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Imperfect Creatures: Vermin, Literature, and the Sciences of Life, 1600-1740

Lucinda Cole

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Lucinda Cole s "Imperfect Creatures" offers the first full-length study of the shifting, unstable, but foundational status of vermin as creatures and category in the early modern literary, scientific, and political imagination. In the space between theology and an emergent empiricism, Cole s argument engages a wide historical swath of canonical early modern literary texts alongside other nonliterary primary sources (including under-examined archival materials) from the period, including: William Shakespeare s "Hamlet" and "Macbeth," Christopher Marlowe s "The Jew of Malta," Jonathan Swift s "Gulliver s Travels," Daniel Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" and "Journal of the Plague Year," Giambattista Della Porta s "Natural Magick," William Harvey s "Anatomical Exercises on the Generation of Animals"; Thomas Willis'"Cerebri Anatome" and "Of the Soul of Brutes," and Robert Boyle s "Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Receiv d Notion of Nature." As Cole illustrates, human health and demographic problems notably those of feeding populations periodically stricken by hunger, disease, and famine were tied to larger questions about food supplies, property laws, national identity, even the theological imperatives that underwrote humankind's claim to dominion over the animal kingdom. In this context, Cole s study indicates, so-called vermin occupied liminal spaces between subject and object, nature and animal, animal and the devil, the devil and disease even reason and madness. This verminous discourse formed a foundational category used to carve out humankind s relationship to an unpredictable, a-rational natural world, but it evolved into a form for thinking about not merely animals but anything that threatened the health of the body politic humans, animals, and even thoughts.
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