

Pirates, Piracy and Octopus: From Multi-Armed Monster to Model Minority?

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Octopus: Anti-Piracy or Piracy-friendly?

The octopus has been represented as a greedy monster, grasping and groping about for anything edible with its writhing tentacles. As its other name, “devil fish,” suggests, it is still considered to be a fiendish vampire or a gigantic sea monster. American movies have preserved and spread this image by means of, for instance, Ursula in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) as well as Kraken in *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (2006) and *At World’s End* (2007). Kraken attacking a pirate ship has become a global icon.¹ The list would be longer—nearly limitless—if one added to it British, French, Chinese and Japanese literature, including that in popular culture.²

In Ancient Greece, however, the octopus was a symbol of “metis.” Like Hermes, it was related to intelligence and skill due to its flexibility and ability to mimic. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant compare the ancient Greek octopus to the modern European fox in symbolical cosmology and note that Odysseus was called “An Octopus.”³ This might explain why this multi-armed creature has widely been depicted in ancient Greek dishes and vases.⁴

When did this gentle, intelligent and nearly harmless mollusk become a Kraken-like sea-monster or man-eater? According to Roger Caillois, this appears to have happened due to Victor Hugo’s novel *Toilers of the Sea* (1866).⁵ Using natural history knowledge based on the increasing number of discoveries and reports of huge multi-armed sea-creatures (including giant squid), this French romantic novelist vividly imagined the octopus as a “sea vampire.” Since then, also partially due to the dramatic illustration of Gustave Doré (fig. 1), octopuses have been seen as blood-feeding creatures that hide in rugged shores and strangle and capture even humans by their suckers.

¹ The contemporary version can be found, for instance, in Johnny Duddle’s *Pirate-Cruncher* (2009), one of the most popular picture books in Britain, and Oda Eiichirō’s *One Piece*, vol.62 (2011), the best-selling manga series in history. It is worth noting that *One Piece* is the Japan’s first globally successful pirate story. A number of Japanese authors, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, have appropriated Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883) and tried to circulate its Asian version to encourage imperialism and a pioneering spirit, but all failed.

² On the octopus in French culture, see, for instance, Guillaume Apollinaire, “Le Poulpe” and Raoul Dufy’s illustration in *Le Bestiaire ou Cortège d’Orphée* (1911) and the octopus-like creature in the movie *Possession* (1981).

³ Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 38–39.

⁴ Kuwabara Norimasa, “Kashikosa no mohan toshite no tako” (The Octopus as a Model of Intelligence), *Nihon Girisha kyōkaihō* (Newsletter of the Japan-Greece Society) 32 (1985), 8–9. I would like to thank the Japan-Greece Society for sending me a photocopy of the article.

⁵ Roger Caillois, *La Pieuvre: Essai sur la Logique de l’imaginaire* (Paris: La Table ronde, 1973), 76.



Fig. 1 Gustave Doré's illustration from Victor Hugo, *Travailleurs de la Mer* (Toilers of the Sea; 1866).

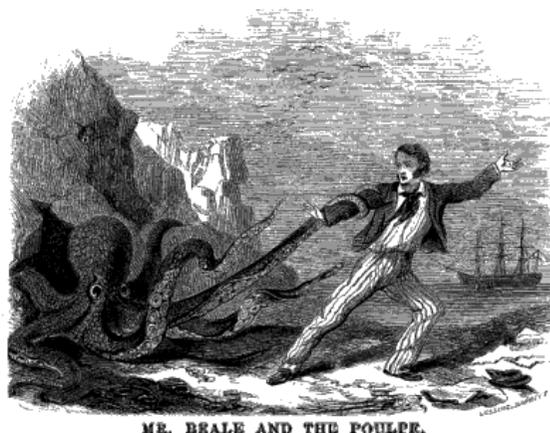


Fig. 2 "Mr. Beale and the Poulpe" from Samuel Griswold Goodrich, *Illustrated Natural History of the Animal Kingdom* (1861).



Fig. 3 A Fisherman attacked by a huge octopus in *Hokusai Manga*. This is an unauthorized reproduction from Charles Gould, *Mythical Monsters* (1886).

An early 19th century representation, however, might have slightly influenced Hugo and Doré. A story similar to the one told by Hugo was reported by a British surgeon, Thomas Beale, in the Ogasawara islands off the mainland of Japan: he was attacked by a giant octopus at the sea shore, and his story, with its illustration (fig. 2), was widely reprinted in an abridged form in a popular natural history book.⁶ Another similar image comes from Hokusai, a famous Japanese painter. *Hokusai manga* (Hokusai's Sketches) includes a fisherman groped by several tentacles of an octopus from a cave at the seashore (fig. 3). Additionally, it is worth mentioning Hokusai's obscene painting, which was one of the most famous *shunga* (erotic woodblock prints) of his

⁶ Thomas Beale, *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale: To which is Added, a Sketch of a South-sea Whaling Voyage* (London: John Van Voorst, 1839), 68–69. For an illustrated version, see, for instance, S. G. Goodrich, *Illustrated Natural History of the Animal Kingdom* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1861), 498.



“THE ACTUAL MARTIAN”

Fig. 4 Warwick Goble’s Illustration of a Martian as vampire octopus from H. G. Wells, *War of the Worlds* (1898). Goble, inspired by Japanese woodblock prints, was the first to illustrate *War of the Worlds*. His forte was exotic Indian and Japanese themes, as can be seen in, for instance, the illustrations of Grace James’s *Green Willow and Other Japanese Fairy Tales* (MacMillan, 1910) and Lal Behari Dey’s *Folk-Tales of Bengal* (MacMillan, 1912).

time: “Diver and Octopus” from *Kino e no komatsu* (Pine Seedlings on the First Rat Day; 1814), which depicts intercourse between two octopuses and a woman.

It is not clear that Hugo was directly inspired by Thomas Beale’s account or Hokusai’s paintings, but his representation of a violent octopus is mixed with a Hokusai-like sensual image of tentacles. According to Ricard Bru, Hokusai’s octopus was so influential that it was appropriated by many artists, such as Henrique Alvin Corrêa in his illustration of a blood-sucking Martian found in a French edition (1906) of H. G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* (1898; fig. 4).⁷

This new image coincided with the rise of caricature that resulted from improvements in printing techniques. A number of caricaturists in Europe and America literally demonized image of the devilfish. Numerous pirated copies of their paintings were produced. This symbol of swelling greed was, and still is, widely applied and appropriated to depict the faces of an enemy, rival powers, monopolies, opposition forces, and unwelcome immigrants.⁸

As for the image of fiendish and dangerous immigration, the octopus had often been associated with Chinese people. One of the earliest examples is found in an Australian magazine, *Bulletin* (21 August 1886). In “The Mongolian Octopus: His Grip on Australia,” an octopus

⁷ Ricard Bru, *Erotic Japonisme: The Influence of Japanese Sexual Imagery on Western Art* (Leiden: Hotei, 2013), 96. Hokusai’s Diver/Octopus illustration captivated influential writers like Edmond de Goncourt and Joris-Karl Huysmans. According to Bru, the subject was interpreted or copied mainly between 1880–1910 by a range of artists, including Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Auguste Rodin, Félicien Rops, Fernand Khnopff, Gustav Klimt, and Pablo Picasso. Meanwhile Bru notes that they were shocked by Hokusai’s visual power and the tentacular monsters sexually assaulting a woman, and that few would have understood the text appearing in the image, which explains that the woman is actually enjoying the intercourse (see pp. 91–93). As for the modern pornographic representation, see Marco Benoit Carbone, *Tentacle Erotica: Orrore, Seduzione, Immaginari Pornografici* (Milano: Mimesis, 2013).

⁸ See, a wide range of variants, for instance, at Michelle Farran’s website, <http://vulgararmy.com/>.

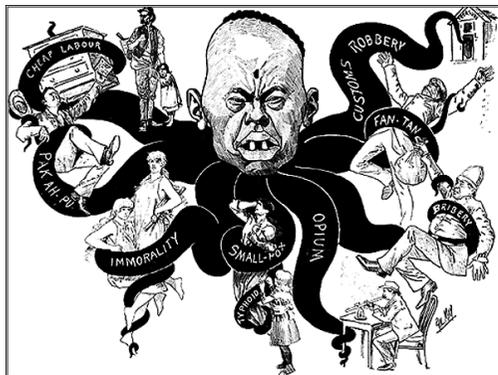


Fig. 5 “The Mongolian Octopus: His Grip on Australia,” *Bulletin* (21 August 1886).



Fig. 6 “What Shall We Do With Our Boys,” *Wasp* (3 March 1882).



Fig. 7 “Between the Devil and the Deep Sea” from *South African Review* (n.d.). This is a reprinted version in *Review of Reviews* (February 1904).

spreads its tentacles to strangle each aspect of society, thereby depicting Chinese people as totally unassimilated aliens (fig. 5).⁹ This multi-armed creature, however, was also used to depict the multi-talented, skilled worker because of its diverse and positive dexterity. The American anti-Chinese immigration caricature “What Shall We Do with Our Boys?” (*The Wasp*, 3 March 1882) unintentionally suggests the other side of the immigrant menace by depicting an octopus-like multi-armed Chinese worker who works more quickly in every kind of job than the “white” American worker (fig. 6).¹⁰ Because of the exchange and reprinting of these caricatures in the English-speaking world, this association was also recycled in South Africa. “Between the Devil and the Deep Sea” (1904) criticizes a government decision to import indentured laborers from China. It depicts a Chinese person landing on the beach and trying to embrace South Africa, which is represented as a goddess (fig. 7).¹¹ This is not an octopus but a slimy and sleazy

⁹ This was reprinted in *Review of Reviews*, July 1903, 119.

¹⁰ This is part of Anti-Chinese propaganda in America. The Chinese Exclusion Act was signed by President Chester A. Arthur on 6 May 1882.

¹¹ This was reprinted in *Review of Reviews*, February 1904, 117.

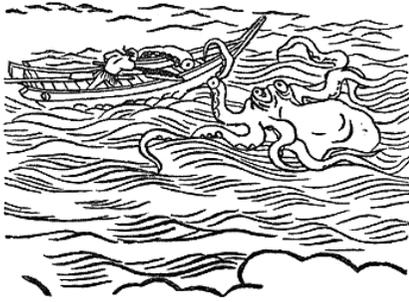


Fig. 8 A Japanese example of a huge hostile octopus from Henry Lee, *Sea Monsters Unmasked* (1883). This must be a traced drawing or pirated copy of fig. 9.

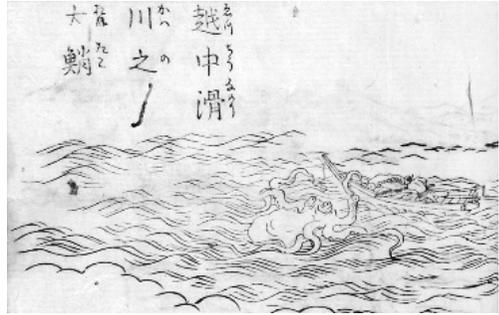


Fig. 9 “Ecchū Namerikawa no ōdako” (A giant octopus in Ecchu Namerikawa) from Kimura Kenkadō, *Nihon sankai meisan zue* (Land and Sea Products in Japan; 1799).

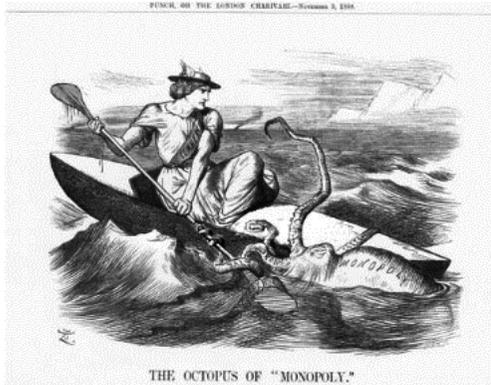


Fig. 10 John Tenniel, “The Octopus of ‘Monopoly,’” *Punch* (3 November 1888). Tenniel might have copied fig. 8.

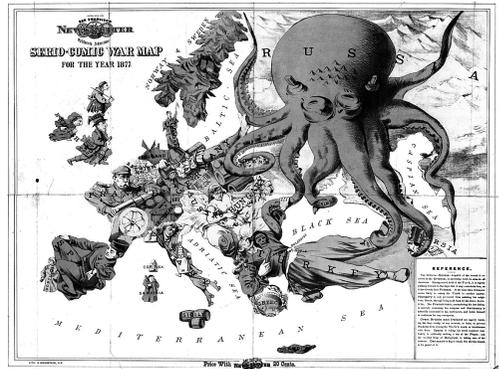


Fig. 11 Fred W. Rose’s “Serio-Comic War Map” (1877).



Fig. 12 Kokkei Ōa gaikō chizu (Serio-Comic Eurasian Map; 1904). This is an obvious copy of fig. 11, but it mainly serves to emphasize common interests between Britain and Japan.



Fig. 13 “A Japanese Cartoon to Illustrate the Russian Peril,” *Kokkei Ōa gaikō chizu* reprinted in *Review of the Reviews*.

outlander with a tentacle-like pigtail—perhaps a variant on the theme of an octopus assaulting a woman at the seashore.

After the French-Japanese chimera-like octopuses of Hugo and Hokusai became popular, similar example of Japanese woodblock prints fuelled a craze in such depictions. British natural historian Henry Lee's *The Octopus: Or, the 'Devil-fish' of Fiction and of Fact* (1875) was, as Caillois notes, a sober and scientific record of this gentle mollusk.¹² In another debunking book of his entitled *Sea Monsters Unmasked* (1883), Lee presents the illustration "Japanese Fisherman Attacked by a Cuttle" (fig. 8) from a Japanese book (possibly from a 1799 natural history record¹³; fig. 9) as evidence for the existence of a giant squid or octopus. This was appropriated as another stock image of the threatening octopus, as can be seen by, for instance, John Tenniel's "The Octopus of 'Monopoly'" in *Punch* (3 November 1888; fig. 10).¹⁴ Nearly every Western power came to depict some other Western power as a greedy octopus spreading its tentacles: France in an American magazine, Britain in a German journal, American monopoly in the British eye, and so on. These cartoons were introduced and reprinted in major papers or magazines such as *Review of Reviews*. In this way, this depiction was circulated globally and became a stereotype. It is hardly surprising that the image was re-imported to Japan. Fred W. Rose's "Serio-Comic War Map" (1877; fig. 11), a British caricature of Russia as an octopus, was, recycled as Japanese propaganda in the wake of the Russo-Japanese war: *Kokkei Ōa gaikō chizu* (Serio-Comic Eurasian Map; fig. 12).¹⁵

Meanwhile, Japan is one of the few countries that traditionally has represented the octopus as a favorable neighbor or a funny imitation of a human being. The above-mentioned negative images were rather exceptional. In the 19th century, this sea-dweller was commonly found in a personified form in the paintings or woodblock prints. In this way, the hybrid octopus can be found in the early days of modernization. The best example is the Kraken-like giant squid or octopus depicted in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). The illustration accompanying the account of a witness on the French dispatch steamer *Alecton* in 1861 (fig. 14) was recycled in a caricature by the Japanese artist Honda Kinkichirō (*Marumaru chinbun*, 9 April 1881; fig. 15). It illustrates a greedy politician as an octopus, but the face is personified in a traditionally funny and comical style.

The bilateral character of the octopus has continued to exist in Japan. Its comical image was spread and strengthened by one of the earliest modern manga artists, Tagawa Suihō. He published *Tako no hacchan* (Octopus, Mr. Eight) in 1935 (fig. 16). Impressed by the life and civilization of the land dweller, Hacchan the octopus lands on the seashore to learn to live as a

¹² Caillois, *La Pieuvre*, 13.

¹³ Lee notes that it is from "'Land and Sea Products' by Ki Kone." Lee, *Sea Monsters Unmasked* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1883), 27. This must be Kimura Kōkyō [Kenkadō], *Sankai meisan zue* (Land and Sea Products; 1799). Kimura was an encyclopaedic writer who studied natural history, Dutch, and Latin.

¹⁴ Interestingly in *Punch* (18 June 1881), Tenniel published "The Irish Devil-Fish" with a quotation from Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, book 4, ch. 3: "The creature is formidable, but there is a way of resisting it, [sic] The Devil-fish, in fact, is only vulnerable through the head."

¹⁵ Peter Barber, ed., *The Map Book* (New York: Walker & Co, 2005), 284. The map was reprinted in *Review of Reviews* (July 1904), 37 (fig. 13), although it is not clear how the propaganda functioned.



Fig. 14 Steamer Alecton and a Giant Squid from Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870).



Fig. 15 Honda Kinkichirō, “Ryōshi tōyō ni takonyū o tsuru” (Two Men Caught a Huge Octopus), *Marumaru chinbun* (9 April 1881).



Fig. 16 Tagawa Suihō, *Tako no hacchan* (Octopus Mr. Eight; 1935–1948). Tagawa was a manga pioneer. This *Curious George*-like story describes the namesake character as a sort of benign model minority.

human. Each episode follows the same pattern: the curious octopus tries to behave like a human but inevitably causes a little smile-provoking trouble. A similar character with a similar name appropriated from Hacchan still survives as a favorable and amusing common image of the octopus, although Tagawa has been forgotten as its creator.

These traditional favorable images may have led the Japanese people to feel an affinity with the ancient Greek respect for the octopus. An interesting example appears in an exchange between two modern potters, Hamada Shōji and Bernard Leach. During his stay in Crete in 1924, Hamada sent a letter to Leach with the design of an octopus from a local museum. Hamada says, “There are much more elegant and amazingly skillful octopus designs—I can’t

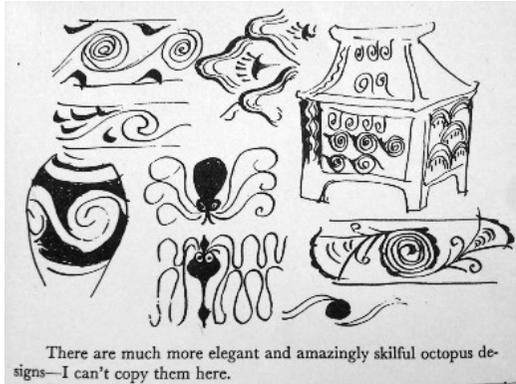


Fig. 17 Hamada Shōji's sketch from Bernard Leach, *Hamada, Potter* (1975). The letter to Bernard Leach (2 Feb. 1924) reporting an interesting octopus pattern was based on his visit to Heraklion Archaeological Museum (Crete).



Fig. 18 Bernard Leach, "Dish with Octopus Pattern" (1925), made in the year after Hamada's letter.

copy them here."¹⁶ A year later, possibly inspired by Hamada's sketch (fig. 17), Leach made an octopus motif dish which may be one of the first modern revivals of the ancient Greek pottery-with-octopus pattern (fig. 18).

These positive representations, however, remained exceptional to Japan. As Caillois wisely notes in 1973, the modern representation of the octopus as demonic means the triumph of mythical imagination over science. As is well-known in Japan because it has been a favorite popular dish, most octopuses are not poisonous, blood-sucking, and threatening.

From Grasping Monster to Gifted Immigrant?

It is noteworthy, however, that these mythicized and demonized images tend to have been globally exorcised since the latter half of the 20th century. *Tako no hacchan* might have caused this change, but it is unlikely. The most plausible origin seems to be Tomi Ungerer's picture-book *Emile* (1960; fig. 19). A huge octopus named Emile (obviously suggestive of the view of innate goodness in Rousseau's book) saves a drowning captain and is invited by him to live on land. Emile works as lifesaving coast guard, saving several people and arresting pirates with his multi-talented, skilled arms. Emile is respected as a citizen but longs to go back to sea. Afterwards the captain often visits him at his house in the bottom of the sea. It resembles Ungerer's previous work, *CriCTOR* (1958), in which a boa constrictor from Brazil is naturalized as a French citizen because of his flexible skills and saving of an old woman. These stories obviously narrate diverse sides of a multicultural society: assimilation in *CriCTOR* and symbiosis in *Emile*. This idea could be related to the author's cultural background: he was born in French Strasbourg, lived through the German occupation of Alsace and worked in the United States.

Caillois strangely did not mention Ungerer's *Emile*, but this must be an urtext of another myth about the octopus, the image of the octopus as a multi-armed model minority. We find

¹⁶ Bernard Leach, *Hamada, Potter* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1990), 146.

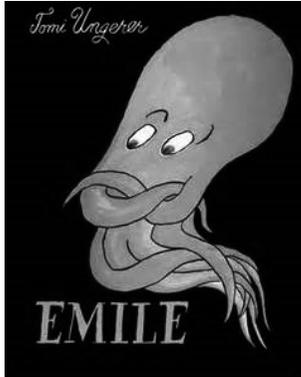


Fig. 19 Tomi Ungerer, *Emile* (1960), the ur-text of multi-armed mollusk as model minority.



Fig. 20 Takabayashi Mari, *Otasukeya tako obasan* (Octopus the Helper; 2014).



Fig. 21 Anbe Masahito, *Shinryaku! Ika musume kōshiki fanbuku* (Invade! Squid Girl Official Fan Book; 2011).

the latent, positive side of the “Mongolian octopus” Chinese skilled immigrant. In juvenile stories and child’s cartoons, this positive side of the octopus has become common. In Andre Dahan’s *Histoire d’été* (1994), for instance, an octopus plays with and entertains kid with his multi-functional arms. Dan Yaccarino’s picture book and cartoon *Hello! Oswald* (2001–2003) is a variant of Ungerer’s *CriCTOR*: Oswald, a blue octopus, comes to live in a New York-like metropolis and finds his own place in a community with his multi-useful arms. In octopus-friendly Japan too, similar stories have been published. These include Takabayashi Mari’s picture book, *Otasukeya tako obasan* (Octopus the Helper) (201; fig. 20; this can be seen as a Japanese version of Ungerer’s *CriCTOR*), the bestselling manga series by Matsui Yūsei *Ansatsu kyōsitsu* (Assassination Classroom; 2012–2016), and Anbe Masahiro’s *Shinryaku! Ika musume* (Invade! Squid Girl; 2008–2016; fig. 21). Though the latter is not about octopus, the other works might have contributed to the image of the octopus as a multi-talented model minority, totally different from the hostile monster Kraken in *One Piece*. Even Squidward Tentacles in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the American animated television series (1999–), might be an example of this drastic change. This story is set in the sea, and the character Squidward looks very much like an octopus like despite his name including the word “squid.” This might imply a change of the immigrant’s name into a favorable or acceptable one based on a host country’s circumstances. Squidward might have changed his name owing to prejudice: in the show, the octopus has another name, “devilfish.”

Octopus, Symbol of Multiculturalism and Piracy?

As Caillois predicted, the octopus is represented as a greedy alien or monster with its writhing tentacles, even though science has shown that this is an absurd representation. As the above-mentioned brief history of the piracy of its image indicates, the octopus became a symbol of violent imperialism or capitalism; the face of the enemy or more specifically, the enemy within. Since the end of the 20th century, however, this mollusk has been used particularly

in children's books as a character symbolic of symbiosis with his or her multi-talented, skilled arms and intelligence; in other words, this sea-life-on-land has become a symbol of harmony in multicultural society. As a model minority or welcomed guest, it became a metaphor for the migrant landing from the sea and trying to adjust to a new environment with his or her multi-talented arms. This change might result from a revival of the ancient Greek symbol of "metis" or may be a transient phase of another myth-making reflection of the problems of multi-cultural society in the process of globalization selecting only talented and skilled migrants. As the few and rare examples of positive images in literature for the mature reader suggest, it remains unclear whether this positive image will spread, increase or change again. This might depend on how much this new image will be pirated and shared by the future generation that was brought up with these examples in children's literature.