

TENNYSON'S KRAKEN UNDER THE MICROSCOPE AND IN THE AQUARIUM

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POLYPUS. *n.*

A cephalopod having eight or ten tentacles, as an octopus, squid, or cuttlefish. *Obs.*

POLYPOD. *adj. Zool.*

Of an animal: having many feet; *spec.* Of or belonging to any of the former invertebrate taxonomic groups named *Polypoda* and characterized as having many feet (or organs resembling feet). Now *rare*.¹

The 3rd of March 1769 aboard HMS *Endeavour* Joseph Banks (one day Sir Joseph, President of the Royal Society) and then-Lieutenant James Cook plucked a “giant” dead squid out of the water midway between Cape Horn and Australia.² Banks packed the creature’s beak in alcohol and addressed it to John Hunter in London, and the remainder of the animal was consumed for supper in the commander’s cabin of *Endeavour* (which Banks deemed “one of the best soups I ever ate”).³ The specimen indeed found its way back to Hunter (whose anatomical collections became the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons) then went largely unnoticed until 1829 when the newly appointed curator of the Hunterian undertook the immense collection’s first-ever catalogue.

¹ OED. Author’s note on terms such as “polypi”: I have maintained in most instances the nineteenth-century terminology, as I appreciate Ralph O’Connor’s perspective that “At a cosmetic level, retaining the most current nineteenth-century spelling of each animal discussed (‘hyaena,’ ‘pterodactyl’) helps preserve a sense of their strangeness which we have perhaps lost” (O’Connor 10). I hope to maintain the conceptual (and cosmetic) strangeness of these creatures that are less strange to us today. This means using the terms by which the author would have known the animals: “polypus,” for instance, for creatures with tentacles (a term which does not distinguish between the tentacles of squid and those of barnacles or other microscopic creatures).

² Roughly 38°44’S, 110°33’W. (*Enoploteuthis cookii*. Hunterian Collection London. Object RCSHC/308, in Case 4, Bay 1.

<<http://surgicat.rcseng.ac.uk/Details/collect/2656>>)

³ Ibid.

The new curator was Richard Owen, who would go on to found the Natural History Museum at South Kensington. At the Hunterian Owen cultivated a lifelong interest in polypi; he published his *Memoirs on Pearly Nautilus* three years later, which was so influential that his official portrait by HR Pickersgill shows Owen holding a nautilus shell in his left hand while an unshelled nautilus is preserved in liquid on the table on which his right hand rests. Presumably, he has unshelled it— his *Memoirs on the Pearly Nautilus* laying the ancient polypus bare for the world to see (Figure 1).



Figure 1. HR Pickersgill's portrait of Richard Owen (1845). National Gallery London.

Around this time, the future Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson undertook writing “The Kraken,” a fifteen-line poem about the monster polypus. “The Kraken” (1830) does not just pull its reader underwater; the poem plunges past the “upper deep” into the “abyssal sea”—the lair of the mythical Kraken—only to witness the monster wake and “roar” back to the surface toward his spectacular death. In *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen contends, “The monster’s body is pure culture” and advocates a new *modus legendi*, “a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender.”⁴ This is a particularly appropriate critical framework for nineteenth-century Britain, as in 1878 the *Times* remarked, “It was long since discovered that nothing is so fascinating to an English crowd as a sea-monster.”⁵ In the nineteenth century there were more ways than ever for the public to interact with “sea monsters”: the “monster soup” of grotesque Thames animalcules under new microscope technology; beached whales characterized as antediluvian contemporaries of the newly-discovered ichthyosaur; and the Kraken’s smaller cousins the octopi, squid, cuttlefish, and nautilus encased in glass in public and private aquariums for the first time.

This chapter will explore literal and figurative visibilities through the nineteenth-century attempts to place the Kraken and its scientifically documented relatives under the literal and literary glass of the microscope and behind the glass of new aquarium technologies. The poem’s conflation of deep sea with deep time also makes it an ideal text for historical studies of the underwater world and nineteenth-century geological and taxonomical debates. The struggle to reconcile new theories with archaic public conceptions about nature and order ultimately had significant scientific, cultural, and imperial repercussions. These images also force us to reconsider the peculiar structure of Tennyson’s poem. I will argue that the structure of the poem is modeled after the Kraken itself: a central poetic “body” with “tentacles” which, like the microscope or the aquarium, appears to domesticate the monster but instead reinforces the taxonomical confusion it engenders in both modern science and archaic public lore.

Contemporary critics see the vestiges of “The Kraken” in *Moby-Dick*, *Bleak House*, Ruskin and Turner’s paintings in that, as Richard Maxwell has noted, they all “like to tie apocalyptic rhetoric to fastidious observation with scientific ambitions.”⁶ Stephen George has compared “The Kraken” to Yeats’ “The Second Coming.”⁷ Christopher Ricks notes that the poem is “quite other than a science-fiction or Loch Ness fantasy; its depth of feeling comes from Tennyson’s pained fascination with the thought of a life which is

⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. x.

⁵ “The Royal Aquarium.” *The Times* (11 June 1878), p. 8.

⁶ Richard Maxwell, “Unnumbered Polypi,” *Victorian Poetry* 47.1 (2009), p. 15.

⁷ Stephen George, “Tennyson’s ‘The Kraken,’” *Explicator* 52.1 (1993), pp. 25-27.

somewhat not life at all.”⁸ In his Oxford edition of Tennyson, Adam Roberts observes that the poem is part of Tennyson’s early work which “explores with horrified fascination the passive life, the life of inaction,” terming it a “poetry of impotence.”⁹ Isobel Armstrong has read “The Kraken” as a poem which “discloses an uneasy, riven, political experience,” though “it is not clear whether it belongs to the inert forces of reaction or the mindless violence of revolutionary action.”¹⁰ Monica Young-Zook, Matthew Rowlinson, and Margaret Lourie have taken psychoanalytic perspectives: Young-Zook has argued that the Kraken “might appear to be most easily read in psychoanalytic terms as a vague figure of repression and the Oedipal complex, while Rowlinson calls it the stage before the Oedipal complex, situating it in the Lacanian Law of the Father, and Lourie argues that the creature “can only represent to the post-Freudian reader the vaguely fearful machinations of the unconscious.”¹¹ John Rosenberg and James Donald Welch have focused on “The Kraken” in the context of Tennyson’s body of work: Rosenberg calls the poem “the germ of all Tennyson’s poetry” as the poet “stakes out his essential subject—the twilight world of myth in which consciousness and unconsciousness intersect,” while Welch has been interested more generally in Tennyson’s sense of time, his “predilection of landscape” and “concentration on the external,” suggesting that the “enigmatic quality of [“The Kraken”] and similar poems is a result of the centrality of the material to the structure of Tennyson’s imagination.”¹²

The Kraken might be called an archetypal sea monster. It appears as early as the thirteenth century in Norse and Icelandic literatures and oral traditions, and the word *Kraken* comes from the Norse “krake,” for an unhealthy animal or something twisted. Nineteenth-century English interest in the Kraken stems from Linnaeus’s discussion of the creature in the first edition of *Systema Naturae* (1735) and most famously from *Natural History of Norway* (1752-3) by the Bishop of Bergen Erik Pontoppidan (translated to English soon after). The French malacologist Pierre Denys de

⁸ Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson: A Selected Edition* (London: Pearson, 1969/2007), p. 44.

⁹ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *The Major Works*, ed. by Adam Roberts (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p. xiv.

¹⁰ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 53.

¹¹ Monica Young-Zook, “Sons and Lovers: Tennyson’s Fraternal Paternity,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 33.2 (2005), p. 453; Matthew Rowlinson, *Tennyson’s Fixations: Psychoanalysis and the Topics of the Early Poetry* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), pp. 3, 50; Margaret Lourie, “Below the Thunders of the Upper Deep: Tennyson as Romantic Revisionist,” *Studies in Romanticism* 18 (1979), p. 11.

¹² John D. Rosenberg *Elegy for an Age: The Presence of the Past in Victorian Literature* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), p. 303; James Donald Welch, “Tennyson’s Landscapes of Time and a Reading of ‘The Kraken,’” *Victorian Poetry* 14.3 (1976), p. 201.

Montfort wrote of giant octopi in his *Natural History of Mollusca* (1802), which contributed one of the best-known illustrations of the creature (*le poulpe colossal*) terrorising a ship. Zoologist James Wilson theorised in an essay for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1818 that the Kraken must be a giant cephalopod. Henry Lee asserts in his 1883 treatise on sea monsters for the London International Fisheries Exhibition that “the belief in giant cuttles is an ancient one” and specifically cites Aristotle, Pliny, and Aelian.¹³

Kraken aside, the natural history of polypi in the nineteenth century was investigated by the era’s most celebrated scientific minds. In addition to Owen, Georges Cuvier was also an authority and even wrote the first draft of his 1829 volume *Mollusca* in octopus ink, and Charles Darwin kept a pet octopus collected by the *Beagle* near the Cape Verde Islands in 1832. The Kraken is most often identified as a gigantic squid, and by the early nineteenth century a formidable body of encounters with giant squid (or giant octopi, “polypi,” “cuttles,” etc.) would have been known to anyone with a passing interest in the subject. Giant squid have washed up on the coasts of the British Isles for centuries, including at Dingle Bay, County Kerry, in 1673, when the carcass was taken to Dublin and displayed and a broadside was circulated. Thus, part of what is at stake here is what I might call a history of engagement with polypi in the British Isles, in which “The Kraken” participates and foretells the Victorian preoccupation with sea monsters (of which polypi small and large are a recurring figure). The Kraken is a flash point of “modern” science and archaic lore, and Tennyson pushes this tension to the boundaries of scientific and public knowledge.

“SECRET CELLS,” DEEP SEA, AND DEEP TIME

Rebecca Stott has written of sea creatures on display: “From the mid-century onwards, public and drawing-room aquaria, deep sea dredging, rock pools, and the detailed recording and observing of the sexual behaviour, anatomy and metamorphosis of sea creatures could be said to have become a national obsession.”¹⁴ This is the lens through which later readers would view “The Kraken,” but at its publication in 1830 the poem deftly engaged the infancy of aquarium technology (and adolescent microscopy) to place enormous tension between archaic public lore and progressive scientific discourse in the 1820s. It invokes the scientist observing polypi under the glass of the microscope and prefigures the public observing polypi behind the glass of the aquarium. Through these media, the form of the polypus also becomes a symbol for sexual grotesqueness and a creature that

¹³ Henry Lee, *Sea Monsters Unmasked* (London: Clowes and Sons, 1884), p. 30.

¹⁴ Rebecca Stott, “Through a Glass Darkly: Aquarium Colonies and Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Marine Monstrosity,” *Gothic Studies* 2.3 (2000), 305-327.

threatens the foundations of polite taxonomy with its anthropomorphised, literal and figurative backwardness: it is “upside-down,” “head-footed,” an unchanged inhabitant of the primordial monster-filled seas, a primitive, readily-breeding creature whose mouth, genitals, and appendages are situated in indelicate proximity.

The poem invites a criticism of its scientific gaze through the microscope with allusions to “secret cells” and creatures commonly observed in the early days of microscopy. Under the microscope of the poem, these usually tiny creatures become not just visible but “huge” (l. 6), “enormous” (l. 9), “giant” (l. 10). Tennyson’s sponges and polypi, “huge” versions of common microscopy subjects, indicate the poem’s engagement with those creatures far away in the depths of sea *and* in the laboratory under the microscope. In what we might term the allegory of the microscope in the poem, Tennyson plays with the notion of the minuscule vs. enormous. Tennyson spends the first half of the “Kraken” focusing his microscope; the lens descends farther and farther down into the sphere of the monster. While under other famous microscopes of the age there is chaos (such as Heath’s “Microcosm” to be discussed in this chapter), under Tennyson’s there is a disconcerting calm. The creature is sleeping soundly, dreamlessly, in a dark seabed, ripe for observation.

Studying polypi under the microscope was a “grand nineteenth-century tradition” according to Richard Maxwell.¹⁵ The middle lines of “The Kraken” are Tennyson’s laboratory, refracting the creature’s environment through the language of rapidly popularizing microscopy:

And far away into the sickly light,
From many a wondrous grot and secret cell
Unnumbered and enormous polypi
Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green. (ll. 7-10)

Despite the “sickly light” this underwater world becomes visible in Tennyson’s hands. The “secret cell” reveals a double meaning. Indeed the “unnumbered and enormous polypi” inhabit cell-like caves beneath the sea, but “secret cell” also alludes to the cellular level on which marine creatures (often polypi) were being observed for the first time under new microscope technologies.¹⁶ These cells are “secret” because they are yet unstudied. The allegory of the microscope is further evident in the “unnumbered and enormous” polypi:

¹⁵ Richard Maxwell, “Unnumbered Polypi,” *Victorian Poetry* 47.1 (2009), p. 11.

¹⁶ Though the understanding of “cells” in 1830 lacked the sophistication of even the following decade, it is not anachronistic to read the “secret cell” as biological. From the *OED*, “cell”: “(chiefly *poet.* and *literary*). A small and humble dwelling, a cottage. Also: a lonely nook; the den of a wild beast”; “The cup-like cavity occupied by an individual polyp in some colonial invertebrates, esp. cnidarians and bryozoans. Now *rare*; “*Biol.* Any of various larger chambers in the structure of a tissue or organism, typically with known functions,”

“unnumbered” alludes both to their population and reproductive avidity. The polypi are “enormous” with “giant arms” when literally magnified under new microscope technologies as in William Heath’s 1828 “Microcosm, Dedicated to the London Water Company.”

The duality of the sea and laboratory can be considered separately, as above, and together, as the sea itself was a new laboratory for the growing marine sciences. G. H. Lewes and others encouraged ordinary Britons to venture to the coast to explore the beaches and tide pools; deep sea diving bells were in their infancy; physicians aboard whaling ships acted as marine scientists studying the water and its creatures. Isobel Armstrong has correlated the importance of water in microscopy and “popular” science: “Water and its contents spawned a popular literature of microscopic investigation and, indeed, helped to bring into being the category of “popular” science in an avid print culture.”¹⁷ The microscopic language and imagery of the middle lines of “The Kraken” suggest a fraught opposition between the invisibility (and hostility to humans) of the deep sea and the seemingly all-penetrating eye of science.

While the poem’s “secret cells” are both geological and biological, the asexual reproduction of those some polypi also evinced a literal doubling which horrified spectators. In one of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s letters, which the poet dates the 9th of October 1809, he writes of compiling new manuscripts for publication: “I will divide them polypus-wise, so that first Half should get itself a new Tail of its own, and the latter a new Head.”¹⁸ In a letter to James Gilman in 1826, Coleridge charged nature with being a “warily wily long-breathed old witch, tough-lived as a turtle and divisible as the polyp, repullalative in a thousand snips and cuttings.”¹⁹ Coleridge invokes the polypus’s peculiar habit of surviving (and regenerating) as two creatures after being cut in half (or a thousand, as he hyperbolizes). This lends new meaning to the “secret cells” from which Tennyson’s “unnumbered and enormous polypi” wave their giant arms. The “secret cells” were further “unnumbered” as the creatures’ reproductive power stunned, confounded, and profoundly disturbed naturalists. The body which can survive such trauma (and reproduce asexually as a result) is threatening. The monsters in Heath’s “Monster Soup” (published just two years before “The Kraken”) are subtitled in Milton’s words, “all prodigious things,” readily, unstoppably breeding. Indeed Isobel Armstrong has observed that much of the shock of microscopic observation was a product of the “gross feeding and sexual avidity” of the heretofore unseen creatures beneath the lens.²⁰ That which so

¹⁷ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 320.

¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 3, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971, 2002), p. 235.

¹⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 6, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971, 2002), p. 743.

²⁰ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 318.

discomfited early Victorian naturalists made the public, once exposed to these polypi in aquariums, positively aghast. When the scientific glass of the microscope yielded to the public glass of the aquarium, polypi became spectacle. “The Kraken” illuminates the public exhibition of polypi under the glass of proliferating microscopy and prefigures such engagement at aquariums beginning mid-century. Thirty years after “The Kraken,” in John Swain’s 1860 cartoon “Valuable Addition to the Aquarium” for *Punch* (Figure 2), a woman is horrified at the octopus, its legs splayed out in front of her face.



Figure 2. John Swain, “Valuable Addition to the Aquarium,” *Punch* (1860).

The public reception of polypi was often relegated to horror at the creature’s sexual grotesqueness. For octopi and squid this anxiety was focused on the immorality of having a mouth permanently situated between one’s legs as well as the phallic nature of the tentacles. Just as Victorian science tried to fit new creatures into archaic taxonomies, it also tried to apply the conventions of human body parts to non-human creatures, resulting in an anthropomorphism in which the human form is horrifically, abjectly reimagined by a public (and even a scientific community) that observes, in the case of Darwin’s barnacles, a polypus’s legs in the air while it “stands” on its head, its mouth beneath its many “legs” (tentacles), a single eye on top of its “stomach” and a horrifying public anus. This defiance of taxonomy (and their seeming reproductive avidity) put creatures like the polypus at odds with Victorian decorum and made them the perfect sea monster: so gruesome the public could not get enough—from a safe distance, that is, through the mediation of glass.

For the microscopic polypi this public horror was largely contained in the animal’s ability to reproduce without a mate. In Heath’s “Microcosm, Dedicated to London Water Companies” (Figure 3), the passage from *Paradise Lost* at the top right of the etching

decries “All monstrous, all prodigious things / Hydras and gorgons and chimeras dire.” The passage from Milton is a particularly clever epigram, as it invokes yet another set of double meanings. When Milton invoked hydras and gorgons, he did so in the mythological sense; however, Heath would have known that hydras, gorgons, and chimeras were also genii of marine creatures first catalogued by Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae*. “Monster Soup” is also a complicated expression of the categorical tensions present when Tennyson was writing “The Kraken”; Heath’s Miltonic nod to Linnaeus accepts the taxonomy he cemented in 1735 (the first phylogenetic binomial system), but the busy visual of microscopic monsters undermines that taxonomy to seem “unnumbered” (to borrow from “The Kraken”). There was much to fear from these sexually avid modern polypi populating not just the faraway oceans but the Thames and one’s afternoon tea.

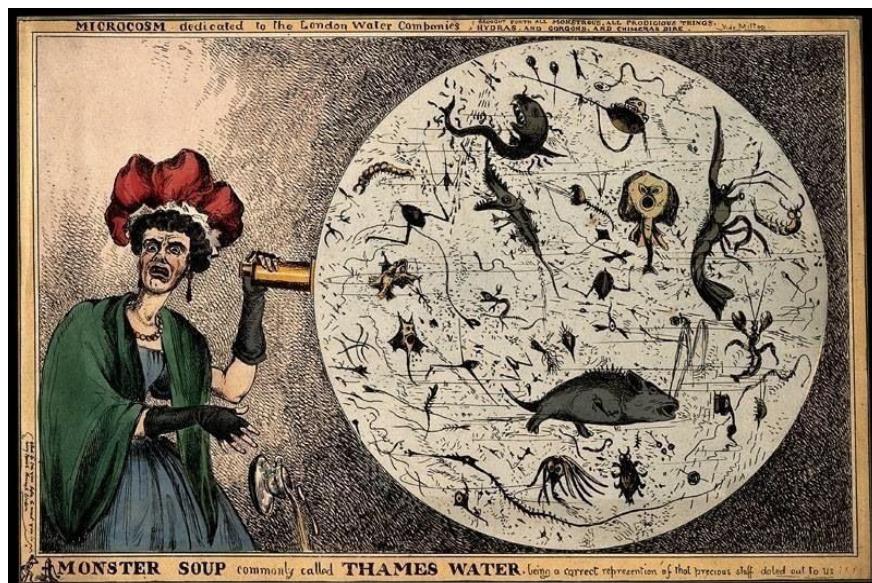


Figure 3. William Heath, “MICROCOSM, dedicated to the London Water Companies” (1828). British Museum.

The image of a public display of polypi is also evident in the last lines of “The Kraken”: “Then once by man and angels to be seen, / In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die” (ll. 14-15). I will take up these lines with regard to the structure in the final section of this chapter, but it is important to underscore in this section that the fifteenth line, in which the monster is at last visible to men on land, is also the moment of its demise. At its most basic level, the conflation of water and glass (scientific and public, the microscope and the aquarium) is about fatal visibility. I have interpreted what I have seen as the tacit moments of taxonomy and new Victorian visibility of the deep sea, but the poem’s final line is an unequivocal moment of display. Richard Maxwell has argued that “death and visibility go

together” in the poem, but is the Kraken’s death in part *caused* by being seen?²¹ Rather than (or perhaps in conjunction with) the more traditional Christian apocalyptic reading of the Kraken rising to face judgment, perhaps we should also consider the final Romantic caution to nascent Victorian science, when Wordsworth famously warns in “The Tables Turned” (1798) that “Our meddling intellect / Misshaped the beauteous forms of things:— / We murder to dissect.”²² The Kraken’s poetic sleep begins “uninvaded” (l. 3) by the symbolic light of science (l. 4), and by 1830 it was already suspected that prolonged time at the surface damages deep-sea creatures’ buoyancy mechanisms such that they cannot dive again and die there on the surface. Rather than taking “pleasure in the pathless woods” and meeting nature where it stands, a new (Victorian) observational ethos of capture and domestication is emerging, and the Kraken is “roaring” against it.

Tennyson’s layering of these images of time and space at sea prefigure the literary and visual genres which will conflate the deep sea with “deep time.” In Henry Morley’s “Antediluvian Cruise” for Charles Dickens’s *Household Words*, for instance, the sea voyage is a voyage back in time.²³ The same year that “The Kraken” was published, Henry de la Beche painted “*Duria Antiquior, a More Ancient Dorset*” (Figure 4)—the first artistic portrayal of a prehistoric underwater world.²⁴ In it, ichthyosaurs frolic in the water submerging that “more ancient” Dorset, while several of Owen’s nautili rest on the seafloor and four large squid are clearly visible. The rock which slopes to the sea floor seems to host several organisms which resemble the non-cephalopod polypi (any creature with many tentacles like corals and barnacles). As Martin Rudwick argues of this genre of “scenes from deep time”, “this conjunction of living and dead alludes neatly to the process of fossilisation that links the reality of the deep past to the survival of its relics in the present”.²⁵ “The Kraken” (the poem and the creature) engenders this connection, but also creates a sense of tension between the two instead of a harmonious scientific “conjunction” of living and dead, modern and archaic.

²¹ Maxwell, p. 12.

²² William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned,” *The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ll. 25-28.

²³ Henry Morley, “Our Phantom Ship on an Antediluvian Cruise,” *Household Words* 3.73 (1851) 492-96.

²⁴ The figure shows De La Beche’s original watercolor of the prehistoric scene, based on the discoveries of famed fossil hunter Mary Anning in Lyme Regis, Dorset. When Anning fell on hard times, De La Beche commissioned lithographer George Sharpe to sell grayscale lithographs of the painting with the proceeds going to Anning.

²⁵ Rudwick, p. 46.



Figure 4. Henry De La Beche, “*Duria antiquior*, a More Ancient Dorset” (1830). Amgueddfa Cenedlaethol Cymru - National Museum of Wales.

Most notable, however, is what Rudwick has termed the “tacit human viewpoint,” of “*Duria Antiquior*” and “The Kraken” for the first time, in which “the observer is not out on land, but half in the water, close to the surface and seeing the view both underwater and above it. [...] The viewpoint is as much that of the marine animals themselves as of any ordinary human observer.”²⁶ Indeed, the viewpoint in “The Kraken” even descends deep below the surface. As Rudwick points out, “*Duria antiquior*” comes twenty years before the accepted “invention” of the aquarium and mid-century “aquarium craze” which rendered the underwater world visible for the first time (albeit a version which suffered from human arrangement). “*Duria antiquior*” and “The Kraken” participate in this iteration of the “tacit human viewpoint” by serving as aids to visualisation of the world beneath the surface. By facilitating readers’ first visions beneath the surface—and linking it so inextricably with the idea of deep time—“The Kraken” echoes “Monster Soup” in the ubiquity of monsters, while adding the layer of the temporal as well as the geographic.

RETHINKING THE STRUCTURE OF “THE KRAKEN”

The peculiar structure of “The Kraken” has confounded critics. Drawing on my claims about the material culture of polypi here, I propose a reinterpretation of the poem’s structure which reinforces a sense of taxonomical strangeness and interacts with the new theory

²⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

and practice of popular science in the 1820s and 1830s. It is generally agreed that “The Kraken” is a sonnet of sorts, which more closely resembles the Petrarchan than the Shakespearian form; however, it has fifteen lines instead of the customary fourteen (a medium-is-the-message nod to the “latter” [l. 13] chaos, most critics say). As the Petrarchan sonnet is typically marked by an octave followed by a sestet which resolves or somehow redirects the problem laid out in the octave, most Tennyson scholars account for the fifteenth line of “The Kraken” as an addition to the conventional sestet. The fifteenth line indeed accomplishes this “return” (the “roaring” in line 15 recalls the “thunders” of line 1); however, to characterise the final seven lines as a sestet with an extra line seems disingenuous when the implied stanza break would come in between two enjambed lines (lines 8-9, “From many a wondrous grot and secret cell / Unnumbered and enormous polypi”). Instead, Tennyson’s enjambment where the octave would traditionally conclude and the sestet would begin subverts the anticipated pause and continues the poem’s measured descent into the lair of the Kraken, creating a patiently layered lack of order or resolution building toward to the “latter” chaos of the extra line. I would like to offer, then, that the Petrarchan form is intact but backward before the extra line: instead of the customary octave and sestet, Tennyson employs a sestet *then* an octave plus an extra line.

A standard Petrarchan stanza break would fall like so:

Octave	Below the thunders of the upper deep; Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea, His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee About his shadowy sides: above him swell Huge sponges of millennial growth and height; And far away into the sickly light, <u>From many a wondrous grot and secret cell</u>
Sestet	Unnumbered and enormous polypi Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green. There hath he lain for ages and will lie Battening upon huge sea-worms in his sleep, Until the latter fire shall heat the deep; <u>Then once by man and angels to be seen,</u>
Extra line	<u>In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.</u>

However, I contend that the poem should be understood with the following subtextual stanza break:

Sestet	Below the thunders of the upper deep; Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea, His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep
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Octave	The Kraken sleepeth: faintest sunlights flee About his shadowy sides: above him swell <u>Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;</u> And far away into the sickly light, From many a wondrous grot and secret cell Unnumbered and enormous polypi Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green. There hath he lain for ages and will lie Battening upon huge sea-worms in his sleep, Until the latter fire shall heat the deep; <u>Then once by man and angels to be seen,</u>
Extra line	In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.

“The Kraken” is a poem about that which is below rising to the top. The ancient monster, supposed to dwell at the bottom of the sea, rises to be “seen”. I propose that the poem itself takes the form of a Kraken. The octave and sestet are upside-down, and the Kraken itself is an upside-down creature: the word *cephalopod* is Greek and translates to “head-footed.” The “head” and “foot” of the poem, like the creature, are backward, upside-down. What’s more, cephalopods, by definition, have eight tentacles. Thus, the octave at the bottom of the poem mimics the creature itself: a smaller head on top with an octave of appendages below. Indeed, the first enjambmed sentence of the octave-plus-one is about the “giant arms” of the “unnumbered polypi” which “winnow” the sea (“unnumbered” deftly intimating the difficult-to-quantify structure of the poem).

“The Kraken” is a poem about an impending lack of order, a chaos. What could be more threatening to the rigid Victorian literary-scientific consciousness than the tried-and-true sonnet dismantled and put back together wrong in the form of a monster? (Mimicking a creature which does the same?) The rhyme is also a measure of embraced chaos. While the traditional Petrarchan rhyme scheme is ABBAABBACDDECE, the rhyme scheme of “The Kraken” is ABABCDDCEFEAAFE. Upon closer examination, a sort of warped reflectiveness is visible, beginning with the rhyming lines 12 and 13, which create a warped mirror image of the first three lines of the poem:

Below the thunders of the upper deep;
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep (ll. 1-3)

Battening upon huge sea-worms in his sleep,
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep; (ll. 12-13)

In line 12 “deep;” (including the semicolon) is reiterated, followed by “sleep,” but without the line in between the pace between them is now

hurried. The chaos of the “latter fire” draws near—it is the next line. Perhaps Tennyson is alluding to (but distorting) the common characteristic of all the polypi: their “radial symmetry.”²⁷

Furthermore, the rhyme scheme of lines 9-14 is a warped mirror image of the traditional rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan sonnet form. In “The Kraken,” lines 9-14 rhyme EFEAAF while the traditional Petrarchan sonnet rhymes lines 9-14 CDDECE. Though the scheme corresponds to different rhymed lines, Tennyson has skilfully mirrored the rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan concluding sestet (EFEAAF is CDDECE in reverse). He has also embedded it in the octave which mimics the octopod creature itself, and composed the line after this odd sestet in iambic hexameter (as opposed to the staunch pentameter of all other lines), perhaps as a nod to the “extra foot.”

This reflection again speaks to the “backwardness” of the monster after which the poem is modelled: the “head-footed” creature with head and legs reversed, and perhaps even the intellectual backwardness of the creature’s invocation of deep time. Furthermore, in the traditional Petrarchan sonnet form of an octave followed by a sestet, the sestet is supposed to resolve or redirect the conflict laid out in the octave. Tennyson’s poem is backward in this way as well, as the initial sestet relies heavily on assonance for its calm, measured depiction of deep-sea life, and the concluding octave (the tentacles of the beast) are chaos personified. (And the final line, in hexameter, is this chaotic sestet in miniature.) Tennyson’s “reflection” of the sestet form may be construed as reiterating the “rules” in order to throw them into chaos or to mediate or challenge the anxiety of poetic “impotence” which Tennyson’s early poetry espouses.²⁸

The Kraken will finally surface with the “latter fire” to be seen by man and angels. But why shall he die? Zoologists already suspected by 1830 that prolonged time at the surface damaged deep-sea creatures’ buoyancy mechanisms such that they could not descend again and died there on the surface. And why has he risen in the first place? It has been widely speculated that the Kraken has been summoned (along with other monsters) to the surface to face Judgement Day. His “rise” underscores Christ’s, and he rages against it, ultimately succumbing to judgement. The passionate “latter fire” figuratively “heats” the sea to draw out its monsters, piercing through the earlier “sickly light” to cast vision (of “man and angels”) upon the creature.

Richard Maxwell has called the fifteenth line a “calculated moment of excess,” though no one has yet considered the metre of the line.²⁹ The final line is not only anomalous because it is the fifteenth in an ordinarily fourteen-line closed form, but because of its

²⁷ *OED*.

²⁸ According to Roberts (p. xiv), with whom I agree.

²⁹ Maxwell, p. 14.

metre (iambic hexameter). The poem, though making significant changes to the Petrarchan structure, staunchly maintains iambic pentameter save the two trochees in lines 10 and 12, respectively. The final line, however, is iambic *hexameter*, containing an entire extra metrical foot. The extra metrical foot mimics the extra line. Also, an abundance of “feet” is precisely what makes a polypus (*poly-pus* signifying *many-feet*). The line is a monster, it has an extra foot, and the monstrous creature itself has “extra” feet. “Extra” feet make a statement in other parts of the poem as well, in the “unnumbered an enormous polypi” who wave their many limbs in the current (ll. 9-10).

To this point, the carefully measured iambic pentameter has slowly, methodically submerged the reader into the deep sea and deep time, and this sense of rhythm lends the outlying metrical foot a profound send of disruption. The enjambment between lines 9-10 and between lines 11-12 yields a stressed syllable at the beginning of lines 10 and 12 (“Winnow” and “Battening”, respectively), disrupting the iambic nature of the first two thirds of the poem. (Line 10, “Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green” begins to destabilize the metre by beginning with a trochee, which disrupts the heretofore iambic nature.) The pentameter remains intact, but the metrical balance is thrown off. Something is happening, portending chaos. The medium indeed seems to be the message in “The Kraken,” contributing to the sense of taxonomical confusion and monstrosity informed by both modern science and archaic public lore.

As for the squid beak collected by Banks in 1769, the specimen is still on display in a jar of spirits, tucked alongside others in Case 4 Bay 1, at the Hunterian Collection in London. It retains the preparator’s handwritten label: Owen pronounced it *Onychoteuthis banksii* after Banks as opposed to Hunter’s initial naming *-Enoplooteuthis cookii*—after Cook. Its provenance, from South Pacific to *Endeavour* to London, and from Banks to Hunter to Owen, speaks to the importance of polypi (both massive and microscopic) in the development of marine zoology in the nineteenth century and to the expanding public and material culture of zoological display. It is easy to imagine the confusion—perhaps even horror—of a nineteenth-century observer told that such a beak comes not from an enormous bird but a tentacled sea creature. The peculiar structure of “The Kraken” anticipates such anatomical bewilderment and sets the scene for other large literary polypi such as in *Moby-Dick* (1851), *Toilers of the Sea* (1866), and *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), in which the creature unsettles men’s conquest of the sea.

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