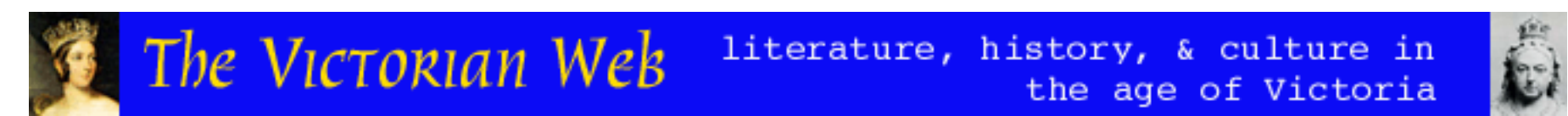


"The Kraken" (1830)

Alfred Lord Tennyson



[Victorian Web Home —> Authors —> Alfred Tennyson —> Works —> Theme and Subject —> Image, Symbol, and Motif]

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

Commentary and Notes [PVA]

"The Kraken" first appeared in *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. By Alfred Tennyson. London: Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, Cornhill, 1830. pp. 154, and leaf of Errata. This text has been checked against the Ricks edition and the Buckley and Woods anthology listed in the bibliography below.

A. W. Thomson describes "The Kraken" as one of Tennyson's few good sonnets, even though it has fifteen lines. In terms of rhyme scheme, the ABABCDDCEFEAAFE pattern suggests that it is modelled on the Petrarchan (Italian) rather than the Shakespearean (English) form of three quatrains and a concluding couplet. "Visually [the Kraken] is only guessed at, by the perspectives of the other giant growths of sponge and polyp" (Thomson 28). The sestet has been extended, argues Thomson, to return to the dominant words and rhymes of the opening four lines. The reader can conceive of the enormous polypi more easily than he or she can the legendary sea-best, who will live in suspended animation until the Judgment Day.

The poem draws its images from the Norse legend of a gigantic sea-monster that supposedly preyed upon shipping off the coast of Norway (and was probably founded on the observation of an enormous cuttle-fish or squid), first described by Bishop Pontoppidan in *A History of Norway* (1752). It was said to be capable of dragging down to the sea-bottom even the largest ships because, when submerging, it created a powerful whirlpool, known as the Skagarag. See *Brewer's Phrase and Fable*.

The connection of Tennyson's sea-best to the biblical end of time suggests the influence of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book One, line 42: "There Leviathan / Hugest of living creatures, on the deep / Stretch'd like a promontory" The word in Hebrew means "that which gathers itself together in folds"; the creature has been variously associated with the crocodile (Job 41:1), a conventional sea-serpent (Isaiah 27:1), and a whale (Psalms 104: 26, as in the 1662 Church of England *Book of Common Prayer*).

A third influence is Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), which had challenged the geological time of the Bible, as had recent discoveries of dinosaur skeletons by Gideon Mantell in Tigate Forest, Sussex, in 1822. In 1825 Mantell had announced his discovery of the Iguanodon. Such discoveries were destroying the case made by Armagh's Archbishop Ussher (1581-1656) that the world, according to calculations based on the ages of the Old Testament prophets, had been created on Sunday, 23 October 4004 B. C. E. Thus, Tennyson's poem neatly combines the Bible, literature, mythology, and natural history, balancing the theories of science with the traditions of Christian faith. Ricks's asserts that Tennyson

would also have read of the kraken in Scott's *Ministrelsy* (Leyden's *The Mermaid*), and in T. C. Croker's *Fairy Legends* ii (1828) 64, a book which he knew and later owned (*Lincoln*). Paden (p. 155) observes that T.'s monster has only its name in common with Pontoppidan's, and argues that T. associated it with G. S. Faber's religious mythologizing, where the serpent (the evil principle) leads to the deluge: hence the sea-snake, and hence the 'latter fire'. [Ricks, I, 269]

References

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