

MINATORY MONSTERS FOR TURBULENT TIMES:

“The Devil in the Shape of a Great Fish” that presaged the English Civil War and other piscatorial prodigies

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ROBERT L. FRANCE

Dalhousie University, Truro, Canada <rfrance@dal.ca>

ABSTRACT: Monsters, by the Latin definition of their name, are omens that portend turbulent times. The pamphlet *A Relation of a terrible Monster called a Toad-fish*, published in London in 1642, told of “a fiend, not a fish; at the least a monster, not an ordinary creature” which had become entangled in a fishing net and then put on display in London. The creature was described as resembling a giant toad, with a wide, toothy mouth and human characteristics of ribs, hands, and fingers. Discovery of the Thames monster instilled a sense of worry throughout the realm. The landing of the “Toad-fish” was linked in the tract to a bloody encounter that occurred between two well-known members of the British aristocracy fighting on opposing sides at the onset of the Civil War. The present paper describes how this vernacular publication was part of a flourishing of providential pamphlets in the 17th century wherein natural anomalies were invested with wider ecclesiastical and political meaning. Also undertaken herein is a review of various candidate species from which to suggest that the mysterious Toad-fish may have been another example of the angelshark’s (*Squatina squatina*) monstrous alter ego. This is an animal that has previously been suggested as being responsible for the ‘sea monk’ noted in several prominent natural histories of the Renaissance.

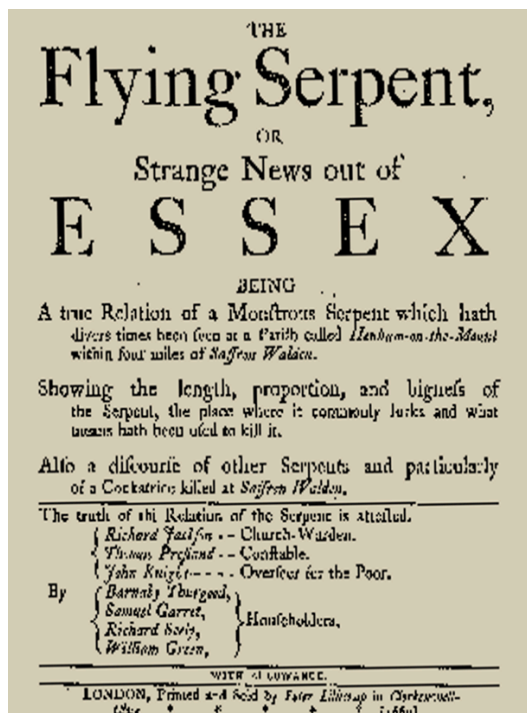
KEY WORDS: 17th century, Thames monster, “Toad-fish,” angelshark, prodigy

Introduction

Monsters, being mental constructs (Meurger and Gagnon, 1988), ask us to question our perceptions about the world and why they were created in our imagination at that particular time (Cohen 2020). Because they have always represented our deepest held fears (Asma, 2009), monsters are frequently born in periods of great anxiety. Not without reason then, are they coming to be regarded as convenient metaphors of social-ecological disorder in the Anthropocene (e.g., Hammond, 2004; Higgens, 2016; Tsing et al., 2017; MacCormack, 2018; Payne, 2019; Bubandt, 2019; Guuliani, 2020; France, 2021a; Oziewicz et al., 2022). There is of course a long tradition of monsters defining the zeitgeist of troubling times. For example, during the uncertainty about the human place in the natural order in the Victorian era, sea monsters figured prominently in discussions about evolution and theology (e.g., Lyons 2009; France 2019a). More recently, dozens of sea monster films were produced in the 1950s coincident with widespread concerns about the threat of atomic radiation (e.g., Napier, 1993; Low, 1993). In like spirit, it was during the concurrent crises

that racked 17th century England that the sensational equivalents to *kaiju* (giant monster) films (such as the *Godzilla* series) flourished in the form of widely distributed pamphlets (Raymond, 2003), of which unnatural or ‘monstrous’ animals featured prominently (Park and Daston, 1981; Friedman, 1993). Two mystery creatures of note from southern England at this time were the ‘Essex Serpent’ and the ‘Toad-fish’.

Published in 2016 with an initial print-run of five thousand, Sarah Perry’s novel *The Essex Serpent* has gone on to sell more than three hundred thousand copies, received the British Book of the Year Award, and has a film adaptation in production. The acclaimed book is a novel about Victorian ideas in which the rumoured presence of a serpent haunting the shores of East Anglia is used to explore concepts of science and superstition prevalent in the late-19th century. The mysterious beast in the novel is not an invention of the author but is based, as she describes in the British Library Living Knowledge Blog, on a 1699 pamphlet entitled *The Flying Serpent, or, strange news out of Essex, being a true Relation of a Monstrous Serpent which hath divers times been seen at a Parish called Henham on the Mount within four miles of Saffron-Walden*. The 17th century pamphlet was republished in 1885 (Figure 1).



Figures 1 - Cover from the 1885 pamphlet reprinting the original 1669 account of the Essex Serpent, along with an introduction by naturalist R. Miller Christy, that was used as the inspiration for S. Perry’s award-winning 2016 novel (France, 2019a).

The republished version was accompanied by a lengthy introduction by noted Victorian natural scientist Robert Miller Christy, wherein he writes:

The narrative contained in the pamphlet may well cause us to wonder that our ancestors, only two centuries ago, were capable of such ignorant credulity. Clearly the narrative is set forth in sober earnest by one who did not see in it anything at all impossible; and the fact that its truth is attested by the Church-warden, the Constable, the Overseer of the Poor, and four Householders, indicates that in that day the public mind was quite able to accept seriously such statements as those found in the tract.

Miller Christy's attempt to provide an explanation for what the Essex Serpent might have been (Figure 2) is an important early step in positing natural phenomena for mystery animals (France 2019a). Far from being a unique occurrence, the original Essex Serpent pamphlet is representative of a popularisation of monsters being used as metaphors in the pulp press of the early modern period. It is another pamphlet concerning "a frightening creature that got tangled up in a fishing-net, which set the whole region on edge with worry" (Asma 2009, p. 141) that is the subject of the present paper.



Figures 2 - Illustration from the 1885 pamphlet reprinting the original 1669 account of the Essex Serpent.

As was typical for the time with respect to such popular tracts, this pamphlet, published anonymously in 1642, has a long, run-on title which serves as a summary of the contents, with words printed in larger font acting as headlines to grab the attention of the browsing public (Figure 3):

A Relation of a terrible Monster taken by a fisherman neere Wollage, July the 15. 1642. And is now to be seen in Kings street, Westminster: The shape whereof is like a Toad, and may be called a Toad-fish; But that which makes it a Monster, is, that it hath hands with fingers like a man, and is chested like a man. Being neere five foot long, and three foot over, the thicknesses of an ordinary man. The following Discourse will describe him more particularly. Whereunto is added, A relation of a bloody Encounter be-twixt the Lord Faulconbridge and Sir John Hotham, wherein the Duke of Richmond is hurt, and the Lord Faulconbridge taken prisoner. With some other Misselanies of memory both by sea and land, With some Forreigne Occurrences.

Henceforth, for brevity's sake, the pamphlet will be referred to by its first line of text: *A Relation of a terrible Monster called a Toad-fish.*

A Relation of a terrible Monster taken
by a Fisherman neere *Wollage*, *July the 15. 1642.* and
is now to be seen in *Kings street, Westminster.*

The shape whereof is like a Toad, and
may be called a Toad-fish; But that which makes
it a Monster, is, that it hath hands with fingers
like a man, and is chested like a man.

Being neere five foot long, and three foot over, the
thicknesse of an ordinary man.

The following Discourse will describe him more particularly.

Whereunto is added,

A Relation of a bloody Encounter be-
twixt the Lord *Faulconbridge* and Sir *John Hotham*,
wherein the Duke of *Richmond* is hurt, and
the Lord *Faulconbridge* taken prisoner.

*With some other Miscellanies of memory both by sea and land,
with some Forreigne Occurrences.*



L O N D O N,
Printed for *Nath: Butter.* 1642.

Figure 3 - Front page of the Toad-fish pamphlet from 1642 (public domain - online access).

Hitherto, this pamphlet has received limited mention in the literature. Friedman (1993) provides half-a-dozen sentences from the pamphlet in several paragraphs about the English prophetic literature during the 17th century. In his chapter on how opposing sides in the English Civil War used the popular press for propaganda purposes, Braddick (2008) briefly refers the pamphlet. Asma (2009) provides several sentences from the pamphlet in three paragraphs of discussion about how monsters have been used as omens throughout history. Gerwig's (2016) power point presentation on monstrous pamphlets of the 17th century gives but a single sentence. Only Haig (2020) has considered the Toad-fish tract in a dedicated publication, and there his interest was focused on the historical interpretations that comprise the second half of the pamphlet. The purpose of the present study was therefore twofold: firstly, to present the text of the pamphlet in its entirety along with a broader discussion about its place in the prophetic literature of the period; and secondly to attempt to identify what the source animal might have been behind "the terrible monster."

Account

A Relation of a terrible Monster called a **Toad-fish** follows the customary format of such monster broadsides, which, as Park and Daston (1981) explain, begin with a provocative title, often followed by a woodcut illustration (absent, however, unfortunately in this case), then a brief description of the circumstances of the monster, with the bulk of the space occupied by interpreting and clarifying God's hidden message.¹ Following the extended title, reproduced above, the remainder of the text comprises:

GOD sheweth his wonders in the deep, (saith the royall Prohet) but those wonders are never with our wonder, when once they leave their wonted stations, and come (upon what message God knows) to visit us in an unknowne world: their shapes being as miraculous to us, as our element unnaturall unto them. But to the purpose. Friday morning, July 15. between 4. And 5. Of the clock in the morning, a little above Wollage, one Thomas West, casting his net upon the coming in of the tide, for Salmon; upon the drawing in of the net (whose weight and difficulty in dragging portended to him good tidings) on a sudden he found a strange alteration: he sees in the net a Fiend, not a Fish; at the least a Monster, not an ordinary creature. Had not his companion had a better resolution, he would rather have been rid of his net, then troubled with his guest, so deeply was he struck with the divers Gentlemen of great quality that went to see it, such a monstrous creature as scarce can be beleaved ever to have been seen: this morning brought alive into Glove-Alley in Kings street. It is called a Toad-fish, and with good reason; for the head and eyes, when it lyes upon its belly, doe perfectly resemble at Toad. But here lyes the wonder, turne him up, or but a little raise his head, and you shall behold the perfect breast and chest of a man: nay you may evidently tell as many ribs, both short and long, as are in a man, and of the same joynture and feature; and two as perfect hands as any man whatsoever. By which it is evident that he swims upright, beating the water with his hands, as we all know how the Toad marcheth with his snowt upwards. His mouth is very broad, with three ranks of sharp teeth; whereby it is probable that it is a devouring, ravenous, and prey-booting fish: yet is its mouth the very emblem of a Toad, as likewise its eyes. A Butcher's wife coming in hastily to see it, and hearing at the first that there was a strange fish to be seene, and being upon it in the stable where it lay before she was aware, thrusting in among others, started from it with a shreek, crying Oh the devil in the shape of a great fish, swounded, and was faine to be carryed out. The dimensions of the fish area these: He is in length well-nigh five foot, in breadth a yard over, having on each side two huge fins, in likenesse much like a Thornback, his taile a foot in length, as it were all of Whale-bone.

¹ The pamphlet contains eight pages in quarto format with four text pages printed on a single sheet of paper which is then folded in half twice (Haig, 2020). The pamphlet consists of two sections: the first four pages after the title page and blank verso are devoted to the capture and marvel of the mysterious fish, followed in the second section by an additional two pages concerning the incident in Hull. The text of the pamphlet presented herein keeps the original spelling, italics, paragraph division, emboldened heading titles, and odd sentence punctuation, but ignores ligatures and dispenses with the forced line breakage of the individual sentences due to its narrow printing design. A few explanatory comments occur in situ within square brackets, most derived from Haig (2020).

Now the comming up of this monster into the fresh river, and so nigh the shore, is more then remarkable, (never any of this strange kinde ever having beene seene by any age before:) For Plinie, the Naturalist, although he confesseth that athere is no creature or vermine upon the earth, but hath its like in the seas, and that there is a Toad-fish, yet this Author averreth, that that fish never commeth neare the shore, but is constantly in the depth of the Ocean, as is the Sharke, the Flaile-fish [small fishes that inflate to reveal poisonous stingers around their bodies], and others of that noxious kinde, and that hew never saw or heard of any taken upon any Coast save one, which was in the yeare the Nero (that never-sufficiently detested Tyrant) was borne in, of which he hath this note, that Monstrum praecessit monstro: and plainly ivided that its arrivall was ominous, as indeed all Histories doe with constant consent maintain & write, that all unusuall births either in men or bruit creatures, in sea or upon land, especially out of their seasons, have ever been the fore-runners and sad harbingers of great commotion and tumults in States and Kingdoms, if not mournfull Heralds of utter desolation: Witnesse the Heifer calving of a Lambe upon the Altar in Jerusalem, (mentioned by Josephus) some halfe a year before the dismall sacking, firing, and finall subversion of that beautiful& renowned City by Vespasian. A mares foling of a colt with tow heads at Vitellius (that beast) his entrance into the Romane Empire, who did much mischiefs in his wicked raigne. A Whales comming ashoare at Diepe, a little before Francis the first was taken prisoner at the bataile of Pavia by Charles the fift, Emperour of Germanie, and King of Spaine.

These unnaturall accidentss though dumbe, do notwithstanding speake the supernaturall intentions and purposes of the Divine powers, chiefly when they meete just at that time when distractions, jars, and distempers are a foote in a Common-weale or Kingdome: Messengers of Justice they were ever accounted; nay, they have without missing ever proved themselves to be the same. God in his mercie grant that this ugly monster may not for our sins prove the like for to us, seeing the divers sins which are by divers Divines comprised in the nature of a toade, raigne, and have their swinge in our Nation. It is further observed by those that professe skill in Prognostication, that of how much the monster is of feature or fashion, hatefull and odious, so much it portends danger the more dreadfull and universall; God defend their observation may not hold in us, but surely a creature (if a creature we may call it, though truly it goeth something against the haire, considering its detestible ugly shape) I say a creature more displeasing, and at which humane blood may rise, I never say with my eye, nor desire to see againe.

LORD we beseeth thee turne thy back upon our sinnes, and thy favourable aspect upon our miseries, very likely with more haste then good speede to light upon us. Unite (good God) Head and Members, King and Parliament, increase their loyall affections to him, his royall approbation to them and their proceedings, whence may procede in our time His Majesties content and all our securities, and let all true-hearted, plaine-dealing, and plaine-mening Subject say Amen.

Divers Occurrences from HULL and other places taken July. 15th. 1642.

FROM Hull is reported this present Friday at Westminster, that the King intending to build a Sconce or Halfe-moone [terms for small defensive forts or earthworks of the period] neere Hull, to the intent to keepe aide from them either of men or moneyes, in the side of Lincolnshire, he committed the charge of that enterprize to my Lo: Falconbridge [royalist Thomas Belasyse, first Viscount Fauconberg]: the same Lo: proceeding with all diligence in raising the Halfe-moone to make batteries upon it, and placing his Ordnance against it, my Lord Rich [first Earl of Holland, an area in Lincolnshire] being in his company, on Tuesday night a Scotch Knight [parliamentarian Sir John Meldrum] and Captaine [possibly John Hotham of Hull], with 500. men and foure field pieces, issued out of Hull, set upon my Lo: of Falconbridge, who received him very stoutly, and maintained a long and hot skirmish, three houres, in which my Lord Duke of Richmond [King Charles' deeply loyal cousin, James Stuart] fighting very valiantly is wounded; my Lord forced them to retreat and quit his workes; but being more valiant then advised, pursued so far that he had his horse shot under him, and by that meanes was taken prisoner and carried into Hull: The King sent from Beverley more aid to the Halfe-moone, so that for such a piece it is very strong. His Majesty is very sorry at the wounding of the Duke, and said openly, that they had drawne his owne blood already.

This morning went 200. Volunteeres all armed through Lincolnes-Inne-fields, having red and yellow fethers, and ribbons in their hats, and went directly to the water-side to take shipping for Hull this very day. God send my Lord of Holland, and his associate, well with their message, that they may deliver it unto the Kings content, but these are but bad signes of it, divers were slaine and hurt of both sides in this attempt and defence spoken of, but no number named.

London, July 16. 1642.

Richard Nevill Esquire, of Billingbeare, Gentleman in Ordinary of his Majesties Privy Chamber, was sent with an hundred gallant Horse, Tuesday, July the 12. unto the aid and assistance of Master Henry Hastings, High Sheriffe of Leicester shire.

The Earle of Warwicke hath sent againe unto the House, earnestly desiring them to consider in what case he stands in as touching monies and victuals; his souldiers and sea-men daily complaining of their wants in both: and as touching victuals, his Majestie hath given expresse command unto all his victuallers at Chattam, and elsewhere, to send in none of any sort or quantity soever, upon paine of his high displeasure, and ther perill.

Newes from Forreine parts, July 16.

The Swedes have lately taken from Piccolomini [Octavio, Imperial general from Italian nobility prominent in the concurrent Thirty Years War within the Holy Roman Empire] 8000. pounds worth of Gunpowder, abundance of souldiers coats, and other provision; in which he hath lost many men.

Likewise the Emperour is fled from Vienna. All Austria (his hereditary country) is revolted from him, and Hungary likewise.

FINIS.

Interpretations

Historical and Prophetical

Recently, Haig (2020), with his interest in the discourse of historical media, undertook a detailed study of the second section of *A Relation of a terrible Monster called a Toad-fish*.² In the lead up to the Civil War, a propagandist ‘paper war’ was waged by both sides during the first half of 1642 (Braddick 2009). Friedman (1999) is of the opinion that the Toad-fish tract was inspired by the publication a few months prior of another pamphlet, *The marine mercur’y* (see Discussion), each offering support for an opposing side. The events at Hull became a frequent subject covered in a barrage of more than fifty pamphlets that were rushed to publication in 1642. The Toad-fish pamphlet, which reports on the Hull incident from the perspective of someone writing within the Royalist camp, is of particular interest, Haig (2020) believes, for being unique in its discussion of a miraculous story combined with presenting news from both Hull and London as well as other countries. Haig notes, also with interest, that the author “allows himself to express his hope for the success of Lord Holland’s mission in a way which encourages his readers to align themselves with that hope while at the same time acknowledging that the omens for a peaceful outcome are not good, thereby forming a rather neat anaphoric link back to the ‘toad-fish’ story.”

Significantly, readers of the pamphlet would have noted that the appearance of the “terrible monster” in the Thames and the date for the report of the events at Hull were the same, July 15, thereby linking the former to the latter. In other words, as Friedman (1999) has it, the capture of the unusual fish augured the capture of Lord Faulconbrige. The main point made by the pamphleteer is that “all unusuall births either in men or bruit creatures, in sea or upon land, especially out of their seasons, have ever been the fore-runners and sad harbingers of great commotion and tumults in States and Kingdoms, if not mournfull Heralds of utter desolation.” The author gives credence to the contention of sea monsters being ominous heralds through a brief reminder of such prodigies from Classical and more recent history, most notably the deformed fish caught in the birth year of the detested tyrant Nero—in the words of Pliny the Naturalist, “Monstrum praccessit monstro” (preceded by a monster, a monster). Such occurrences of deformed or monstrous animals,

² Concerning the nature of the document itself, its author remains unknown. Indeed, it is possible that the Toad-fish story and the news from Hull and elsewhere sections may have been written by different individuals. The colophon identifies Nathaniel Butter, a prominent London bookseller and broadsheet publisher at the time. In the months before the start of the first of the three temporally linked English Civil Wars, Royalists and Parliamentary supporters were scrambling about the land, shoring up resources for the expected conflict. The well-fortified town of Hull in east Yorkshire was of strategic importance due to housing a magazine of arms and ammunition, the largest in the country outside of London. It was inevitable that the maneuvering of troops would lead to a military confrontation, the first such between English citizens and their Sovereign in more than a hundred-and-fifty years. Haig (2020) details the actions and fates of the respective players involved, those whose names are mentioned in the pamphlet. The ‘sticky end’ of the king, Charles I, is of course well known.

although they be silent, still speak volumes about “the supernaturall intentions and purposes of the Divine powers, chiefly when they meete just at that time when distractions, jars, and distempers are a foote in a Comon-weale or Kingdome.” Readers would have certainly recognised the mentioned, albeit understated, reference to the turbulence of their times (see Discussion). And it is in that reckoning through which comes the paramount lesson; that the current malaise suffered by Englishmen can be seen as divine retribution for their own transgressions: “God in his mercie grant that this ugly monster may not for our sins prove the like for to us, seeing the divers sins which are by divers Divines comprised in the nature of a toade, raigne, and have their swinge in our Nation.” The first section of the pamphlet concludes with an appended prayer to heed the warnings of the Toad-fish and have the King and Members of Parliament reconcile their religious and governance differences and unite lest darker days prevail.

There is a long tradition of conceptually linking abnormal or monstrous bodily forms to bad or monstrous behaviour (e.g., Houwen and Olsen 2001). It is in this spirit that the pamphleteer frames the portentous purpose of the pamphlet by going out of his way to express abject loathing for the Toad-fish, which, after all, was simply a hapless and maligned fish of some sort that had the misfortune of becoming caught on a day of auspicious events. And so, in addition to “monstrous,” we have a host of pejorative adjectives such as “terrible,” “hateful and odious,” “dreadfull,” and “displeasing,” all in regard to the animal’s “detestible ugly shape.” So, what might this “devil in the shape of a great fish,” according to one witness, or “Fiend, not a Fish,” as referred to by the author, have really been?

Ichthyological

Suggestions about the identity of aquatic animals behind sightings of sea monsters involve careful parsing of the words used to describe the mysterious creatures (France 2019a, 2021b). Five pieces of useful information are relayed in the long-winded title of the pamphlet *A Relation of a terrible Monster called a Toad-fish* that can aid in postulating as to what its identify might have been:

- 1) The fish was collected near Wollage, present-day Woolwich, a town located twenty kilometres east of London, on the south side of the Thames.
- 2) The overall shape is likened to that of a toad, leading to the appellation “Toad-fish.”
- 3) The strange creature sported hands and fingers like those of a man.
- 4) It is also “chested” like a man.
- 5) The fish’s dimensions were that it is 5 feet (one-and-a-half metres) long, 3 feet (one metre) wide, and had the thickness of a man’s thorax (about a third-of-a-metre).

The text of the pamphlet goes on to provide eleven discriminating characteristics of the encounter and the animal’s physiognomy, some elaborating upon those presented in the title:

- 1) The fish was caught on the incoming tide, meaning that the animal was in saltwater. The Thames is really a long estuary rather than a freshwater river, with London always being regarded as a coastal city. The latter statement made by the author that the monster was in fresh water is therefore incorrect.

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- 2) The fish was caught through use of a hand-cast net. This ancient technique, going back millennia, relies upon weights to pull the net quickly down into the water, such that when it is drawn in and the depth is shallow it will often scrape across the bottom, thereby catching both benthic (bottom) in addition to pelagic (water column) species.
- 3) The fish survived out of water long enough to be displayed at a distant location in Westminster.
- 4) It was considered to be a scarce individual, the like of which never having been seen previously by any of the eyewitnesses.
- 5) When lying on its belly, the head and eyes were visible on the dorsal surface, just like a toad.
- 6) The ventral surface of the fish resembled a human chest due to the presence of a series of ribs.
- 7) Also present here could be discerned a pair of “perfect” humanoid hands which the animal apparently used to beat the water.
- 8) The mouth was notably broad and contained three rows of teeth, suggesting the animal to be a predator.
- 9) The fish’s mouth and eyes closely resembled those characteristic of toads.
- 10) The dimensions are repeated, followed by mention that the creature had two “huge” fins on each side, and that these were “much like a Thornback.” This latter is significant as it is the only attempt to link the mysterious Toad-fish to a known fish; i.e. Thornback rays (*Raja clavata*).
- 11) The animal sported a tail that was a foot (third-of-a-metre) in length and that it looked like as if composed of whalebone, probably meaning that it was serrated.

Zoologists interested in postulating on the real species behind aquatic mystery animals, which have, and in some cases still are, believed to be ‘sea monsters’ by cryptozoologists, have employed a likely candidate analysis (LCA) of plausible identities based on screening various traits (Paxton and Holland, 2005), in several cases doing so through a numerical scoring system (Woodley et al., 2011; France, 2019a). Despite the butcher’s wife referral to the creature as the “devil in the shape of a great fish,” it is possible to immediately discount the candidacy of those ‘devil-fish’ of common parlance such as the giant squid, octopus, manta ray, gray whale, or various fishes restricted to the Pacific Ocean or deep-water. The likelihood possibility of the prophetic Toad-fish of the pamphlet having more realistically been a real toadfish, or alternatively, either a monkfish, Thornback ray, or angelshark is shown in Table 1.

‘Toadfish’ is the vernacular name applied to a handful of different families of fish that share in common the appearance of resembling toads. The name of one family, *Batrachoididae*, derives from the Greek word *batrakhos* for frog. Three to five diagnostic characteristics are supportive of this candidate. In terms of potential occurrence, seven species of toadfish from four genera are known to inhabit waters around the United Kingdom: the Orange-spotted (*Torquigener hypselogeneion*), Reticulated (*Sanopus reticulatus*), Splendid (*Sanopus splendidus*), Whitelined (*Sanopus greenfieldorum*), Whitespotted (*Sanopus astrifer*), and two others, in addition to the widely distributed Lusitanian toadfish (*Halabatrachus didactylus*). As well, relying on their cryptic colouration, toadfish are sedentary ambush predators that conceal themselves in bottom substrates of shallow waters. Toadfish have large heads with eyes on their upper surface as well as markedly large mouths, which together certainly do give them the appearance of toads (Figure 4). Their mouths contain maxillae and premaxillae and often sport barbels. Being bottom dwellers, the fish have stubby fins which can be employed for walking across exposed

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mudflats, with a remote possibility being that these might be construed as resembling human hands, although this seems a bit of a reach. However, the evidence against the toadfish's candidacy for the 17th century monster is that they are relatively small, never being more than half-a-metre in length. Moreover, and unlike other benthic fishes including elasmobranchs such as rays and skates and bony flatfish such halibut and flounders, toadfish are not dorso-ventrally flattened. Nor do they have large, broad fins, overt ribcages, and pronounced bony tails, all traits of the mysterious Toad-fish from the Thames.

Thames monster	Toadfish (<i>H. didactylus</i>)	Anglerfish (<i>L. piscatorius</i>)	Thornback ray (<i>Raja clavata</i>)	Angelshark (<i>Squatina squatina</i>)
Present in England	Y	Y	Y	Y
Large size (1.5m x 1m)	N	Y	P	Y
Dorso-ventrally Flattened	N	Y	Y	Y
Survival out of water	P	Y	Y	P
Overt ventral ribcage	N	N	P	Y
Anthropomorphic 'hands'	P	P	Y	Y
Broad terminal Mouth with teeth	Y	Y	N	Y
Four large fins	N	N	N	Y
Ridged distinct tail	N	Y	Y	Y
Toad-like features	Y	Y	N	Y
Total score similar	4	7.5	6	9.5

Table 1 - Diagnostic characteristics of the Thames monster and likely candidate analysis for four potential source animals based on Y = yes (numerical score of '1') or N = no (numerical score of '0'), with P = perhaps (numerical score of '0.5') for demonstration of the trait.

Toads are of course closely aligned with their amphibious siblings, frogs, with the difference largely being the texture of the skin and how the hind legs are used for propulsion. A widespread belief held in medieval and Renaissance times was that for every terrestrial animal there was a corresponding marine equivalent, as for example, the 'sea worm,' 'sea swine,' 'sea unicorn,' 'sea cow,' and 'sea rhinoceros' shown on Olaus Magnus' monster-laden map, the *Carta Marina* (Niggs, 2013). So, it is no surprise that, in addition to toadfish, the common vernacular also refers to animals called 'frogfish.' Taxonomically,

frogfish belong to the order *Lophiiformes* and are members of the anglerfish family. These are stocky benthic dwellers endowed with elaborate bodily appendages for camouflage. However, in addition to being diminutive in size, their restriction to tropical and subtropical waters precludes their candidacy for the Thames' Toad-fish. The same pertains to the so-called 'handfish,' extremely cute-looking anglerfish in the *Brachionichthyidae* family which are notable for using their human hand-shaped fins for walking about the Australian seafloor.

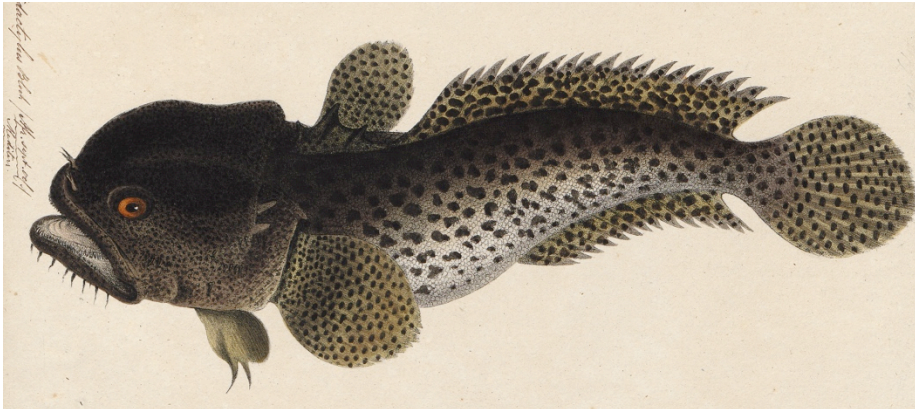


Figure 4 - Lusitanian toadfish (*Halabatrachus didactylus*) (public domain - Wikipedia).

A more serious contender for the identity of the Thames "terrible monster" is the lophiid anglerfish, which is sometimes referred to as 'frog-fish,' 'fishing frog,' or 'sea-devil,' though more commonly so as either 'goosefish' or 'monkfish.' Of the seven species in the genera, several inhabit the waters of the continental slope off the United Kingdom. One, the black-bellied angler, although of appropriate size in that it can be about a metre in length, is restricted to depths between three hundred to one thousand metres and therefore would not have been found in the Thames. Alternatively, the other British species, *Lophius piscatorius*, has been recorded in shallow waters, and so is worth considering in more detail (Table 1), especially since this would not be the first time that this particular species has been examined as the potential source fish to explain a sea monster (Paxton and Holland 2005; see Discussion). In addition to its presence in England, four to five other characteristics are supportive of the monkfish's candidacy. *L. piscatorius* can grow up to two metres in size and has a flattened body shape to enable hiding in benthic sediments (Figure 5). The species has a broad head and enormous mouth filled with recurved teeth that, together with its dorsally situated eyes and roughly textured skin, could certainly give the impression of a giant toad. Monkfish also have a fleshy and ridged tail. However, a prominent ribcage is not ventrally exhibited. Nor does the animal also have the requisite number of four "huge" fins recorded for the Thames Toad-fish, and though the two that are present are used to enable the fish to walk along the seafloor, it is questionable as to whether they can be said to resemble human hands. And far from being rare, the species has long supported an artisanal and later a commercial fishery. A notable feature of monkfish is the presence of both an illicium, the fleshy growth used by all anglerfish to lure prey into their mouths, and frilly growths about the head that resemble seaweed fronds. Given the detailed description of the Thames Toad-fish in the pamphlet, the failure to mention these two obvious physical attributes might further diminish the likelihood that the "terrible monster" was a monkfish. Nevertheless, such fish are known to have been

equated with Thames sea monsters. In 1954, for example, a decomposed carcass washed up on Canvey Island at the mouth of the estuary that had “huge bulging eyes, reddish coloured skin, and two leg-like fins.” The following year another carcass, this time over a metre in length and much better preserved led zoologists to conclude it was a monkfish, “although the locals insisted they thought they [i.e. monkfish] had more ‘humanoid’ features” (Elvery, 2021) (see Figure 5).



Figure 5 - Anglerfish (*Lophius piscatorius*) known as monkfish.
(<http://bigfishesoftheworld.blogspot.com/2012/09/angler-fish-monkfish-lophius-piscatorius.html>)

The only real clue provided in the pamphlet as to what the mysterious animal might have been is the mention that on each side of the creature were “two huge fins, in likeness much like a Thornback.” Thornback rays (*Raja clavata*), sometimes called maiden rays, are actually skates that are commonly distributed throughout the coastal waters of northern Europe. There are a series of characteristics of the species that support them being the source animal behind the ichthyologic mystery. Although largely found at depths of ten to sixty metres, the young are known from shallow waters through occasionally being found stranded in estuarine pools. Thornback rays reach lengths of more than a metre and widths of half that size. Their dorso-ventrally flattened bodies enable them to remain hidden in bottom sediments, and like many elasmobranchs (cartilaginous fishes), they are able to survive out of water for short periods. The copulatory claspers on the inner edge of the anal fins of males could be construed to resemble human hands. Eyes feature dorsally, ribs are visible, though subtly, on the underside near the gill slits, and the fish have long, spikey tails. Nevertheless, three of the most distinguishing features of the Thames Toad-fish are absent in thornback rays. Only their pectoral fins are large and wing-like, providing the batoid, kite-like shape that is characteristic of rays/skates (Figure 6). The mouths of thornback rays are ventrally not dorsally located, and when viewed together with the proximal nostrils, displays as a personified face. This is the trait which would lead them to be used in the fashioning of fraudulent mermaids in times past (Russell and Russell 1977), but which in no way can be said to resemble the facial features of a toad.

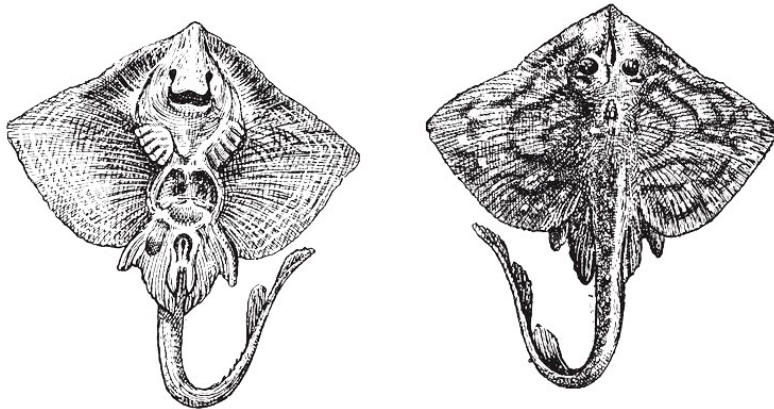


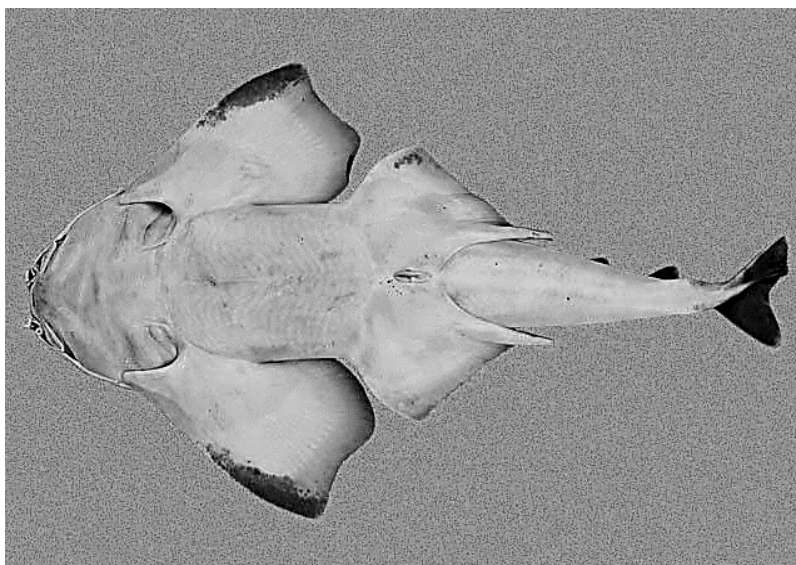
Figure 6 - (Undated) engravings of Thornback ray (*Raja clavata*) (public domain - www.dreamtime.com).

In common parlance, to be a ‘thornback’ fish is to have a dorsal surface that is covered with thorny protuberances as, for example, the Thornback guitarfish, a species of ray restricted to the coastal waters of California and Mexico. It is therefore not at all unreasonable to interpret the pamphleteer’s referral of the Thames Toad-fish to a Thornback—which was based on the shared presence of four huge fins—in a more generic sense with respect to other, similar looking elasmobranch species. The most appropriate candidate to examine in this regard are angelsharks, sometimes referred to as ‘fiddle-fish,’ ‘sand-devils,’ and confusingly, also ‘monkfish,’ which, due to their flattened bodies and presence of enlarged, broad fins, give them the appearance of rays. There are twenty-four species in the genus *Squatina*, the Latin word for skate. Only one species, *Squatina squatina*, was historically distributed in northern Europe, including the British Isles. Of notable interest is that this is the particular species that was thought by Paxton and Holland (2005) to be the most likely source fish behind the mysterious ‘sea monk’ of Renaissance natural history (see Discussion).

To varying degrees of fidelity, angelshark *S. squatina* display characteristics corresponding to all the diagnostic features mentioned in the description of the Toad-fish from the Thames (Table 1). The species was not formally identified by natural scientists until 1758 and therefore the fisherman, Thomas West, the pamphleteer, and other witnesses might be excused for their surprise and befuddlement at the encounter. Although occurring at depths exceeding one hundred metres, angelsharks are also capable of moving considerable distances, including entering shallow and brackish waters such as the Thames. *S. squatina*, which are very susceptible to being caught in nets, can grow to sizes of over two metres, comparable to the so-called Toad-fish. They are bottom-dwellers with flattened bodies to enable hiding as ambush predators within the sand, and like many elasmobranchs can survive outside of water for limited periods. The animal’s ribcage is clearly displayed on its ventral surface, where the prominent claspers of males might be likened to human hands by the imaginative (Figure 7a). This angelshark species sports large, wing-like fins so that they resemble rays, a genus to which they are often incorrectly ascribed by the general public. Most significantly, both the pectoral and the pelvic fins are large and splayed horizontally, a key distinguishing feature noted for the Thames Toad-fish. The fish have long fleshy tails that are dorsally ridged. Angelsharks have broad heads and extensive jaws filled with small, sharp teeth. The combination of the terminal mouth

France: Minatory monsters

and barbels at the tip of the snout, and presence of small dorsal eyes and large spiracles atop their heads (wherein the unknowing would confuse the latter for the former) gives angelsharks an uncontested likeness to toads. *S. squatina* have small facial spines and rough backs covered with dermal denticles or placoid scales, and, when young, by thorny tubercles. The species is also notable for being susceptible to skeletal deformities. Of the four candidate typologies of fish examined in Table 1, angelsharks tally the highest score of concordance with the “terrible monster” of the Thames.



Figures 7a & 7b – Closely related angelshark species *Squatina dumeril* (public domain; Wikipedia; www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu).

Discussion

Identity Musings about Anthropomorphic Sea Creatures

There is a long and abiding fascination in hybrid sea creatures displaying hominid traits, some of which, in recent times, have been interpreted as known animals and natural phenomena (Russell and Russell 1977; Lehn and Schroeder, 1981, 2004; Jon, 1998; Parsons, 2004; Jon et al., 2017; Forth, 2020). Of particular note is the mysterious ‘sea monk’ which “aroused the interest of the whole of Europe” (Paxton and Holland, 2005) and led to it figuring prominently on early maps (van Duser, 2014) and in discourses about natural theology (Parish 2019; Jones, 2012). Following a comprehensive review of the sea monk from its origin in medieval times, Paxton and Holland (2005) undertake a LCA of animals which have been posited over the years to have been the source animal, including giant squid (Roeleveld and Knudsen, 1980), Jenny Haniver fakes (Russell and Russell, 1977), several marine mammals, and two fishes, anglerfish (*Lophius* spp.) and angelsharks (*Squatina* spp.). These latter were included as both bottom-dwelling fishes are often colloquially referred to as ‘monkfish.’ Accompanying the table in which various attributes of the sea monk are compared with those of the “alternative suspects,” a composite figure is shown in which early illustrations of “this abominable creature,” to use one Renaissance moniker ascribed to it, are arranged side-by-side with the selection of possible source animals. From this, the conclusion is made is that the sea monk was “unlikely to have been a giant squid [and that] the most likely alternative suspect would be the angelshark *Squatina squatina*.”

Angelshark (*Squatina* spp.) and anglerfish (*Lophius* spp.), which are both referred to as ‘monkfish,’ have long been conflated in early natural history and sea monster lore (Paxton and Holland 2005). In the present case, either fish, due to their unusual or startling – ‘monstrous’ to some – appearance, might arguably be invoked to explain the Thames Toadfish, though the nod would seem to go the former candidate. If indeed it was an angelshark that Thomas West hauled out of the Thames that fateful morning in spring 1642, then this would be a further example, following Paxton and Holland (2005), of this particular species being postulated to have been the source animal for an anthropomorphic sea creature from the early modern period. And it would join other linkings that have been made between elasmobranchs (cartilaginous fishes) and sea monsters (de Camp and de Camp, 1985; Kuban, 1997; Speedie, 2017; France, 2019b, 2021b; Jenkins, 2022).

Monstrous Times and Providential Fish

The period between the middles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a particularly calamitous time of unparalleled hardship in Europe.³ It is therefore in this

³ Overlying and influencing all human endeavours over this interval was the Little Ice Age, a time of climatic deterioration and increased instability, provoking widespread famine and storm-related fatalities throughout northern Europe (Fagan 2000). England, during the last decade of the 16th century, was hit particularly hard, with successive failed harvests leading to food riots. The precarious situation continued into the first quarter of the 17th century, with the last period of starvation occurring in southern England in 1623 (Hoskins, 1968). In the pre-scientific search for explanations, many of the fearful, believing the situation to be clear demonstration of God’s wrath at profligate human behaviour (Fagan, 2000), found convenient scapegoats through the burnt offerings of tens of thousands of witches (Behringer, 1999). Added to this climate-induced increased confusion and disorder was the dark shadow of the devastating wars of religion that defined the Post-Reformation

zeitgeist of deprivation, despair, and doom brought about by all these catastrophes that the pamphlet *A relation of a terrible Monster called a Toad-fish*, as well as other providential polemics involving prodigious fish, should be viewed. Educated readers of pamphlet would have nodded knowingly, recognised it to be part of a long lineage of piscatorial prognostications, extending back through the use of moralising animals in medieval bestiaries to Aristotelian-inspired writings from Classical Antiquity. To remind them of this, and therefore to purvey a sense of importance to the Toad-fish, several precedents are provided by the author, including the capture of the “noxious” fish that was a harbinger to the birth of the much-reviled Nero. Of interest is the absence, however, of mention made of one of the most influential examples of the prodigy literature, the “pope-ass” that was fished out of the Tiber River in 1496. This abnormal creature was construed by Martin Luther in 1523 to represent the Romish Antichrist, with its bestial parts corresponding to the bestial vices of the Catholic Church, thereby prophesising the Papacy’s imminent ruin (Park and Daston, 1981; Asma, 2009). In fact, there was an enormous flourishing of such religio-political grievances in the ephemeral literature during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England and elsewhere in Europe that specifically involved providential fish. Therefore, *A Relation of a terrible Monster called a Toad-fish* is “symptomatic of a pervasive sense of profound malaise” that characterised the times (Walsham, 1999). In some cases these tracts describe the strangest of fishes, such that ichthyological verisimilitude seems to have been completely supplanted by prophetic rhetoric and political propaganda. Representative examples of this moral-polemical literature are reviewed below to give context to the Toad-fish tract.

Fish stomach contents

In one famous incident, the interpretation of piscatorial presaging was easy, for the words were there for all to read. *Vox piscis: or, The book-fish contayning three treatises which were found in the belly of a cod-fish in Cambridge Market, on Midsummer Eue last, anno Domini 1626. Letter wryten unto the faythful folowers of Christes Gospell*, was published in 1627 and describes the events leading up to the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University’s receipt of a “half-dissolved book wrapped in canvas, covered in gelatinous matter and slime, and exuding an intolerable stench” and the ensuing interpretations therefrom (Walsham, 1999). The book was discovered in the stomach of a codfish that had been caught off the East Anglia coast and gutted a few hours later in the city’s fish market. The consumed book, which had been published around 1540, contained a series of short tracts bound together, including two entitled *Praeparatio Crucem (Of the Preparation to the Cross)* and *A Lettre which was Written to the Faithfull Followers of Christes Gospell*. It was soon realised that God had issued a warning, Jonah-like from the belly of a fish, for all

era. The English Civil War between the Parliamentary Puritans and the High-Church Royalists over issues of governance and religious freedom, coupled closely to Cromwell’s Invasion of Ireland led to the deaths of millions from war-related disease, famine, and military engagement (Braddick, 2009; White, 2013). On the Continent, the French Wars of Religion fought between the Catholics and Huguenot Protestants and especially the Thirty Years War (1618-48) wherein Protestants and Catholics battled for control of Germany led to mass mortalities of millions on a scale never experienced before nor since in Europe (Parker, 2008; Wilson, 2009; White, 2013). And if all that were not enough, 17th century Europe was also ravaged by the return of the bubonic plague. Epidemics in London alone in 1603, 1625, 1636, and 1665 resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands – up to a quarter of the population – leaving survivors in a state of fear and despair (Moote, 2008; Dafoe, 2010/1722).

England to heed. As Walsham (1999) elaborates, the anonymous author of the pamphlet “spoke of the ‘strange judgements usuall ushered in by strange and prodigious signes’ and insisted that this ‘Sea-monster’ and its curious literary cargo were a warning ‘by spirituall prudence in the midst of supposed security, to arme our selves against ghostly dangers which may and doe on every side besiege us.” Walsham details the perturbing recent events of the time, including the growing sense of impending crisis about which the book-fish provided a disturbing premonition.

Another subsequent pamphlet (Figure 8), *A True and Wonderfull Relation of a Whale, pursued in the Sea, and incountered by multitudes of other Fishes, as it was certified by divers Mariners of Weymouth, who coming from France, the good Ship called the Bonaventure, did shoote and slay Whale, which making to Land did strike upon the Shore, within three miles of Weymouth, where being opened there was found in the belly of it a Romish Priest, with Pardon, for divers Papists in England and in Ireland, whose names are here inserted*, was published in 1645 to affirm the subversive actions of the Papacy while also justifying the general English disdain for the Irish (Friedman 1993). While approaching England from France, sailors noticed a great disturbance in the water caused by the largest whale that any had ever seen.⁴ What was most unusual was that the whale was being pursued by an army of fish which “in most violent manner they did beat against the whale, making a most hideous and fearful noise and falling upon her... did use whatsoever weapons of offense that nature had afforded them to assault the whale” (Friedman 1993, p. 143). Issuing “terrible” cries of distress, the whale was slain by the fish. The explanation for the mysterious events is soon learned when the beached carcass is cut open to reveal, Jonah-like, a man with a shaven head, indicating that, “he was surely a priest.”

Even more remarkable was that the priest clutched a box filled with a series of pardons issued by the Pope for various papists living in England and Ireland, some who had been implicated in plans to blow up the Houses of Parliament. The pamphlet notes that the fish sought out and executed the whale, the greatest of their kind, since the Catholicism contained within its belly was a taint to their aqueous environment. This warning was proven true when the sailors cut the creature open and the emanating reek was such that “it may be a question of whiter their noses can ever have the capacity of scenting anything that is sweet again.” As Friedman (1993, p. 144) explains:

Clearly, Catholicism was unnatural and putrid in itself but was also corrupting of nature in its influence. This story, like those about other monsters and prodigies, was yet another indication of how the mysterious and the mundane, in this case a Jesuit in the whale, were interwoven and how God’s judgments were reflected in nature.

⁴ Whales were considered to be fish at the time (Burnett 2007; Romero 2012), creatures whose very size led them to be referred to as ‘monstrous’ (Szabo, 2008; Hendrixx, 2018; Brito et al., 2019). Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, more than forty whales became stranded on the coast of the Netherlands. In each instance the beached animal assumed an allegorical or metaphorical quality wherein they were interpreted in moral-polemical pamphlets as being ‘oracular signposts’ or portents of impending disaster at a time when Dutch culture was preoccupied by fears about religious conflict and war (Sears Goldman, 2012).

He goes on to conclude with a touch of humour that, from the perspective of their time, “[i]t must have been a comfort for Englishmen to know that even the fish of the sea were good allies in the battle against smelly Roman Catholicism.”

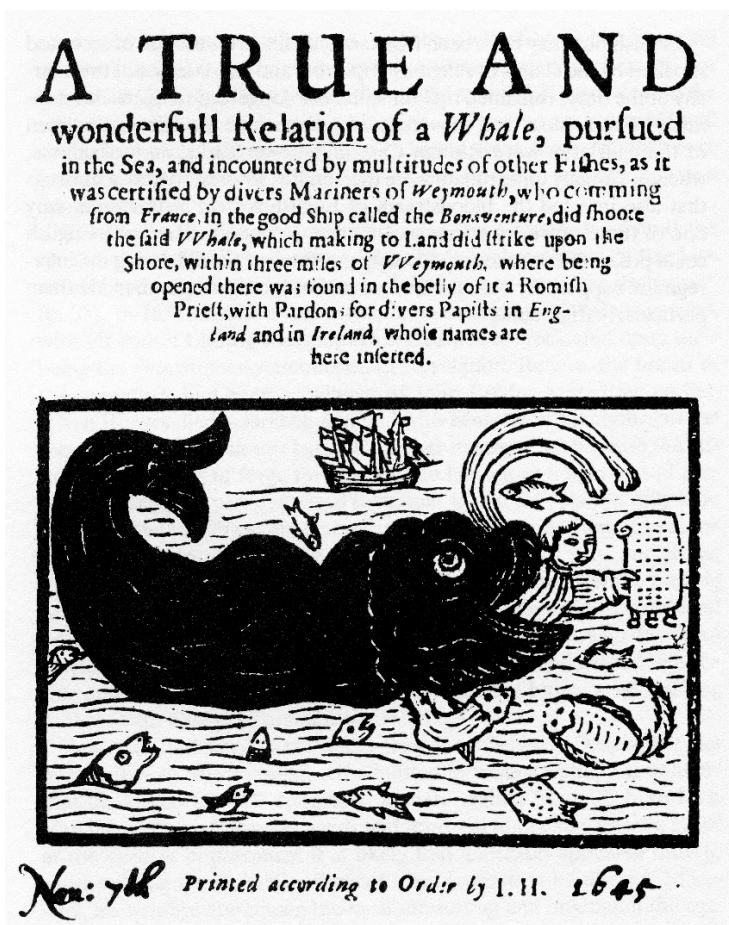


Figure 8 - Front page of the 1645 whale pamphlet (pubic domain; online access).

Pieter Bruegel (the Elder)'s 1556 drawing 'Big Fish Eat Little Fish' depicts a surrealistic father-son fishing trip. Shown is an enormous, beached fish out of whose mouth and carved midsection pour spillage of fishes in whose mouths are found yet smaller fishes. Scattered about the background, in a scene reminiscent of the nightmare images of Hieronymus Bosch, are fish with human legs with smaller fishes in their mouths, a strange flying fish, and predatory clams attaching other fish from whose mouths smaller fish emerge. The image of same-species predation is an allegory of the injustice of the wealthy exploiting the impoverished and weak (Anon., 2022). An anonymous 1619 engraving of the drawing adds explanatory text and slightly tweaks the image to highlight its moral message by creating a political critique (Figure 9). The words "The oppression of the poor" are now added above the image. Blazoned across the body of the enormous fish are the words "Barnevelsche Monster," which refer to the controversial former Chancellor of the

than does the land. Also, in keeping with the belief system of the day wherein social standing and mores are correlated, the story being relayed by a gentleman meant that its veracity should not be questioned. When the “monster” appeared to the group of fishermen:

at the first sight they were much dismayed, but afterward they taking heart (some of them having beene at seafights) made them more adventurous: for the approach of this Monster was very terrible; having broad fiery eyes, haire blacke and curled, his brest armed with shining scales, so that by the reflection of the Sunne they became so blinde and dazled, that he might have taken or saline a very man of them, he having a musket in one hand, and a large paper in the other, which seemed to them a Petition.

By which posture they did imagine that what he could get by intreaty, he would by force or fear attain, but after they had paffed some words with this man-fish, he seemed rather an Angel sent to guard this Kingdome, then an enemy to hurt us, for he shewed himself to be debonarie and full of curtesie as if he had beene tutored in the absolutest Court in Christendome; telling them he came inspired by providence for the good and flourishing estate of this Kingdome, and the armed hand he advanced, was to put us in minde pf our security, which hath beene the overthrow of the famous Monarchies, and in the other hand was the intelligence of all the dangers and plots of forraine Princes against us.

Being but humble and illiterate sailors, they profess themselves to be ignorant of many of the expressions issued by the man-fish, entreating him “to keepe on his course towards London, with his Embassy to the Worthies of the land.” To which the Man-Fish retorts that we are all courtiers to Neptune and cavaliers to land Princes. The strange creature then specifies his warnings about foreign machinations against the Kingdom, including a French fleet threatening England and a Spanish one doing the same for Ireland, before plunging back into the waters on his way towards London. On its last page the pamphlet does a pivot to recount a battle in Ireland the preceding year against Catholic rebels from which to take heed. The lesson to be taken from “The marine mercury” pamphlet – keeping in mind that Mercury is the god of relaying messages – is of a warning that the political problems facing England at the present time are by no means restricted to only those occurring within its own borders (Gerwig, 2016).

In other accounts, the prophetic messages were more cryptic due to their being inscribed upon the bodies of the fishes in the form of strange hieroglyphics. In one such example, *A breefe coniecturall discourse, vpon the hierographicall letters & characters fovnd upon **lower fishes** taken neere Marstrand in the kingdome of Denmarke, the 28. of Nouember 1587. Treating by considerations poligraphicall, theologicall, Thalmudicall & cabalisticall. Seene and allowed* (Anon. 1587 in Rutkowski, 2019), the English pamphleteer interprets a sequence of mysterious characters on the scales of fish as a divine code signalling the imminent Second Coming which will save humanity. For Rutkowski, this is demonstration that not only can fish contain consumed books, vis-à-vis the Cambridge cod, but that their very bodies also function as templates upon which God can issue eschatological pronouncements. In like fashion, the pamphlet *A **Most Strange and Wonderfull Herring Taken on the 26. Day of Nouember 1597, Neere Vnto Drenton Sometime the Old and Chiefe Cittie of the Kingdome of Norway. Hauing on the One Side the Picture of Two Armed Men Fighting, and on the Other Most Strange Characters, as in the Picture Is Here Expressed.***

First Printed in Dutch at Rotterdam by Ian van Doetecam. And Now Translated into English, Taken on the 26. Day of November 1597 (Jan van Doetecam 1598 in Parish 2019), construes the occurrence of strange markings on the tiny fish's scales to be a warning from God for humanity to mend its wicked ways. Parish equates the fish's markings to be a form of divine finger pointing like the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast attended by Daniel. Rutkowski (2019) quotes a passage from the tract about "a heavie sentence against the sinnes of this age" as an intent to encourage the contrition and repentance of sinners.

Fish symbolic bodies

The task of divine decipherment was most difficult in those situations when all the interpreter had to go on was the bizarre physiognomy of the fish itself. For example, the pamphlet *The Discription of a Rare or Rather Most Monstrous Fische Taken on the East Cost of Holland the. XVII. of Nouember, anno 1566 The Workes of God How Great and Straunge They Be a Picture Plaine behold Heare May You See* (Anon. 1566 in Parish 2019), shows how a natural aberration can be linked to divine wrath. As Parish summarizes, the tract makes "the connection between such monstrous sea creatures, the sins of humanity, and the providential interventions of God in nature that were intended to prompt reflection and repentance." In another case, *The True Discription of This Marueilous Straunge Fische, Whiche Was Taken on Thursday Was Sennight, the XVI. Day of June, This Present Month, in the Yeare of Our Lord God. M.D.LX.ix* (C.R. 1569 in Parish 2019), the language used to describe the large fish – possibly a thresher shark – caught in a fishing net is an illustrative example, so Parish believes, of the genre of Protestant providentialism, wherein a natural history narrative is manipulated into a moralising sermon. Religious rhetoric arising from descriptions of strange-looking fish was commonplace, such as in *A Most Strange and True Report of a Monstrous Fish, Who Appeared in the Forme of a Woman, from Her Waste Vpwards* (P.G. 1604 in Parish 2019), in which the capture of a mermaid-like creature in Wales that sported "two fayre hands" is detailed. Walsham (1999) gives the titles of other pamphlets from the period which also featured preternatural and prodigious fish whose bodies provided "oracular signs of impending calamity": *A Certaine Report of...Also of a Most Strange and Huge Fish, which was Driven on the Sand at Outhorn in Holderness* (1595); and *'A True Report and Exact Description of a Mighty Sea-Monster, or Whale, Cast upon Langar-shore over against Harwich in Essex* (1617).

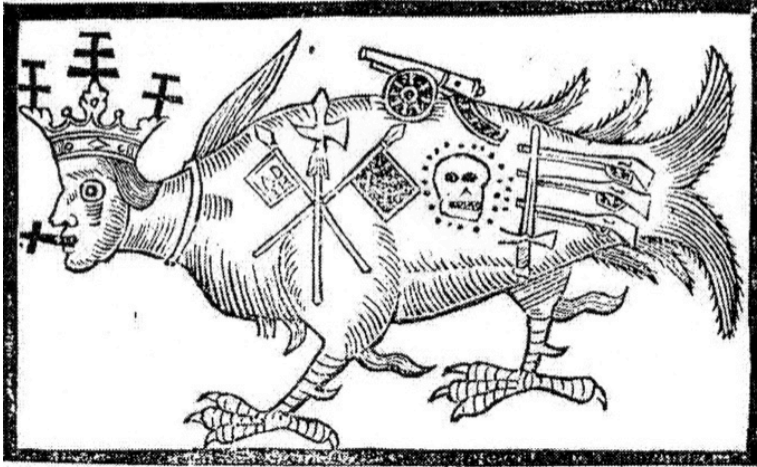
One pamphlet, *The worlds wonder! or, The propheticall fish.: Being a full description of this monster, its length & breadth with predictions on it. As it was taken by fisher-men in the port of Cucanga, neer the province and kingdom of China, in the year 1664. and sent to the emperour of Germany, and from thence convey'd to his Royal Majesty, the king of Greet Brittain, &c. To the tune of, When stormy winds do blow*, was published in 1666 to legitimise support for Charles II's monarchy at a time of further turbulence in the realm (Gerwig 2016). Unusually, the format is stanzas (Figure 10) to be sung to the tune of the song 'When Stormy Winds do Blow', whose title itself is a descriptor of difficult days, and which starts:

*You gentlemen of England,
That live at home at ease,
How little do you think upon
The dangers of the seas;
Give ear unto the mariners,
And they will plainly show
All the cares and the fears
When the stormy winds do blow.*

The Prophetical FISH.

Being a full Description of this Monster, its length & breadth, with Predictions on it, as it was taken by Fisher-men in the Port of *Cucanga*, near the Province and Kingdom of *China*, in the year 1664. and sent to the Emperour of *Germany*, and from thence Convey'd to his Royal Majesty, the KING of *Great Britain*, &c.

To the tune of, *When Stormy Winds do blow.*



Be tell you of a Monster,
that lately hath been Shelton,
as strange as Winters Thunder;
or Frost and Snow in June:
Fish by Fisher-men was catch'd
late in *Cucanga* Bay,
where Health, and Wealth,
their Plenty do Display.

Sixteen hundred sixty four,
this Pondrous Fish was caught,
sent to the German Emperour,
then from him it was brought
to Charles the King of England,
a Prince of high Renown,
which well, doth tell,
much welfare to his Crown,



This monstrous Fish is twelve foot long,
and likewise six foot broad;
Upon his back (so firme and strong)
he bears a pondrous load,
A Piece of Ord'nance mounted,
upon a warlike Carr;
Whose Charge, at large,
doth threaten woful War.

The Face of it, is like a man,
upon 'its head a Crown;
A Cross for England, in the Van,
Presaging all's our own;
The Cross doth issue from his mouth,
which he seems to disgorge;
And cry, We'l die,
for England, and St. George.

Figure 10 - The prophetical fish from the 1666 pamphlet (public domain; online access).

The tract begins with mention of a “monstrous Fish” caught in Asia that was sent to the German Emperor who then had it brought to Charles II, after which the bizarre accoutrements and hieroglyphics of wondrous creature (Figure 10) are described:

*This monstrous Fish is twelve Foot long,
and likewise six foot broad;
Vpon his back (so firme and strong)
he bears a pondrous load,
A Piece of Ord'nance mounted,
upon a warlike Carr;
Whose Charge, at large,
doth threaten woful War.
The Face of it, is like a man,
upon 'its head a Crown;*

France: Minatory monsters

*A Cross for England, in the Van,
Presaging all's our own;
The Cross doth issue from his mouth,
which he seems to disgorge;
And cry, Wée'l die,
for England, and St. George.*

Following on from this is a mocking synopsis of the Parliamentary rebels (e.g., “while every Ass was made Iustice of Peace”) before the heartfelt wish is expressed by the pamphleteer that all such enemies “on *Tyborn* may swing.” The second part of the pamphlet returns to “the prophetic fish” with a more detailed description offered of its signature features and what these signify in terms of England’s international relations, particularly regarding the Second Anglo-Dutch war (1665-67) then going on for control over maritime trade routes (Gerwig 2016). Of interest, too, is the linking of the fish’s “Pestilential Spots” to the “woefull *Plague* of late / And will, we fear, renew agen, if we Repent not strait.” This inclusion is of significance since the Great Plague of London was then in full swing and would go on to kill a hundred thousand people between 1665 and 1666, a quarter of the capital city’s population. For, if the fish’s bodily attributes could so accurately describe the horrors of the current situation—and one had only to look outside one’s shuttered windows to see the carts carrying away the corpses—then certainly everything else prognosticated must also be true.

*THis rarity in Nature,
Doth all mens wits controule,
This strange Prodigious Creature,
Is Flesh, and Fish, and Fowle:
The Flesh is meant for England sure,
The Fowle is meant for France,
The Fish, a Dish.
For Hollands Mainteynance.
His Back is full of Fish-like Finns,
his Legs have Eagles Clawes,
And Cock-like Spurs, as sharp as Pinns,
which blood in Battel draws:
The Eagle is a Princely Bird,
and never Fights for States;
But flyes, at th' Eyes,
of such Confederates.
Vpon his very Shoulder-bone,
he bears two Flaggs a crosse;
A.D. I. H. is writ on One,
importing some great losse:
Which I shall now Expound to you,
the next ensuing Lines;
If this, do miss,
Ile leave it to Divines.
D. I. H. doth seem to teach,
the Dutch-man shall have no Land;
A.D. doth stand for All Down, and
I. H. doth mean In Holland:
A. D. I. H. doth plainly shew, /*

All Down In Holland *falls*;
•f They, obey
not England's Brazen Walls.
There are Three Muskets and a Sword,
display'd upon the Rump;
Which shews the Hollander Aboard,
is beaten to the Stump:
Death's Head on his Left-side is,
and like so many Shots;
•ll round, 'tis Crown'd,
with Pestilential Spots.
Which doth demonstrate unto men,
our wofull Plague of late;
And will, we fear, renew agen,
if we Repent not strait:
This Fish hath Arrows in the Tayle,
which he 'gainst Holland drawes,
And slights, the Flights,
their Lyon hath in's Pawes.

The pamphlet concludes by encouraging England's people to hold together to ensure fortunes not wain despite the efforts of the Dutch, French, and Danes:

*Wee need not fear the Powers that come
from Paris, nor from Def
If we, then be,
at Peace within our Self*

By which it meant to accept the Restoration. Cortequera (2013, p. 99) offers another interpretation, noting that before the strange fish was sent to Charles II, it had been presented to the German Emperor, wherein its "finding coincided with events related to what would become known as the Thirty Years' War. There was little doubt this was a prodigy sent by God as a warning. The skulls, swords, guns, cannons, and flags on the fish suggested a deadly message."

Conclusions

What all these pamphlets share in common is a deep-rooted belief among the clergy and educated readers that the natural world could be regarded as a revelatory text, functioning as an emblematic vision of the world as well as a silhouette of the celestial realm (Walsham, 1999; Parish, 2019). In this mindset, animals are much more than mere biological entities; they are repositories of metaphorical insight that convey meaning. Or, to use the parlance of the 17th century, "every living beast being a word" that is capable of being deciphered; a gift from God to help guide humans on their path to salvation. And of all animals, fish were particularly revelatory conduits in this regard since, after all, the Pisces symbol was the secret acrostic of Greek letters used by early Christians, such that, as referred to by one 2nd century theologian, "we, little fishes, after the image of our Ichthys, Jesus Christ, are born in the water." In this regard, the 'sea bishop,' for example, which figured so prominently in natural histories of the Renaissance, "was not simply a deformed

fish, but one that was intended to be read as a commentary upon monasticism and the Protestant reformation” (Parish, 2019).

Furthermore, the underlying theme of the ‘A Relation of a terrible Monster called a **Toad-fish**’ and other pamphlets of the period is that aberrations of nature provided insight of ecclesiastical and political significance. Animal anomalies symbolised and revealed God’s anger while at the same time also his benevolence through the warnings issued about the onset of turbulent times, in an interlocking chain of cause and effect (Friedman, 1993; Walsham, 1999; Parish, 2019). Monsters were therefore infused with meaning, something that made perfect sense. For after all, the very word ‘monster’ has its origin in the Latin *monstrum*, itself deriving from the root *monere*, which means ‘to warn.’ Put simply, “to be a monster is to be an omen” (Asma 2009, p. 13), such that the capture of frightening aquatic creatures was logically construed as being portentous of difficult times. As Walsham (1999) writes, “prodigies neatly reflect and project the collective apprehensions of the era in which they occur, their incidence being a function of fear, unease and anxiety, and their effect self-confirming.”

Whether, through applying the zoological insight of today in hindsight, it was either an angelshark or an anglerfish (‘monkfish’ in common parlance, both) that was captured by Thomas West on that fateful day in 1642, one thing is for certain: that for the 17th century readers of the pamphlet, the Toad-fish of the Thames, as a divergence from the perceived norm, was unquestionably a sign and divine warning of troubles lying ahead. Sadly, for those about to face the long years of terrifying violence, religious fervour, and radical politics of the English Civil War that was hovering just over the horizon (Braddick 2009), the minatory message conveyed by the Toad-fish is something that would become all too realised.

Sad also is the fact that should the aquatic monster from 1642 really have been a *Squatina*, the likelihood of anyone today repeating the same error of conflation is essentially nil. This has nothing to do with any increased understanding on the part of people today compared to those of four hundred years ago with respect to marine biodiversity. Rather it stems from the regretful circumstance that this particular species of angelshark has been overfished to the point of near complete population collapse in the waters around the British Isles (Hiddink et al., 2019; Bom et al., 2020). The lesson here is a sobering one from the perspective of conservation biology (Kolbert, 2015); namely, that monsters of the Anthropocene are characterised just as much by their absence in our mutual lives as by their presence in our collective imagination (France, 2021a).

Afterword

England harbours a rich panoply of unidentified marine objects (or ‘UMOs’ *sensu* France 2017) which have been construed as being ‘sea monsters’ (Harrison 2001; France 2021c). In one particularly noteworthy example of historic recurrence, fast forward 374 years from the capture of the Toad-fish, and it is interesting to note that in April 2016 the Thames was once again visited by another mysterious sea monster. The event generated considerable press reportage, some of it thoughtful (Hoare, 2016), but much being the fodder of the sensationalist press with attention-grabbing titles on par with those in pamphlets from the past (e.g., Mann, 2016; Tingle, 2016). One cannot but help to ponder how modern-day paracryptozoologists – those who countenance supernatural explanations for mystery

animals – regard the Brexit referendum vote that took place but a mere two months later: *Monstrum praecessit monstro* (an omen precedes a monster) once again, perchance?

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