and
stroking their backs, and playing with ’em.”64 These tamed rats, not realizing that doom is upon them, anticipate a happier fate as beloved pets.

Jack Black seems like a character out of Charles Dickens, one of those seeking to rise in social status. Dickens knew of Henry Mayhew’s work, as did William Makepeace Thackeray, who has a character in *Vanity Fair* who learned about blood and breeding from rat killing: “O as for that,” said Jim, “there’s nothing like old blood; no, dammy, nothing like it. I’m none of your radicals. I know what it is to be a gentleman, dammy. See the chaps in a boat-race; look at the fellers in a fight; aye, look at a dawg killing rats,—which is it wins? the good blooded ones.”65

Jack Black knew how to breed rat-killing dogs. He had one named Billy, whom he claimed had been the best rat killer in London and was the ancestor of all the city’s really good rat-killing terriers. Indeed, he had sold one of Billy’s progeny to the Austrian ambassador and another to the wife of a banker, presumably as pets.66 But the audiences for Jack Black, his dogs, and his rats were usually members of the lower classes. He was part of the performing world, like the flea impresarios who staged spectacles for the amusement or edification of their fellows. When he dipped his hand into a basket of rats and brought them to climb around his body, it was “a feat which generally caused an ‘oh!’ of wonder to escape from the crowd.”67 As we have seen, Victorian London was the site of circuses, freak shows, and public exhibits of exotic animals and peoples, so Jack Black fit right into this particular atmosphere. He was a kind of monster who could perform superhuman feats, and he knew his rats as well as he knew himself.68

Jack Black does seem an amalgam of human and animal. He seems to embody Charles Fothergill’s description of rats in *An Essay on the Philosophy, Study and Use of Natural History* (1813) Fothergill repeats all the characteristics of rats that colored earlier natural history and folklore. “The male rat has an insatiable thirst for the blood of his own offspring . . . a single male of more than ordinary powers, after having overcome and devoured all competitors with the exception of a few females, reigns the sole bloody and much-dreaded tyrant over a considerable territory.” He notes that they are foreign invaders and almost impossible to kill.69

Likewise, Jack Black in his own estimation was “the master of the rat” who dominated the rodents like dominant male in a pack of rats. He was smart and cunning like a rat and enjoyed playing tricks on those unfamiliar with his talents. He was cannibalistic, at least when it came to rats, informing Mayhew that rats “were as moist as rabbits, and quite as nice.”70 Edible rats,
for Jack Black at least, were no longer vermin, and eating them was a sign of
civilization rather than savagery, although no Victorian cookbook contains
rat recipes. Black also encouraged rat procreation, crossbreeding rats to pro-
duce “the finest collection of pied rats which has ever been knowed in the
world. I had above eleven hundred of them—all wariegated rats, and of a dif-
ferent specie and colour, and all of them in the first instance bred from the
Norwegian and the white rat, and afterwards crossed with other specie.” He
sold these specialized rats as pets: his rats crossed the boundary between
carnivorous animal and human play toy.

Like the species-melding rats he produced, Jack Black was a boundary
crosser who attempted to rise above the class into which he had been born.
His rat catching was so successful he was able to buy a tavern. His daughter
served behind the bar, dressed as the “Ratketcher’s daughter in velvet and
lace, with a muslin skirt and her hair down her back, she looked very genteel,
added the parent.”

Unfortunately, the tavern did not thrive, and Jack Black was forced back
into the rat-catching trade. He caught rats for members of all classes and
places in London because, as would be true throughout history, “Rats are
everywhere about London, both in rich and poor places. I’ve ketched rats in
44 Portland-place, at a clergyman’s, house there.” He also aided a “medical
gent” in Hampstead whose children had been bitten so badly by rats “their
little night-gownds was kivered with blood, as if their throats had been cut.”
After Black destroyed the rats, “when I used to pass by that there house, the
little dears when they see me used to call out to their mamma, ‘O, here’s Mr.
Ratty, ma!’”

Mr. Ratty, indeed. When Henry Mayhew recounted the life and exploits
of Jack Black, he painted a picture of a society and its beliefs, what he called
“the undiscovered country of the poor.” Mayhew was attempting a descrip-
tion of all the various characters inhabiting the netherworld of London, “sup-
plying information concerning a large body of persons, of whom the public
has less knowledge than of the most distant tribes of the earth.” How much
Mayhew shaped the stories he heard, and whether he was sympathetic to the
people he was portraying, is open to debate. He was certainly pleasantly
surprised by Jack Black, who was “a very different man from what I had ex-
pected to meet, for there was an expression of kindliness in his countenance,
a quality which does not exactly agree with one’s preconceived notion of rat-
catchers.”

The preconceived image of ratcatchers and the vermin they caught was
usually negative, even if the craftiness rats displayed was admired. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, rats were the familiars of witches who had given themselves to the devil and joined his realm, like the Leicestershire witches or the witches in Macbeth, or because they literally come from another land. As we saw in chapter 4, Scotland and Ireland were both places where “the other” lives. Likewise, when ballads and fables tell the stories of rats and people, they are located in Germany with poor Bishop Hatto or Rat-tamountain’s kingdom in Ireland or the exotic lands where the Ratketcher wanders with gypsies and Africans, or Gulliver’s Brobdingnag. When foreign brown rats invade England, they are brought to the country by the foreign Hanoverians, who in turn encouraged those most rat-like among their new subjects and undermined the traditional institutions of the state. The monarchs are aided and opposed by political ratcatchers, the epitomes of aliens in a society. Actual ratcatchers continued their trade into the nineteenth century, when they gratified the most bloodthirsty of London’s population by supplying rats to the rat pits. In their way they were as alien as the foreign ratcatchers who proceeded them. Henry Mayhew interviewed one of the first proprietors of a rat pit in England, one Jimmy Shaw: “The poor people,” said the sporting landlord, “who supply me with rats, are what you may call barn-door labouring poor, for they are the most ignorant people I ever come near. Really you would not believe people could live in such ignorance. Talk about Latin and Greek, sir, why English is Latin to them—in fact, I have a difficulty to understand them myself.”

From all directions, the very fabric of English society could be gnawed by rats—and by the rat-like.