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“Hurtful, venomous, ravening...”: Animals as a Threat in 16th- and 17th-Century England. Selected Examples

Changes which occurred in the agricultural economy of Western Europe in the late Middle Ages, including new farming techniques but especially the clearing of new lands, gave man unquestioned domination over the world of nature as early as the threshold of the early modern era. The territories occupied by wild nature shrank considerably, which was accompanied by a decrease in the population of wild animals, constantly replaced by a growing number of domestic animals. At the same time, a division between human and animal space was more and more pronounced – the areas which before had naturally coexisted and penetrated each other. It was mainly the influence of a sudden territorial development and population growth of towns where there was less and less space for animals. Also in the country, for obvious reasons closer to nature than urban areas, there was an actual and symbolic separation of animals and their owners so far sharing one room, when the first ones were accommodated in separate sheds.¹

In general, the whole civilised, that is human space – urban streets, houses, fields and gardens – became, as if by definition, less friendly to animals, especially wild ones which began to disappear from a direct field

1 V. Fumagalli, *Landscapes of Fear. Perceptions of Nature and the City in the Middle Ages*, Stanford and London, 1994, pp. 138–145; K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World. A History of the Modern Sensibility*, Harmondsworth, 1984, pp. 40, 99; E. Fudge, *Perceiving Animals. Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture*, Urbana, 2002, pp. 132–133.

of vision. As a result, people were gradually less and less accustomed to the presence of animals in their immediate surroundings. Thus, when wild beasts rushed suddenly in among them, humans reacted with anxiety and fears. In 1595 the terrified and helpless inhabitants of Wymondham in Norfolk observed a large flock of ravens felling on their town to snatch away meat and fish from market butcher's shops and stalls.² In 1621, in turn, in the Irish town of Cork a battle of birds took place, after which the whole town was covered by corpses of dead birds; the event received a great deal of publicity throughout the whole Great Britain.³

These and other English cases of the appearance of animals in places where they should not be invariably caused extreme emotions, which could be regarded as a manifestation of primal fear of the wilderness encroaching upon the boundary of a relatively orderly human world. This fear can seem to us not quite rational, especially if we take into account that England in the 16th and 17th centuries was to a large extent a civilised country with no areas that could be called genuinely wild and could pose any real threat. Large forests and woodlands had almost disappeared from the countryside, and with them also big beasts of prey and wild animals that inspired terror only a few centuries earlier.

And although the genuinely wild nature was tamed in England, fear and anxiety it provoked did not disappear – they were shifted onto the animals which did not lurk in dark, distant and mysterious woods, but were seen constantly in the immediate surroundings of man, sharing with him the same space. This more easily perceived proximity of potentially dangerous animals – both wild and domesticated ones – made the feeling of threat more tangible and intense. It derived from fears that animals around people could destroy their properties, thus causing heavy material losses, or transmit infectious and deadly diseases, thus endangering the health and life of man.

In early modern literature about nature was still dominated by the convention to write about animals mainly in categories of their broadly understood utility. Edward Topsell – whose *History of Four-Footed Beasts* of 1607 was for the English writings on zoology as important as *Historiae Animalium* (1551–158) by the “German Pliny” Conrad Gesner⁴ for the

2 A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England*, Oxford, 2003, p. 172.

3 *The wonderfull battell of starelings; Fought at the Citie of Corke in Ireland, the 12. and 14. of October last past. 1621*, London, 1622.

4 The work of Conrad Gesner (1516–1565) was the most comprehensive and most influential European treatise on zoology in the 16th and 17th centuries (its scientific

European one – already in his title made it known to his readers that apart from appearance, types, characteristics, variety of names and territories of all four-footed animals known to him he would describe also their attitude towards humans, or, as he put it courtly, “their love and hate to mankind.” This anthropocentric approach was then confirmed in his dedication letter in which the author described his intention, at the same time preserving and emphasising the traditional division between animals which are useful and those which are useless, harmless and dangerous:

These things have I principally laboured in this treatise, to shew unto men what beasts are their friends, and what their enemies, which to trust, and which avoid, in which to find nourishment, and which to shun as poison.

Friends include, naturally, beasts of burden and animals raised for meat and dairy products, as well as those with healing properties used in medicine. The category of enemies included “hurtful, venomous, ravening, and destroying beasts,” which after the original sin turned both against their animal kin and against man.⁵

reputation was not damaged even by the fact that it was put on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a list of books banned by the Catholic Church, in 1559 by Pope Paul V because of the Protestantism of its author). Gesner compiled ancient sources preserved in libraries throughout Europe, but also used his own empirical knowledge acquired during his many voyages. As a result, a synthesis emerged with the whole knowledge of Gesner’s contemporaries concerning animal life (see: W.M. Carrol, *Animal Conventions in English Renaissance Non-Religious Prose (1550–1600)*, New York, 1954, p. 18; B. Cummings, ‘Pliny’s Literate Elephant & the Idea of Animal Language in Renaissance Thought’, in: *Renaissance Beasts. Of Animals, Humans, & Other Wonderful Creatures*, ed. by E. Fudge, Urbana and Chicago, 2004, p. 166). Topsell’s work is in its main part a translation of Gesner’s synthesis, but supplemented with original author’s additions.

5 E. Topsell, *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beastes. Describing the true and liuely figure of euery Beast, with a discourse of their seuerall names, Conditions, Kindes, Vertures (both natural and medicinali) Countries of their breed, their loue and hate to Mankinde, and the wonderfull worke of God in their Creation, Preseruatiō, and Destruction. Necessary for all Diuines and Students, because the story of euery Beast is amplified with Narrations out of Scriptures, Fathers, Phylosphers, Physitians, and Poets: wherein are declared diuers Hyeroglyphics, Emblems, Epigrams, and other good Histories, collected out of all the Volumes of Conradus Gesner, and all other Writers to this present day*, London, 1607, p. A4 (all original quotations in this text are after the Internet edition: *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents [...] Interwoven with curious variety of Historical Narrations out of Scriptures, Farhers, Philosophers, Physicians, and Poets [...] The whole Revised, Corrected, and Inlarged with the Addition of Two useful Physical Tables*, by J.R. M.D., London, 1658: <https://archive.org/stream/historyoffourfoo00tops#page/n7/mode/1up>; here p. 15).

Usually, a classification of usable animals did not ignite controversies in the case of animals friendly towards man: all regarded their useful and subservient role as obvious and indisputable. When, however, the question of the “enemies of mankind” was brought up, there appeared almost automatically a problem of purposefulness of apparently useless animals which, thus, seemed redundant. Anyway, it was a continuation of the old dispute between, among others, St. Augustine and the Manicheans for whom the creation of, for example, mice was a deed of “evil God” or “Falling evil” responsible for the creation of a world which deserved condemnation and rejection. St. Augustine in his polemics used a theological argument – repeated afterwards by his followers – that what appeared ugly and useless to men, was profitable and beautiful to God. Thus, even if we are harmed by such creatures, we should not condemn them but admire as the work of God who created them because he considered them purposeful. Topsell, who in his introduction gave the main points of Augustine’s argument, agreed that only a fool could reject as harmful those beasts who God decided to give man just for beauty: “for as in a great house all things are not for use, but some for ornament, so is it in this world, the inferior palace of God.”⁶

This „aesthetic” argument seemed to be especially convincing to contemporary naturalists, for it made it possible for them to emphasise the necessity of including in their scientific research also vicious, usually small animals, which had to exist simply as the part of God’s creation and nobody could question that.⁷

According to Topsell, these creatures could be neither disregarded nor ignored, “For Almighty God which hath made them all, hath disseminated in every kinde both of great and small beasts, feeds of His wisdom, majesty, and glory.”⁸ Small animals merited attention not only for religious reasons, but also purely scientific ones, for they were as an interesting subject of study as any other animal. According to Gesner:

For those admirable gifts and powers are not common to all little beasts, as we see they are in Elephants, Lyons, Camels, & such other, for then we should

6 *Ibid.*

7 In a sense, it was a departure from primitive utilitarianism, replaced by the assumption that nature in all its manifestations could be useful for other reasons than material ones.

8 Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 503 (*The History*, p. 392).

wonder at them the lesse; but yet in some of the little ones there are fare more excellent properties then in any of the greatest.⁹

In the opinion of naturalists, it was worth to look event into the smallest of creatures, whether it was useful or not.

It is easy to guess that not all shared such a specialised fascination of zoologists and theologians: in fact, a huge majority of people did not give any understanding – not to mention sympathy – to mice, rats, caterpillars and similar creatures. For them, such animals were not a subject of abstract religious and scientific divagations, but were quite a real problem, which had to be solved in everyday life. The cause of such state was very prosaic: animals commonly called *vermin* were regarded as main competitors with humans for resources. Vermin ravaged and destroyed cultivations and crops, in which people invested much of their valuable time and efforts; they were also found in houses where they fed on various stored food items ready for human consumption and reserved for people only.¹⁰ As a result, small animals and birds were held responsible for food shortages in the market or even for disastrous famines. It is testified by, for example, *The Commons Complaint* of Arthur Standish, who in 1611 wrote about “the extreame dearth of victuals” caused, among other things, by the fact that “the abundance of corne [...] is yearly devoured and destroyed by the infinite number of pigeons” and other birds plaguing the Kingdom of England.¹¹

This rivalry with animals was especially feared in years of crop failure and the resulting sharp increase in grain prices. People were convicted

9 “The First Epistle of Doct. Conradus Gesnerus before his History of Foure-Footed Beastes [...]”, *ibid.*, p. 3 (quoted after: http://sceti.library.upenn.edu/sceti/printedbooksNew/index.cfm?TextID=topsell_selections&PagePosition=5).

10 M. Fissell, ‘*Imagining Vermin in Early Modern England*’, *History Workshop Journal*, 47, 1999, pp. 2–3.

11 As remedy, Standish proposed “a generali planting of fruit-trees”, “an extraordinary breeding offowle and pullen” and “a general destroying of all kinde of vermine”, as he explained in the title of his writing: *The commons complaint Wherein is contained two speciali grievances: the first, the generali destruction and waste of woods in this kingdome, with a remedy for the same [...] The second grievance is, the extreame dearth of victuals. Foure remedies for the same: 1 By a generali planting of fruit-trees, with the charge and profite. 2 By an extraordinary breeding offowle and pullen [...] 3 By a general destroying of all kinde of vermine [...] 4 Prouing the abundance of corne that is yearely deuoured and destroyed by the infinite number of pigeons, kept and main-tayned in this kingdome*, London, 1611.

that only a large-scale killing of hordes of voracious animals could remedy the crisis. The systematic extermination of vermin proposed by Standish was neither new nor original: throughout the whole 16th and 17th century local communities in England were willingly fighting with such pests, to what they were bound by the state authorities, anyway. In that period, the Parliament systematically passed bills which authorised parishes to by crow-nets to catch birds, and to provide payments for the killing of animals for the depredations they committed on the produce of land.¹² Acts of the English Parliament included also detailed lists of harmful animals, trying to precisely determine which species were most harmful and which should be indiscriminately slaughtered. The detailed lists of the Elizabethan “Bill for Destruction of Crows, Choughs, Rooks, and other such Vermin” of 1563 and another one, which was passed three years later: “The Bill for Preservation of Grain, by Killing of Crows, and other Vermin” included: magpies, rooks, crows, choughs, ravens, jays, hawks, buzzards, kites, ospreys or fish hawks, cormorants, kingfishers, bullfinches, hares, pine martens, foxes, badgers, polecats, weasels, stoats, otters, hedgehogs, rats, mice and moles.¹³ As we can see, the category of vermin was very broad and could include all these animals which in any way damaged or eaten food claimed by people to be only human: crops in fields, fruit in orchards, vegetables in gardens, livestock in farmyards, or even fish in rivers and ponds.¹⁴

In the fight against pests – an affair of State – there were engaged both the state authorities and local government in the name of its threatened community. It should be said, however, that it was its individual members who were actually responsible for the pest control. For each village and town dweller had to defend his properties by himself and wage a private

12 It seems that a majority of contemporary parishes employed people who earned their living by catching serpents, moles, hedgehogs and rats; Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 274. Interestingly, in order not to pay once more for the same killed animal, their heads were displayed in public at the local cemetery, see: J.S. Elliott, *Bedfordshire Vermin Payments*, Luton, 1936, p. 10.

13 Both Bills are published in: *House of Commons Journal*, 1 (1547–1629), 1802, pp. 72, 80; see also the text of the bill published in ‘The Destruction of Birds and Vermin’, *The East Anglian*, 3, 1869, pp. 275–279.

14 An example of such frenzy and exaggeration, rather incomprehensible for us, could be the killing of kingfishers which, owing to their small size and a habit to catch only small fishes, did not have any significant impact on human catching, contrary to otters, fish hawks or cormorants. Even so, a very popular English “pastime” practiced by the contemporary people was to throw stones at kingfishers.

war against vermin at home and in farmyard. The knowledge how to do it was, naturally, widespread for it was one of the skills necessary to manage efficiently their properties.¹⁵ If, for some reason, someone had no this knowledge, it could be found in many textbooks whose large number and popularity prove how much it was valued. Thus, those who were interested could buy, for instance: *A booke of fishing with hooke & line, and of all other instruments thereunto belonging. Another of sundrie engines and trappes to take polcats, buzards, rattes, mice and all other kindes of vermine & beasts whatsoever* (1590), *The Vermin-killer* (1680), or – to quote the whole, long but representative title: *A necessary family-book, both for the city & country, in two parts. Containing exact, plain and short rule and directions, for taking and killing all manner of vermin on land and in water: as, Part I. By land. The fox, polcat, buzzard, kite, weasle, adder, snake, caterpillar, frog, mile, pismire, fly, bug, rats and mice, fleas and lice. Part II. By water. The hern, dob-chick, coot, or more-hen, cormorant, sea-pie, kings-fisher, otter, water-rat, and ospray, all great destroyers of fish [...]* (1688) and many others.¹⁶ Besides the books devoted to the subject, also each general textbooks on farming, breeding, gardening and husbandry included at list a short chapter on it.¹⁷ Interestingly, also naturalists in their zoological treatises did not avoid the information on

15 Topsell wrote that “every woman” (responsible for household and minimizing harms done by vermin) was experienced in this field, as well as a “silly rat-catcher” who was an expert in catching rats and other pests, Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 512 (*The History*, p. 396).

16 See: L. Mascall, *A booke of fishing with hooke & line, and of all other instruments thereunto belonging. Another of sundrie engines and trappes to take polcats, buzards, rattes, mice and all other kindes of vermine & beasts whatsoever, most profitable for all warrin-ers, and such as delight in this kinde of sport and pastime*, London, 1590; W.W. [William Wadham?], *The Vermin-killer, being a very necessary family book, containing Exact Rules and Directions for the Artificiali killing and destroying of all manner of Vermin, & c.*, London, 1680; R.W., *A necessary family-book, both for the city & country, in two parts. Containing exact, plain and short rule and directions, for taking and killing all manner of vermin on land and in water: as, Part I. By land. The fox, polcat, buzzard, kite, weasle, adder, snake, caterpillar, frog, mile, pismire, fly, bug, rats and mice, fleas and lice. Part II. By water. The hern, dob-chick, coot, or more-hen, cormorant, sea-pie, kings-fisher, otter, water-rat, and ospray, all great destroyers offish. To which are added, many natural and artificial conclusions, both pleasant and profitable. The whole illustrated with many proper figures*, London, 1688.

17 See, for example, T. Hill, *Profitable art of gardening*, London, 1563; *The expert gardener*, London, 1640; J. Crawshey, *The good husband's jewel*, London, 1651; T. Barker, *The country-mans recreation, or The art of planting, grafting, and gardening, in three books*,

the subject. Topsell, describing mice (which “do not only destroy the things they eat, and live upon other mens cost; [...] But also mice do defile and corrupt, and make unprofitable whatsoever they taste”), felt obliged to describe how to catch them for the sake of his readers, since, as he wrote, “it is as necessary, or rather more necessary for most men to know how to take mice, then how to take elephants.” Besides, it could be called negligence on his part to omit “the inventions and devices of the ancients”, supplemented by contemporary “manners of catching them.”¹⁸ Thus, we find in Topsell a detailed survey of various mechanical mouse-traps (with “catch mice alive,” “which do kill them,” filled with water, “with a strong piece of iron,” etc.), various poisons, repellents and herbs, together with different ruses to keep them away.¹⁹

From among all methods to catch vermin described by contemporary authors the most interesting seem to be not primitive, simple traps or poisons, but much more sophisticated tricks, the use of which required the knowledge about weak points of the enemy. People could keep away rodents by exploiting their fear of their natural enemies. “It is said that if bread be made wherein the dung of cats is mixed, it will drive away rats and mice.”²⁰ To “prevent rats and mice eating your cheese” you should “take hog’s suet, and the brains of a weasel, mix them together, and lay small pieces about the room,”²¹ while the ashes of weasels sprinkled in any place would drive them away.²² A dovecote, in turn, could be protected against cats and weasels by the head of a wolf hung inside.²³

Another way to keep rodents away was to exploit their alleged fear of death or mutilation:

[...] if a mouse be gelded alive, and so let go, she will drive away all the residue
 [...] If the head of a mouse be flead, or if a male mouse be flead all over, or her

London, 1654; D.S., *Vinetum Angliae: or, a new and easy way to make wine of English grapes and other fruit, equal to that of France, Spain, & c.*, London, 1700.

18 Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 509 (*The History*, p. 396).

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 509–513 (*ibid.*, p. 396 ff.).

20 *Ibid.*, p. 106 (*ibid.*, p. 83).

21 What’s more, such cheese would not go bad! T. Lupton, *A Thousand Notable things of Sundrie sorts. Whereof some are wonderfull, some strange, some pleasant, diuers necessary, a great sort profitable, and many verie precious*, London, 1601, p. 207.

22 Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 508 (*The History*, p. 395).

23 Lupton, *Thousand Notable things*, p. 33.

tail cut off; or if her leg be bound to a post in the house, or a bell be hung about her neck, and so turned going, she will drive away all her fellows.²⁴

The skinned head of a rat or mouse put in the place visited by the pests produced the same effect.²⁵ Such drastic measures worked also for other species: the corpse of a mole put between molehills drives all moles away.²⁶ Weasels killing chickens could be repelled by catching a living weasel, cutting off its tail and testicles and letting it go – other weasels, seeing this pitiful fate of their kin would go away.²⁷

It was also possible, albeit a bit perfidious, to exploit animals' feeling of belonging to the same species, attributed to some of those creatures. Thomas Lupton writes:

Put two or more quick mouse in a long or deep earthen pot, and set the same night unto a fire made of ash wood; when the pot begins to be hot, the mice therein will begin to chirp or make a noise, whereas all the mice that are nigh them will run towards them, and so will leap into the fire, as though they should come to help their poor imprisoned friends and neighbours.²⁸

If there was a mole put in that pot on fire, they would “call other moles or wants, to help her, with a very mourning voice.” This, in turn would made it possible for us to catch them all and kill easily.²⁹

As we can see, this whole array of tricks and ruses recommended from the ancient times as an effective measure in the fight against vermin is grounded in the assumption that those animals had many attributes that

24 Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 512 (*The History*, p. 398).

25 *Vermin-killer*, pp. 4–5.

26 Fissell, *Imagining Vermin*, p. 28; see also note 61.

27 J.S., *The Experienced Fowler: Or, the Gentleman, Citizen, and Country-man's Pleasant and Profitable Recreation*, London, 1697, p. 146.

28 Lupton, *Thousand Notable things*, p. 35. This is described in many sources. The English author quotes it after Antoine Mizauld (a French astrologer and physician, 1510–1578). It could also be found in the quoted above *Vermin-killer* (pp. 6–9) of 1680.

29 Lupton, *Thousand Notable things*, p. 38. This conviction was, naturally, inherited from ancient writers. Probably one of the most famous examples is an often-quoted story about a mouse imprisoned in a pot too deep for it to get out on its own. Thus, as Topsell writes, “they take one another tail in their mouth, and so hang two or three in length, until the mouse which was fallen down take hold on the neathermost, which being performed, they all of them draw her out,” see: Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 507 (*The History*, p. 395); Klaudiusz Elian, *O właściwościach zwierząt*, V, 22, transl. into Polish by A.M. Komornicka, Warsaw, 2005, p. 109.

we usually associate with humans. Animals were endowed with human feelings, the skill to communicate with each other and the ability of collaboration, and above all the cunning and shrewdness which made it possible for them to find food and defend against their enemies. To present a practical wisdom of a mouse, Topsell wrote almost with respect that it always lived in the best possible place that was near supping or dining rooms, kitchens, or larders, to which it was always able to find its way. And a mouse was extremely knowledgeable about human food and knew how to get at the best morsels. It was also cautious and foreseeing, for it “will not commit her life to one lodging, but provideth many harbors, that being molested in one place she may have another refuge to flie unto.”³⁰

As rightly observed by Mary Fissell, the early modern image of vermin was composed of a curious mix of real behaviours observed in animals, ancient tales and stereotypes, and at the same time of projections, identifications and fantasies produced by human imagination.³¹ This special anthropomorphization – which to a certain degree blurred the difference between man and animal, emphasising the human traits of the latter – made the creatures regarded as useless, harmful and troublesome an almost equal opponent of man. Thus, vermin – be it birds that ate grain or spoiled fruit trees or mice and rats who damaged or ate human food – were not just easy to defeat, dumb, brainless beasts, but enemies and competitors, and to outwit them and get rid of them required a lot of time and effort on the part of humans. Worse still, people could not be sure to win that confrontation with those dangerous forces of nature.

At present, when we think about mice, rats, flies and worms, our first association is, usually, dirt, germs, and diseases, and the most probable reaction – repulsion. In this regard we seem to be different from the people living in the early modern period, who were focused pragmatically on damages done by vermin, harmful especially to food and household equipment than on the health of the owners.³² Disgust did not seem to play a vital part in the attitude of humans towards those troublesome

³⁰ Topsell, *The Historie*, pp. 505, 507 (*The History*, p. 395)

³¹ Fissell, *Imagining Vermin*, p. 2.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 22. Topsell, however, notices (although with a certain disregard) that “the eating of bread or other meat which is bitten by mice, doth encrease in men and children a certain disease in their face, and in the flesh, at the roots of the nails of their fingers certain hard bunches [...] yet it is affirmed, that the flesh of mice is good for hawks,” Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 508 (*The History*, p. 395).

small animals. And although, from our perspective, the lack of associations between vermin and diseases could appear strange, we should not think that the relationship between physical and mental well-being of humans and animals was not seen at that time. People were well aware that animals could be responsible for human diseases or be even a cause of death, but usually this danger was associated with bigger domestic animals, such as dogs or cats, which for obvious reasons were much closer to people and had a direct access to them.

A mortal animal-transmitted disease was rabies, all the more terrifying for people (and fascinating for scholarly authors!) that it was, as Robert Burton wrote, quite a common disease, “well known in every village.” It was thought to be a kind of madness “which comes by the biting of a mad dog, or scratching.”³³ Also a direct contact with urine or saliva of an ill animal could be dangerous, especially, as it was repeated after Pliny, during the holidays (*Dog Days*), when the Dog Star, Sirius, was the hottest.³⁴ To illustrate how infectious it is, Topell writes the following: “When a mad dog had suddenly tore in pieces a garment [...] the taylor or botcher took the same to mend, and forgetting himself, put one side of the breach into his mouth to stretch it out to the other, and fell mad immediately.” Similarly, it was enough for humans to eat a small bit of infested dog’s bile, even as small as a grain of lentil, to be dead in seven days.³⁵

The symptoms of rabies, described in contemporary texts, were various, disturbing and, let us add, difficult to bear both for patients and people looking after them.³⁶ The people affected with it could not bear

33 R. Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy, What it is, with all the Kinds, Causes, Symptoms, Prognostics, and Several Cres of it. In Three Partitions. With their Several Sections, Members, and Subsections, Philosophically, Medically, Historically Opened and Cut Up, by Democritus Junior, With a Satirical Preface, Conducing to the Following Discourse Corrected and Enriched by Translations of the Numerous Classical Extracts by Democritus Minor. To which is Prefixed and Account of the Author [...]* [1621], Philadelphia and New York, 1850, p. 92 (all original quotations in this text are after the Internet edition published under the same title by the Ex-classics Project, 2009, <http://www.exclassics.com>, Public Domain, p. 125).

34 See Pliny, *The Historie of the World, Commonly called, The Naturali Historie of C. Plinius Secundus, Translated into English by Philemon Holland [...]*, London, 1601, VIII, 40.

35 Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 185 (*The History*, p. 145).

36 It is worth mentioning that generally they are very similar to modern descriptions of this disease.

the sight of water, since another name of the disease: *hydrophobia*, and refused to drink, although they were very dry, as Burton wrote: “they will rather die than drink.” They had nightmares, hallucinations, fits of fury, and convulsions, they could fall into a swoon or lie passively, deep in sadness. Among other symptoms – psychical and physical – there were mentioned others, such as certain slowness of mind, memory disorders, light intolerance and also red and swollen skin, a hoarse voice, fast and heavy breathing, retention of urine or its changed colour, and even a permanent erection. If a patient developed a whole array of these symptoms, there was no cure for him: his death followed soon after.³⁷

According to St. Augustine, one of the most disturbing aspects of rabies was “that even the animal which of all others is most gentle and friendly to its own master [he was speaking of a dog, of course], becomes an object of intenser fear than a lion or dragon.”³⁸ Over thousand years later such an unexpected transformation of not a dangerous beast still made people worry. The famous 16th-century French surgeon Ambroise Paré wrote with a concern:

We cannot so easily shun the danger wee are incident to by mad dogs, as that of other beasts, by reason hee is a domestic creature, and housed under the same roof with us.³⁹

And for the very reason of danger from domesticated animals early modern authors paid special attention to all changes in behaviour of sick dogs – drooling and foaming of saliva at the mouth, erratic movements, running away from their owners, attacks on people, other animals or things, etc. – which turned them into wild beasts. And it was thought

37 Burton, *Anatomy*, p. 92 (Internet edition, p. 125); Topsell, *The Historie*, pp. 184, 186 (*The History*, p. 145–146).

38 St. Augustine, *City of God*, XXII, 22, after the Internet edition: St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine, by Philip Schaff, http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1819-1893,_Schaff,_Philip,_2_Vol_02_The_City_Of_God._Christian_Doc-trine,_EN.pdf, p. 712.

39 A. Paré, *The workes of that famous Chirurgeon Ambrose Parey Translated out of Latine and compared with the French by Tho[mas] Johnson. Where unto are added three Tractates out of Adrianus Spigelius of the Veines, Arteries, & Nerves, with large Figures. Also a Table of the Bookes and Chapters*, London, 1649, Book 21: ‘Of Poysons, and of the Biting of a Mad Dogge, and the Bitings and Stings of Other Venemous Creatures’, Chapter XIII, p. 513 (a digitalised edition: Digitalising sponsor: Open Knowledge Commons and Harvard Medical School; with contribution of Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine; <https://archive.org/details/workesofthatfamo00par>).

that dogs, just like wolves and foxes, did not need to be beaten (contrary to all other animals and man) by an infected animal to go “mad.” It was believed that in a majority of cases rabies was caused by their own internal humours and their inborn susceptibility, thus it could be developed intrinsically, and in the least expected moment.⁴⁰

Terrifying symptoms of rabies and its unpredictability made dogs, as their cause, both a kind of nightmare and object of deadly fear, being an inseparable part of the disease itself. It referred mainly to the affected people, who – as it was believed – were haunted by visions of animals responsible for their suffering.

“For they affirm, that hee which is bitten by a mad dog, alwaies hath a dog in his mind, and so remain’s fixed in that sad cogitation” – Paré wrote and added:

But they are afraid of the water [...] and they flie from looking-glasses, because they imagin they see dogs in them, whereof they are much afraid, by reason whereof they shun the water, and all polite and clear bodies which may supplie the use of a looking-glass; so that they throw themselves on the ground, as if they would hide themselves therein, lest they should be bitten again.⁴¹

Worse still, not only did the sick think about dogs and see them everywhere, but also identified themselves with them. It was because the venom, reaching to the vital bodily organs, turned the human nature into animal one, which made the sick wanting to howl, bark, and even bite, like the dogs they thought they turned into.⁴²

A mental, and in a sense also physical transformation of a suffering human corresponded to the earlier conversion of the animal which attacked him. As a result, the afflicted himself took on dangerous features and became potentially dangerous to his surroundings. Apart from his aggressive behaviour and fits of fury caused by that poisonous venom ravaging his body, the infected could operate in an invisible and deceitful manner on other people and animals. It was believed, for example, that: “if a wound be dressed in the presence of man or woman, which hath

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 512–513; Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 184 (*The History*, p. 144).

41 Paré, *The workes*, p. 513. Robert Burton, who also mentions these “doggie” hallucinations, adds this curious piece of information that: “Some say, little things like whelps will be seen in their urine.” Burton, *Anatomy*, p. 92 (Internet edition, p. 125.).

42 Paré, *The workes*, p. 513; Burton, *Anatomy*, p. 92 (Internet edition, p. 125); Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 185 (*The History*, p. 145).

been bitten by a mad dog, that the pain thereof wil be increased: and which is more, that abortment will follow upon beasts with young.”⁴³

Thus, attempts to cure the people infected with rabies were made not only for the sake of them, but also to prevent the danger they posed to others. No wonder that it was so important to find cures for this disease. According to contemporary medical authorities, the people infected with rabies should be treated immediately with remedies which would “drive out the poison” from the wound. But their unanimity ended there, which is testified by a huge variety of recipes for diverse ointments and compresses that include all possible organic and non-organic ingredients – from rue and sorrel to honey and vinegar – which were thought to have anti-venom qualities.⁴⁴ Also the animal which caused the illness could be used as a remedy. According to a widespread belief that similar (sympathetic) substances attract each other, some “write, that the hairs of the dog, whose bite caused the madness, applied by themselves, by their sympathie or similitude of substances draw the venom from within outwards [...]. There be som who wish to eat the rosted liver of the dog that hurt them.”⁴⁵ Despite warnings that only those remedies should be applied that were advised by professional physicians, people were often practicing methods which were not approved of by professionals. Such controversial treatments (“for such at least as dwell near the sea-side”), included, for instance, “ducking them [the infected people] over head and ears in sea water.”⁴⁶ Some, as Robert Burton wrote, “some use charms: every good wife can prescribe medicines.”⁴⁷

43 Toppell, *The Historie*, p. 185 (*The History*, p. 145).

44 According to Ambroise Paré, one of most effective medication for all kind of poisons (especially animal produce ones) was treacle. As Paré wrote, it should be dissolved in “in *aqua vitae* or strong wine, and rubbed hard upon the part, so that the blood may follow, laying upon the wound when you have wiped it, cloths dipped in the same medicine, then presently applie garlick or onions beaten with common salt and turpentine;” in this manner, as he informs us, he “free’d one of the daughters of *Madamoiselle de Gron* [...]” Paré, *The workes*, p. 514.

45 *Ibid.* Paré also writes about those cures, but at the same time he does not want to vouch for them for he has never used them himself.

46 Burton, *Anatomy*, p. 92 (Internet edition, pp. 125–126). Paré writes about it: “Manie have cast themselvs into the sea, neither have they thence had anie help against leaping into madness,” and he warns the readers that “you must no not relie upon that remedie, but rather you must have recours to such things as are set in the books of physicians and approved by certain and manifold experience.” Paré, *The workes*, p. 515.

47 Burton, *Anatomy*, p. 92 (Internet edition, p. 126).

This great deal of attention paid to the disease of rabies in scholarly treatises and a multitude of cures against it – both those authorised by professional medicine and non-official ones – testifies how important was the place occupied by rabies both in contemporary medicine and the health consciousness of people. At the same time, however, it reveals that despite the assurances of doctors about the existence of an effective cure and despite their efforts to use it people were helpless in the face of diseases like rabies. It remained a disturbing reminder that even seemingly tamed nature could turn against humans at any time.

One of more important health problems of the early modern period were, of course, epidemics, and especially bubonic fever, commonly called plague, which until the second half of the 17th century was systematically hitting English towns and villages, decimating its dwellers. “The plague is a cruel and contagious disease, which euerie-where, like a common disease, inuading man and beast, kils verie many,” Ambroise Paré began his *Treatise of the Plague*, wanting to emphasise a terrifyingly high mortality rate of the plague.⁴⁸ To gain an idea of the scale of this phenomenon it is enough to look at *death-bills posted in London*: in London itself, during the plague of 1603, 30,000 people perished, in 1625 – 40,000, and during the Great Plague of as many as 80,000, which made up 30–40 percent of the whole number of London’s dwellers.⁴⁹

As we presently know, this highly infectious disease is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, a bacterium transmitted from rodents to humans by the bite of infected fleas. Any reader of Camus’ *The Plague* and other literary descriptions of the plague, when asked what kind of animal does the plague bring to his mind will indicate a rat. And when asked if, according to his opinion, our ancestors had associated the plague with rats, he would probably say yes. This stereotype, based on our almost automatic dislike of these rodents, was in my opinion strengthened by the great majority of historical films in which all scenes with the plague have rats in the background. Yet, it is anachronistic to ascribe this association to people living in the 16th and 17th centuries, for – as it has

48 A. Paré, *A Treatise of the Plague, contayning the Causes, Signes, Symptômes, Prognosticks, and Cure thereof Together with sundry other remarkable passages (for the prevention of, and preservation from the Pestilence) never yet published by anie man. Collected out of the Workes of the no lesse learned than experimented and renowned Chirurgical Ambrose Parey*, London, 1630, p. 1 (all quotations are after: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A08913.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>).

49 Luckily, the Great Plague of 1665 was the last outbreak of plague in the British Isles.

been mentioned above – at that time rodents were thought mainly to be troublesome and destructive vermin, and not the source of diseases, and the plague was not exception here.

It is true, however, that any form of erratic behaviour of rats – like their appearance in much greater numbers or an increased number of dead animals – could have been associated with a plague, but it should be emphasised that all those were regarded as a sign of warning and foreboding of a calamity, and not as its direct cause. It is worth mentioning that it was not only rats that were carefully observed as signs of an imminent disaster, but attention was paid to all the rest of the animal world, bestowed by God with the ability to perceive symptoms of menace invisible to humans. Thomas Lodge in his *Treatise of the Plague: Containing the Nature, Signes and Accidents of the Same* (1603) wrote that when rats, moles and other creatures living underground are leaving their holes, it meant that the element was corrupted and a plague was imminent.⁵⁰ According to the annals of the Royal College of Physicians, the plague of 1563 was preceded by an epidemic of woodlice, while one of the reports to the *Royal Society of London* (1713) remarked on the unusual number of spiders which had appeared one year before plague struck Gdansk.⁵¹ Paré said that that when looking for signs of plague people should pay attention “If birds forsake their nests, eggs, or young, without any manifest cause,” but especially:

They affirme, when the Plague is at hand, that mushrooms grow in greater abundance out of the earth, and vpon the surface thereof many kinds of poysonous *insecta* creepe in great numbers, as spiders, caterpillers, butterflies, grasse-hoppers, beetles, hornets, waspes, flyes, scorpions, snailes, locusts, toads, wormes, & such things as are the of-spring of putrefaction. And also wild beasts tyred with the vaporous malignitie of their dennes, and caues in the earth, forsake them; and moles, toads, vipers, snakes, lezards, aspes, and crocodiles are seene to flye away, and remoue their habitations in great troopes. [...] And moreouer, the carcasses of some of them which tooke lesse heed of themselues, suffocated by the pestiferous poyson of the ill aire contained in the earth, may be euerie-where found, not onely in their dennes, but also in the plaine fields.⁵²

50 T. Lodge, ‘Treatise of the Plague: Containing the Nature, Signes and Accidents of the Same [1603]’, w: *The Complete Works of Thomas Lodge*, Glasgow, 1883, vol. 4, p. 21.

51 Royal College of Physicians, *Annals*, vol. 1, fol. 22; *Philosophical Transaction*, 28, 1713, p. 105. Thomas Lupton also believed that “the great number of spiders do foreshow that the summer following will be pestiferous and plaguy.” Lupton, *Thousand Notable things*, p. 33.

52 Paré, *A Treatise of the Plague*, pp. 9, 11.

As it could be concluded from the abovementioned examples and their references to corrupted elements, it was the latter that were the natural cause of plague and at the same time of unnatural behaviours of animals.⁵³ The necessary condition for plague was “an evil constitution of the aire,” which could have been degenerated by unseasonable weather in the seasons of the year – a too mild winter or hot but cloudy, wet and windless summer – or by such violent and unusual phenomena as fierce winds, thunders, flashes of lightning, shooting stars, meteors, comets, etc.⁵⁴ The air could be corrupted also by “putrid and filthy vapours spread abroad” from natural openings of the earth, shambles “or sinkes and such like places being opened,” and especially from carcasses of dead animals lying unburied. The role played by the sea was especially negative here:

For the Sea often ouer-flowing the Land in some places, and leauing in the Mudde, or hollownesses of the Earth (caused by Earth-quakes) the huge Bodies of monstrous Fishes, which it hides in its Waters, hath giuen both the occasion and matter of a Plague. For thus in our time a Whale cast vpon the Tuscan shore, presently caused a Plague ouer all that Countrey.⁵⁵

Poisonous vapours arising from such filth not only corrupted the air but, falling down as moist and dew drops, also infected the seeds, plants and fruits, herbs and crops which, in turn, infected and killed animals that fed on them. As a result, people’s humours were corrupted and degenerated “into such an alienation which may equall the malignitie of poyson.”⁵⁶

The role which this mechanism of plague emergence ascribed to animals was to warn people of imminent calamity with warning signs which had to be rightly interpreted only. At the same time, however, animals, being part of infected nature, transferred this poison further, thus participating in the spread of disease. It was believed that some

53 Before presenting a description of natural causes of plague, contemporary authors usually devoted some space to the first cause of bubonic plague and all other diseases, that is to the original sin and the fall of man, after which good nature turned against him. They also remembered to include the traditional moral interpretation in which plague was God’s punishment for mankind’s sins.

54 Other factors included “astrological” phenomena, such as unfavourable conjunctions and oppositions of planets.

55 Paré, *A Treatise of the Plague*, p. 5.

56 Paré, *A Treatise of the Plague*, pp. 4–6, 11–12; Burton, *Anatomy*, p. 87 (Internet edition: 118).

animals could be especially dangerous to people, in particular when the pestilential air reached their homes and death began to take its toll. And it was not about rats, mice or whales, but about most ordinary dogs and cats which were thought to spread the disease and thus should be absolutely avoided.⁵⁷ Special rules issued in London in 1625 included instructions for the time of the plague and strongly advised against letting dogs and cats indoors, which, together with other precautions was to protect those who would follow the rule.⁵⁸

Special protective measures were necessary, for, as Edward Topsell informed with great authority, “it is most certain, that the breath and favour of cats consume the radical humour and destroy the lungs;” and what was more, cats “also they are dangerous in the time of pestilence, for they are not only apt to bring home venomous infections, but to poison a man with very looking upon him.”⁵⁹ As regards dogs, they seemed to be equally, or even more dangerous than cats. Their close contacts with people created a kind of physical kinship which made it possible for dogs to have the same diseases as humans. According to this rule, John Caius, a British physician and at the same time a cynologist, recommended little dogs to be applied on the stomach or bosom of “the diseased and weake person” as “a plaster preservative [...] which effect is performed by theyr moderate heate.” Moreover, he added in the following sentence, “the disease and sicknesse, chaungeth his place and entreth [...] into the dogge.” This was evidenced by the fact that “these kinde of dogges sometimes fall sicke, and sometimes die.”⁶⁰ The fact that the relationship between dog and man was regarded as a kind of “communicating vessels” meant, of course, that the direction of transmitted disease could be changed at any time, which was best evidenced by cases of rabies – a deadly disease of animals and humans alike. For it was so easy for dogs to infect people with it, there was no reason to think it would be different with plague. What’s more, considering the much greater virulence and volatility of

57 M.S.R. Jenner, ‘*The Great Dog Massacre*’, in: *Fear in Early Modern Society*, ed. by W.G. Naphy and P. Roberts, Manchester and New York, 1997, pp. 44–61.

58 *Especial Observations and Approved Physical Rules*, London, 1625, p. Bv.

59 Topsell, *The Historie*, p. 106 (*The History*, p. 83).

60 J. Caius, *Of Englishe dogges the diuersities, the names, the natures, and the properties. A short treatise written in latine by Iohannes Caius of late memorie, Doctor of Phisicke in the Vniuersitie of Cambridge; and newly drawne into Englishe by Abraham Fleming [...]*, London, 1576, pp. 21–22 (quotations after: <https://archive.org/details/englishdoggesd00flemgoog>).

bubonic plague, it was not even necessary for humans to be bitten by dogs to catch the plague.⁶¹

Recognising the threat posed by animals as real, local authorities ordered their impounding or mass slaughter, which became a routine and commonly accepted measure of defence against plague.⁶² These regulations were directed mainly against dogs, although they listed other dangerous enemies of public health, such as – apart from cats – also pigs, conies, or even pigeons.⁶³ Even apart from medical considerations, there were other reasons for such a treatment of dogs by official authorities, as their great numbers and mobility because of which they were almost omnipresent, especially in towns, where they were running loose in the streets. The majority of them had owners and performed some useful function – they were used to hunt, shepherd livestock, guard, defend, or to turn roasting-spits in kitchens – but even those duties did not mean that they lived with one owner or in one household. As a result, many dogs were only semi-domesticated which, like cats and pigs, were freely moving around.⁶⁴

This freedom of movements was for the municipal councils in London and other English towns troublesome enough in normal times, let alone in times of pestilence. Besides, it was an obvious sign of disorder which had to be stopped as soon as possible. It could be done by a drastic reduction of the number of dogs wandering loose in the streets, so it was necessary to employ many dogcatchers.⁶⁵ The importance attached to the problem is evidenced by the fact that one of the official duties of the *Common Hunt, an official keeper of the city's hounds, was killing of dogs running loose in the streets, when his superior decided that was necessary.*⁶⁶ Preserved London bills for the killing of dangerous animals spreading disease testify that municipal dogcatchers worked willingly and efficiently:

61 Thus, some regarded dogs as symbol of the death by plague, like the Florentine physician who after the plague in northern Italy in 1630 argued that *Canes Venatici* and dog days were the signs of imminent plague, Jenner, ‘*The Great Dog Massacre*’, p. 51.

62 During the anti-Quakers riots in the 1650s in England, members of this Christian group were compared to dogs during the plague, which should be killed so that they cannot infest people, Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 47.

63 Jenner, ‘*The Great Dog Massacre*’, pp. 45, 48.

64 Pigs wandering in the streets were causing problems, although not necessarily medical ones: they could start fire, and also could hurt or kill small children, Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, p. 95.

65 *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 55.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

in 1584–1586, when the mortality rate among victims of pestilence was not very high, the city paid for the killing of 1882 dogs; in 1636 the number amounted to “310 dozens” (that is 3720 dogs), and in 1665 more than 4380 quadrupeds.⁶⁷

The scale of extermination of animals could be surprising, but we should bear in mind that in periods of plague people were extremely afraid that the illness would spread and this fear almost automatically included its alleged carriers. The slaughter of dogs was – to the same extent as, for example, marking houses with a red cross or carrying away the bodies of plague victims – was an obvious, almost imposing itself strategy of defence which was supposed to stop the spreading of disease: the fate of a town and its inhabitants depended on the efficiency of this operation.⁶⁸ Certain role in this act of institutionalised aggression against dogs and cats was played by – apart from rational factors – also by the fear of metamorphosis of domesticated or almost domesticated animals, well-known from various reactions to the cases of rabies. Dogs and cats, which served man, better or worse performing their functions, suddenly transformed into a deadly menace for their owners and their families. It was difficult for them to accept the fact that they could not trust this was they thought to be part of their well-known, domesticated reality.

The dangers portrayed in the present article, which in a common awareness was associated with the close proximity of animals, make only a small portion of real and presumed threats discussed in English sources. Apart from destroying food and transmitting dangerous diseases, like rabies or plague, they related also cases of bites by snakes or other venomous creatures, of death or injuries caused by farm horses or oxen,

67 See: *ibid.* Englishmen were not exceptional in this regard, other European towns also carried out exterminations of dogs *running loose in the streets*.

68 Interestingly, in contemporary texts there are references to methodical slaughtering of dogs and cats not because they were thought to spread the disease. Ambroise Paré cites a story recorded in *De obseruatione in pestilentia* (1493) by *Alexander Benedictus* (Alessandro Benedetti, ca. 1450–1512), “that there was a Scythian Physition, which caused a plague arysing from the infection of the aire, to cease, by causing all the dogges, cats, and such like beasts which were in the citie, to be killed, and casting their Carcasses vp and downe the streets, that so by the comming of this new putrid vapour as a stranger, the former pestiferous infection, as an old guest, was put out of its lodging, and so the plague ceased. For poysons haue not onely an antipathy with their Antidotes, but also with some other Poysons.” Paré, *A Treatise of the Plague*, pp. 14–15. Thus, we have here two very different attitudes towards the role played by urban animals during pestilence, although their consequences for misfortunate beasts were the same.

deadly attacks of captured and seemingly tamed bears against their trainers or, worse even, the audience. Animals which constantly or temporarily were sharing the space of humans were very often regarded as enemy and real or at least possible competitor. The spirit of rivalry and fear of the animal world which were still widespread and common, despite the constant broadening of the areas of human domination, made people and animals rivals in a continuous fight, and not infrequently – in a ruthless tug-of-war.

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