




Marta Czapińska-Bambara (Łódź)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2159-8294>
e-mail: marta.czapinska@uni.lodz.pl

THE OCTOPUS AS A LITERARY FIGURE IN IMPERIAL-ERA LITERATURE

Abstract. An examination of didactic and scholarly texts composed between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE reveals that the passages concerning the octopus exhibit recurring thematic and structural features. These commonalities suggest the existence of a literary model for representing the octopus during this period. Moreover, they exemplify the use of fictional narratives as a vehicle for artistic and entertainment purposes. In them, the figure of the octopus appears as a thief who, equipped with the qualities attributed to him by literary traditions (including the ability to walk, climb a tree, unusual culinary tastes, cunning character, and thieving inclinations) commits a sneaky theft, not infrequently linked to an assault, a fight and a sad end to the negative character. The tales about the octopus are thus part of the trend of sophisticatedly created adventure plots based on playing with literary heritage.

Keywords: octopus, thief, pirates, Imperial period, literary tradition

During the Imperial period of Greco-Roman antiquity, the development of the Second Sophistic emerged as a dominant force shaping literary production¹. This sophistic flourishing was driven not only by rhetorical education embedded in curricular exercises – most notably the imitation of Homeric adventures of Odysseus – but also by the active role of sophists in the formation of fictional

¹ G. ANDERSON, *The Second Sophistic. A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire*, London–New York 1993, p. 17. According to K. Eshleman's estimates, approximately 150 sophists and orators of the Second Sophistic – identifiable through coins, inscriptions, and careful inference from the writings of second-century intellectuals – although often remaining obscure figures, likely represent only a fraction of those active between the late first and early third centuries CE (K. ESHLEMAN, *Defining the Circle of Sophists: Philostratus and the Construction of the Second Sophistic*, CP 103.4, 2008, p. 397, 408).



literature². At the core of the Second Sophistic, and as a defining feature of Imperial literature more broadly, lies *miscellanism*, understood not as a haphazard compilation but as a deliberate aesthetic model³. Its aim was to produce works that were both intellectually accessible and artistically engaging for the reader. Some scholars identify the principle of variety (ποικιλία) as the primary mechanism through which this aesthetic was realized⁴. In texts of an animalistic nature, one manifestation of this principle was the attribution of human traits to animal behavior⁵. This is exemplified by narratives centered on the octopus. In addition to conveying – often following Aristotle – information about the octopus’s physical characteristics, such as appearance, scent, diet, reproduction, natural enemies, and hunting methods, authors also assigned behavioral traits to the creature, constructing stories that cast it as a morally ambiguous, if not outright villainous, figure. The analysis presented in this article of Latin and Greek didactic-scientific texts from the 1st to the 3rd century CE demonstrates that descriptions of the octopus exhibit recurring features that coalesce into a recognizable literary model. The octopus is portrayed as a wanderer, a thief, and a deceiver, and the narratives devoted to it exemplify the use of fictional storytelling based on imagined events for artistic and entertainment purposes.

*Polypus peregrinus*⁶ (“Wandering octopus”)

Athenaeus (170–223 CE) derives the name octopus from the Greek word for foot – *pous* and gives the form in the Attic dialect – *poulypous*, *poulypodos*, following Homer, in whom the word first appears. Athenaeus also mentions the Aeolic form

² G. ANDERSON, *The Second Sophistic...*, p. 75, 155–157, 168, 235, 240.

³ S.J. DIGIULIO, “ποικιλία ποικιλῶς”: *Situating Aelian’s Miscellanistic Programs between Greek and Roman Models of Variety in the Second Sophistic*, TAPA 153.1, 2023, p. 214.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 218. J. HINDERMANN places Elian’s work in the literary tradition of works whose composition was subordinated to the principle of ποικιλία. This is because thanks to it, the content diversity of the work was highlighted, and animals were presented in a multidimensional way, both in positive and negative connotations (J. HINDERMANN, *Aelian und die ποικιλία. Ordnung und Unordnung in “De natura animalium”*, RMP 159, 2016, p. 81–82 and 92).

⁵ The aim of this article is to draw attention to the formal and stylistic aspects of narratives involving octopuses. It should be noted, however, that animal stories attributing human characteristics to non-human creatures can also be examined within the context of the intense philosophical debates of the time. Pliny employed such narratives to articulate a complex vision of nature, while Aelian used them to challenge Stoic assumptions (P. LI CAUSI, *I leoni provavano gratitudine? La mirabolante storia di Androclo (e di altri) e il dibattito antico sugli animali*, Habis 52, 2021, p. 90; IDEM, *Les animaux qui souffrent sont-ils les animaux qui pensent? Pour une relecture du livre VIII de la “Naturalis historia” de Pline l’Ancien*, [in:] *Ani-Maux Souffrances animales, remèdes humains. Antiquité, Moyen Âge, Époque moderne*, ed. F. COLLARD, É. SAMAMA, Paris 2024, p. 31–32).

⁶ Term taken from Iacob Masen (I. MASEN, *Speculum imaginum veritatis occultae*, LXXIV, XXXII, 7, Coloniae Ubiorum: sumptibus viduae et haeredum Ioannis Antonii Kinchii, 1681; cetera: I. MASEN, *Speculum imaginum*).

– *polypon*⁷. This name reflects a characteristic feature of the octopus' appearance, namely "many legs"⁸, which influenced the view that the octopus uses his legs like a human uses his legs and hands, and therefore his long tentacles must be used for walking⁹. This belief implied the possibility of indicating where octopuses could go and the reason for why they would do so. According to the authors of the Imperial period, the destination of the octopuses' excursions was dry land¹⁰. Their causes were the culinary preferences of these cephalopods, which were to supplement their basic diet (consisting mainly of snails and fish hunted in the sea) with fruits and seasoned fish. According to Oppian (149–180 CE), octopuses, for example, adore the fruit of the olive tree to such an extent that at the mere sight of it they feel excitement; as soon as they smell olives, they crawl to the tree, embrace its trunk and then climb up to embrace the branches as if to kiss them¹¹. Also according to Athenaeus, octopuses were found on land embracing the trunk of the olive tree with their tentacles, because their weakness for olives led them to it. Athenaeus also cites the opinion of the predilection of octopuses for another fruit, figs¹². Pliny

⁷ ATHENAEUS, *The Deipnosophists*, VII, 316a–b, vol. III, Books VI–VII, English trans. Ch.B. GLICK, London 1957 (cetera: ATHENAEUS, *Deipnosophists*). This etymology of the name was repeated after him in the 17th century by the Dutch scholar and humanist G.I. Vossius (G.I. VOSSIUS, *Etymologicon linguae Latinae*, Amstelodami: P. et I. Blaeu, 1695, p. 462).

⁸ The earliest surviving images of the octopus from around the Mediterranean appear on pottery from the Minoan culture period and on coins from various areas. On them one can see an animal with eight long legs and a large head, sometimes ending in a kind of tip or sack. The significance of this element above the head was already explained by Aristotle, and repeated by Pliny the Elder after him. Indeed, discussing bloodless animals, Aristotle stated that in them the head fits between the legs and the abdomen, ARISTOTLE, *Historia animalium*, IV, 523b, vol. II, Books IV–VI, English trans. A.L. PECK, London 1970 (cetera: ARISTOTLE, *Historia animalium*); PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 83, vol. III, Books VIII–XI, English trans. H. RACKHAM, London 1956 (cetera: PLINY, *Natural History*); after Aristotle repeated in the 16th century by G. Rondelet, G. RONDELETIUS, *Libri de piscibus marinis, in quibus verae piscium effigies expressae sunt*, XVII, VI, Lugduni: Matthia Bonhomme, 1554 (cetera: RONDELETIUS, *Libri de piscibus*), p. 511; cf. [C. GESNER], *Conradi Gesneri medici Tigurini Historiae animalium liber IV*, Francofurti: Andrea Cambieri, 1604 (cetera: GESNER, *Historiae animalium*), p. 737. This visual element inspired the imagination of modern scholars, who saw phallic symbolism in it (J. SCHNIER, *Morphology of a Symbol: The Octopus*, Alm 13.1, 1956, p. 29–30).

⁹ Aristotle, noting the proportions of the body parts of cephalopods, stated that the octopus has a small pouch with internal organs, and long legs, in contrast to squids, which have a large pouch, and their legs are so short that they cannot walk on them (ARISTOTLE, *Historia animalium*, IV, 524a).

¹⁰ PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 71; ATHENAEUS, *Deipnosophists*, VII, 317b–c. Oppian refers to the octopus as a "crawler", but states that octopuses crawl near the shore (OPPIAN, *Halieutica, or Fishing*, II, 260–265; I, 305–311; I, 609, [in:] Oppian, *Colluthus, Tryphodorus*, English trans. A.W. MAIR, London 1958 [cetera: OPPIAN, *Halieutica*], p. 200–534). The mobility of the polyps, which may therefore be capable of rapid escape, was already pointed out by Plautus (PLAUTUS, *Rudens, or The Rope*, 1143–1144, [in:] *Plautus in Five Volumes*, vol. IV, English trans. P. NIXON, London 1959, p. 287–435).

¹¹ OPPIAN, *Halieutica*, IV, 264–307.

¹² ATHENAEUS, *Deipnosophists*, VII, 317c–d. In the sixteenth century, this belief is cited after Athenaeus by G. Rondelet (RONDELETIUS, *Libri de piscibus*, p. 515; GESNER, *Historiae animalium*,

the Elder (23–79 CE) and later Aelian (175–235 CE), in turn, describe the octopuses' expeditions to the mainland for salted fish. The way in which they depict the efforts of these cephalopods to obtain food processed by the hand of man is a testimony to the changes that took place over time in the way of presenting content of a fantastic nature, designed to interest the reader and provide him with more intellectual entertainment than to educate him and provide him with reliable information about these sea creatures¹³.

Polypus furax (“Thief octopus”)

In the *Natural History*, Pliny often draws attention to all sorts of curiosities and strange things (*mirabilia*)¹⁴. However, he introduces them skillfully into his work, giving them a specific form¹⁵. In recounting an event whose main character was supposed to be an octopus, in order to turn a fictionalized event into a credible story, following the example of Hellenistic historiography, he cites the account of an eyewitness, a certain Trebius Niger¹⁶. He relays:

In the fishponds at Carteia a polyp was in the habit of getting into their uncovered tanks from the open sea and there foraging for salted fish¹⁷ – [...] – and so it brought on itself the wrath of the keepers, which owing to the persistence of the theft was beyond all bounds. Fences

p. 740). In the seventeenth century, I. Masen also echoed this opinion, claiming that octopuses come ashore in summer to seek fruit on trees (I. MASEN, *Speculum imaginum*, LXXIV, XXXII, 6).

¹³ According to Th. Fögen, Aelian's apparent narrative strategy suggests that he was more interested in adding variety to the themes he addressed, rather than in a logical presentation of the subject, in order to avoid tedious monotony (Th. FÖGEN, *The Implications of Animal Nomenclature in Aelian's "De natura animalium"*, RMP 152, 2009, p. 50 and 60).

¹⁴ P. LI CAUSI, *Gli animali nel mondo antico*, Bologna 2018, p. 229–230.

¹⁵ Stories about strange things were characteristic of his era. However, it should be emphasized that Pliny was rather skeptical of them and marked his distance (M. BEAGON, *Roman Nature. The Thought of Pliny the Elder*, Oxford 1992, p. 9–11).

¹⁶ Researchers, analyzing the structure of the work *Natural History* of Pliny pay attention to the historiographical approach and a kind of pattern, although not always applied, of starting with examples from earlier eras to end with the author's contemporary times in order to highlight the moral content of the story (Ch. SMITH, *Pliny the Elder and Archaic Rome*, [in:] *"Vita Vigilia Est". Essays in Honour of Barbara Levick*, ed. E. BISPHAM, G. ROWE, London 2007 (= BICS 50), p. 160). The tale of the octopus partly reflects this kind of arrangement, because Pliny starts with a story from the Republic period and closes the plot with a remark about the times known to him, but the inspiration of historiography is found in the stylistic means characteristic of this genre rather than in the structure of the story itself.

¹⁷ Carteia, today's Rocabillo on the bay of Algeciras on the southern coast of *Hispania Ulterior*, was founded by the Romans in 171 BC. Carteia was a port of great importance. It was also famous for the production of *garum* from mackerel (C.A. INGEMARK, *The Octopus in the Sewers: An Ancient Legend Analogue*, JFR 45.2, 2008, p. 155). Numerous Roman remains have been found there, including the remains of salt pools for the production of *garum* mentioned by Pliny (*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites*, ed. R. STILLWELL, Princeton, NJ 1976, p. 437).

were erected in its way, but it used to scale these by making use of a tree, and it was only possible to catch it by means of the keen scent of hounds. These surrounded it when it was going back at night, and aroused the guards, who were astounded by its strangeness: in the first place its size was unheard of and so was its colour as well, and it was smeared with brine and had a terrible smell¹⁸;

Pliny further expands the account with a fictional episode, recounting a battle that ensued when an octopus tried to return to the sea after being stolen. In this battle, the octopus grows into a monster that is difficult to defeat:

who would have expected to find a polyp there, or who would recognize it in such circumstances? They felt they were pitted against something uncanny, for by its awful breath it also tormented the dogs, which it now scourged with the ends of its tentacles and now struck with its longer arms, which it used as clubs; and with difficulty they succeeded in dispatching it with a number of three-pronged harpoons¹⁹.

Following the example of the tragedian writers, Pliny then arouses strong emotions in the reader and captures his attention by emphasizing the unnatural size of the cephalopod²⁰:

They showed its head to Lucullus – it was as big as a cask and held 90 gallons, – and (to use the words of Trebius itself) ‘its beards which one could hardly clasp round with both one’s arms, knotted like clubs, 30 ft. long, with suckers or cups like basins holding three gallons, and teeth corresponding to its size.’ Its remains, kept as a curiosity, were found to weigh 700 lbs. Trebius also states that cuttle-fish of both species of the same size have been driven ashore on that coast²¹.

The fact that Pliny distinguished between literary playfulness and historical-scientific truth, but deliberately did not follow its requirements in order to make a strong impression on the reader, can be evidenced by the following remark

¹⁸ PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 92. The power of the poetic comparison of an odor to the unusual stench of an octopus was already used by Horace (HORACE, *Epodon*, XII, 5, [in:] *The Odes and Epodes*, English trans. C.E. BENNETT, London 1960).

¹⁹ PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 92–93.

²⁰ Pliny builds an atmosphere of fear around octopuses by stating that there is no crueller animal in his quest to defeat humans in the water, for when he assaults castaways or divers, he entwines his tentacles around his opponent, sticks his suckers into him and sucks him in for a long time with his many legs. He also adds that *The rest of the facts reported by the same authority may possibly be thought to approximate to the miraculous* (PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 91–92). The literary potential of the description of the tentacles of an octopus entwining his prey was recognized earlier by Ovid (OVID, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 366–367, vol. I, *Books I–VIII*, English trans. F.J. MILLER, London 1960). In the Middle Ages, fear of octopuses was only compounded by stories of their alleged attacks on sailors. Albertus Magnus, citing Pliny’s information about octopus attacks on shipwrecked sailors and divers conveys that octopuses snatch people from boats (A. MAGNUS, *De animalibus libri XXVI, Buch XIII–XXVI*, XXIV, 100, ed. H. STADLER, Münster 1910 [cetera: A. MAGNUS, *De animalibus*]).

²¹ PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 93.

of Pliny immediately after the passage quoted above: *In our own seas one kind is taken that measures 7½ ft. in length and the other kind 3 ft.*²² The depiction of the octopus as an unnaturally sized monster, on the one hand, fit the paradigm of miracles at the ends of the known Earth²³ popular in ancient Greek and Roman thought, and, on the other hand, stemmed from his identification with a source of great fear²⁴, so it was well suited to personify the danger threatening humans from the sea²⁵.

Oppian's didactic epic *Halieutica* deals with the fishing of sea creatures by humans, emphasizing the humanly appealing element of risk present in the fishing profession and the agonistic aspect of grappling with the element²⁶. Oppian's work is part of the Greco-Roman tradition of didactic poetry, whose goals from the Hellenistic era onward always went beyond the purely cognitive. Indeed, they conveyed moral teachings, but were also an occasion for the creator's artistic display. *Halieutica* from the beginning aroused great admiration and interest due to the

²² PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 93. M. Beagon draws attention to Pliny's personal experience, who, as an official, like other equites of the time, combined intellectual work with provincial duties. He therefore possessed not only "first-hand" information, but also had the experience to verify the stories passed on by others (M. BEAGON, *Roman Nature...*, p. 5–7). Some researchers, on the other hand, emphasize that *Natural History* is not the result of direct scientific observation, but the work of "an armchair intellectual" who merely processes the material gathered by others, without being interested in the intention of the original author. Therefore, they assume that Pliny's text reveals more about Roman ideology than empirical knowledge of the early empire, because its purpose was to show the extent of the ruling emperor's influence (and by extension, Rome's) and so it should be considered a literary text, not a scientific one (E. LIBONATI, *An Aspect of the Object Habit: Pliny the Elder, Audience and Politics*, *MusHJ* 10, 2017, p. 129). According to Th. Fögen, Pliny ascribes moral qualities to animals, describing them almost as if they were humans representing an alien world with which Roman citizens struggled (Th. FÖGEN, *Pliny the Elder's Animals. Some Remarks on the Narrative Structure of "Nat. Hist." 8–11*, *H* 135.2, 2007, p. 186).

²³ C.A. INGEMARK, *The Octopus in the Sewers...*, p. 152.

²⁴ Because the octopus was imagined as a creature of enormous size, the image of his moving legs inspired fear, and on a symbolic level it was linked to the Greek hydra, Medusa, vampire, dragon or spider (J. SCHNIER, *Morphology of a Symbol...*, p. 11–26). In a sixteenth-century Latin treatise, Joachim Camerarius, citing Pliny and Aelian, depicts the octopus as a symbol of danger lurking everywhere (I. CAMERARIUS, *Symbolorum et emblematum centuriae quatuor: rariores proprietates historias ac sententias memorabiles non paucas breviter exponit*, IV, XLIII, Moguntiae: Ludovicus Bourgeat, 1668). A similar meaning can be found in a handbook of symbolic art of the 16th and 17th centuries (A. HENKEL, A. SCHÖNE, *Emblemata. Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1967, p. 699).

²⁵ Pliny's accounts stand out from traditional Greco-Roman stories about sea dwellers because he selectively reports folklore concerning the sea and its mythical inhabitants. According to R. Denson, Pliny perceives the sea as a place that is not directly hostile to humanity, which is due to the Stoic tendency to absolve nature of direct blame. Pliny, therefore, does not attribute importance to prayers to Poseidon, but points to the responsibility of man during contact with the sea (R. DENSON, *Divine Nature and the Natural Divine: The Marine Folklore of Pliny the Elder*, *GLE* 25.2, 2021, p. 147–148).

²⁶ OPIAN, *Halieutica. Poemat o rybach i rybakach*, trans. K. BARTOL, Poznań 2020, p. 10.

high artistic value of the work, full of wonderful descriptions. Oppian, characterizing the behavior of an octopus after a victorious battle with a crawfish resorts to a remarkable comparison:

Then when the Crayfish falls prone, the Poulpe sits by him on the sands and feasts, [...]. Even as a day-sleeping man, with predatory craft devising dark counsels, never honouring the majesty of justice, skulks at evening in the narrow streets and lies in wait for one passing by after a banquet; the banqueter, heavy with wine, goes forward, singing drunkenly, bawling no very sober melody; and the other darts forth stealthily behind and seizes his neck with murderous hands and overpowers and lays him low in a cruel sleep not far from death and despoils him of all his raiment and goes his way with his booty, ill-gotten and unlawful: even such are the devices of the cunning Poulpes²⁷.

Oppian compares the behavior of the octopus to the actions of a robber, whom he defines with the word ληϊστωρ (equivalent to the Ionian form ληϊστήρ and the Attic ληστήρ). Thus, he ascribes human conduct and motivations to the octopus. Thanks to this procedure, the reader of the work *Halieutica* imagines the octopus as a thief who disobeys the law and deceitfully assaults his victims, robs them and then escapes.

Aelian in his work *On the characteristics of animals* also introduces the theme of the octopus, placing more emphasis on the artistic rather than didactic side of the story²⁸. Aelian tells the story of a certain octopus in the Dicaearchia of Italy²⁹, which grew to monstrous size and began to despise sea food. As a result, he went ashore to seek prey there. He entered the city through an underground sewer, from which waste usually dripped into the sea. He then broke into a house where Iberian merchants kept goods imported from their country, namely salted fish, stored in huge clay barrels. The octopus smashed those huge barrels with his tentacles and gorged himself on the captured food³⁰. When the next day the merchants saw the shattered shells and the absence of most of the goods, they decided to find out who had robbed them. So they put a well-armed, most courageous servant on the lookout. During the night, the octopus again crawled out of the sewer and went to that house in search of more loot. Aelian, like Oppian, compares the octopus to a thief³¹ and spins his tale in these words:

²⁷ OPPIAN, *Halieutica*, II, 402–418.

²⁸ Cf. M. BEAGON, *Roman Nature...*, p. 138.

²⁹ Today's Pozzuoli, a town and municipality in Italy, in the Campania region. Dicaearchia was founded around 530 BC by Greek refugees from the island of Samos, and later renamed Puteoli by the Romans.

³⁰ We're talking about *garum*, the Romans' favorite marinated fish or fish sauce, which was obtained by fermenting fish or discarded fish parts. *Garum* provided the Roman diet with salt in the form of a dark, flavorful and rather smelly liquid. Iberian *garum* was considered one of the best at the time (C.A. INGEMARK, *The Octopus in the Sewers...*, p. 151).

³¹ According to C.A. Ingemark and D. Ingemark, Aelian likens the octopus to an athlete competing in *pankration*, a combat sport in which one of the techniques involved the use of choking holds

the robber – if I may so call the Octopus – crushed the earthenware with the greatest ease. It was full moon, and the house was full of light, and everything was quite visible. But the servant was not for attacking the brute single-handed as he was afraid, moreover his adversary was too big for one man, but in the morning he informed the merchants what had happened. [...] Later, in the evening the marauder paid his visit and made for his usual feast. Thereupon some of them closed off the conduit; other took arms against the enemy and with choppers and razors well sharpened cut the tentacles, just as vine-dressers and woodmen loop the tips of the branches of an oak. And having cut away its strength, at long last they overcame it not without considerable labour. And what was so strange was that merchants captured the fish on dry land. Mischief and craft are plainly seen to be characteristics of this creature³².

It should be noted that Aelian uses the word *ληστής* to describe the octopus, with which Homer referred to pirates and land robbers³³. In addition, Aelian likens the behavior of the octopus to the conduct of pirates known from sophistic tales, who go ashore undetected to steal and often get into various brawls along the way³⁴. This, both in terms of motif and narrative technique, allows him to introduce elements of the genre typical of the ancient novel³⁵ (which was at the height of its development in the late 2nd / early 3rd century AD) into a work of a scientific and exploratory nature. The threat of aliens, especially pirates, played an important role in the structure of this type of story. The octopus, like the novel's pirates, becomes the initiator of a dangerous situation into which the other characters are drawn. And what is worth emphasizing, while for the other characters the story ends *with a happy ending*, the negative protagonist, in this case the octopus,

against the opponent. Aelian's characterization of the octopus as a thief served to legitimize its brutal treatment by merchants, as the law permitted the killing of a thief at night, and the punishment of theft by death was socially acceptable. C. A. INGEMARK, D. INGEMARK, *Representation of Fear. Verbalising Emotion in Ancient Roman Folk Narrative*, Helsinki 2020, p. 221–222.

³² AELIAN, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, XIII, 6, vol. III, *Books XII–XVII*, English trans. A. F. SCHOLFIELD, London 1959 [= LCL, 446].

³³ It is worth noting that Homer pointed out another property of this cephalopod. Comparing Odysseus' behavior in the sea to that of an octopus, he points out that when the cephalopod breaks away from a rock, remnants of the surface of the stone from which it broke away remain on his tentacles (HOMER, *The Odyssey*, V, 432, vol. I, *Books I–XII*, English trans. A. T. MURRAY, London 1960). This affliction of the octopus also did not escape the attention of the comedy writer Plautus, who used him in depicting the inclinations of wealthy people to steal. In a comedy titled *Aulularia* an old man, an Athenian citizen named Megador, justifying his choice of poor Euclion's daughter as his future spouse, states that he does not trust rich people, because, like octopuses, they get sticky with everything they touch, *I know all about those octopuses that touch a thing and then – stick* (PLAUTUS, *Aulularia*, 198, [in:] *Plautus in Five Volumes*, vol. I, English trans. P. NIXON, London 1961, p. 231–323).

³⁴ Cf. LONGUS, *Daphnis and Chloe*, I, 28: *some Tyrian pirates, in a Carian vessel lest perchance they should seem to be barbarians, sailed up to the fields, and coming ashore armed with swords and half-corslets, fell to rifle, plunder, and carry away all that came to hand*. LONGUS, *Daphnis and Chloe*, English trans. G. THORNLEY, London 1955.

³⁵ By “ancient novel” I mean, following Holzberg, “*sýntagma dramatikón*”, i.e., a fictional narrative from the field of the viewer's experience (N. HOLZBERG, *Der antike Roman. Eine Einführung*, Düsseldorf 2001, p. 24).

dies. The narrative is conducted as a simple linear story without looping action or flashbacks. The place of action, as required by the novel, is outside the main *polis*. In this case, it is in the city of Puteoli on the Bay of Naples, which was known for its extraordinary ethnic and social diversity, for after being promoted as the financial and political center of Campania as a reward for its loyalty in the conflict with Hannibal, it became a place frequented by many travelers. Puteoli exuded the charm of its exotic atmosphere and high standard of living. Its strong association with trade undoubtedly contributed to its attractiveness as the setting of Aelian's story, as the presence of foreign merchants there seemed entirely natural³⁶.

Polypus fraudulentus ("Fraudulent octopus")

The attribution of the role of the octopus as a villain in the story was largely related to the perception of the octopus as a vicious creature. After all, since antiquity, when the octopus was observed to have the ability to change color and the ability to resemble the rock to which it clung³⁷, it acquired the character of an animal from the borderline of worlds (simultaneously fish and non-fish³⁸) in popular beliefs and became the flagship symbol of deceivers who pretend to be someone other than they really are in order to obtain tangible benefits³⁹. Inquiries into the cause and value of this trait have undergone changes over the centuries. Ancient authors, such as Theognis (c. 570–485 BC), Pindar (6th/5th century BC) and Klearchos (4th century BC), did not consider the cunning attributed to the octopus as a disadvantage and advised imitating it⁴⁰. In the accounts of Pliny the Elder and later Athenaeus, the octopus' color change was attributed to his nature and driven

³⁶ The port of Puteoli, thanks to its ability to accommodate ships of all sizes, was the main port of the Roman Republic for almost two hundred years (J. URBANUS, *Rome's Imperial Port*, *Archaeo* 68.2, 2015, p. 29). Cf. C.A. INGEMARK, *The Octopus in the Sewers...*, p. 154.

³⁷ Ancient authors who regarded the octopus's ability to adapt to external conditions as a sign of its wisdom referred to it using the Greek noun *mêtis*. This term denoted a particular kind of intelligence that enabled practical effectiveness in action. It encompassed various forms of knowledge useful in life, including the art of cunning, which typically manifested in confrontational situations requiring either force or subtlety (M. DETIENNE, J.-P. VERNANT, *Les ruses de l'intelligence. La mêtis des Grecs*, Flammarion 2018, p. 21–22). In the Middle Ages, however, this phenomenon was interpreted differently by Albertus Magnus, who suggested that the rock to which the octopus clung cast a kind of shadow over it, providing shelter and facilitating hunting. Consequently, the discourse surrounding the octopus's cunning – its intentional adaptation to external conditions – ceased to exist (A. MAGNUS, *De animalibus*, XXIV, 100).

³⁸ G.E.R. LLOYD, *Science, Folklore and Ideology. Studies in the Life Sciences in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge–New York 1983, p. 45.

³⁹ J.-F. Lhermitte has demonstrated that Aelian's primary objective was to challenge Stoic views on animals, which regarded them as *aloga* – irrational beings – and therefore devoid of higher cognitive faculties. A salient example of this is Aelian's attribution of cunning to the octopus. J.-F. LHERMITTE, *L'animal vertueux dans la philosophie antique à l'époque impériale*, Paris 2015.

⁴⁰ PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 87; ATHENAEUS, *Deipnosophists*, VII, 317a–b.

mainly by fear⁴¹. Oppian regarded the octopus' mimicry as an effective way to defend himself against attacks by stronger creatures, but also to hunt smaller fish⁴². Plutarch (50–125 CE), on the other hand, was convinced that this color change was not a nature-derived affliction, but a deliberate act of the octopus to hide or hunt effectively⁴³. Recognizing the disadvantages of this type of attitude, he concluded that it should not always be imitated, as it should even be avoided in close relationships:

What man is there, [...] that he can assimilate and accommodate himself to many persons, without deriding the advice of Theognis when he says: 'Copy this trait of the cuttle-fish, which changes its colour / So as to seem to the eye like to the rock where it clings?' However, the changes in the cuttle-fish have no depth, but are wholly on the surface, which, owing to its closeness or looseness of texture, takes up the emanations from objects which come near to it; whereas friendship seek to effect a thorough-going likeness in characters, feelings, language, pursuits, and dispositions⁴⁴.

Plutarch compares to the behavior of an octopus the action of a flatterer who, like a mirror, reflects the moods of other people without revealing what he really thinks and what he is aiming at, in order to achieve his hidden goals all the more easily⁴⁵.

⁴¹ PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 87; ATHENAEUS, *Deipnosophists*, VII, 316f.

⁴² OPIAN, *Halieutica*, II, 232–240.

⁴³ PLUTARCH, *Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer*, 27, [in:] *Moralia*, vol. V, English trans. F.C. BABBITT, London 1957 [= LCL, 406]; PLUTARCH, *Causes of Natural Phenomena*, 19, [in:] *Moralia*, vol. XI, English trans. L. PEARSON, F.H. SANDBACH, London 1965 [= LCL, 426]. Cf. RONDELETTIUS, *Libri de piscibus*, p. 514; GESNER, *Historiae animalium*, p. 738; U. ALDROVANDI, *De piscibus libri V, et de cetis liber unus*, Bononiae: Bellagamba, 1613, p. 473.

⁴⁴ PLUTARCH, *On Having Many Friends*, 9, [in:] *Moralia*, vol. II, English trans. F.C. BABBITT, London 1956.

⁴⁵ PLUTARCH, *How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, 8, [in:] *Moralia*, vol. I, English trans. F.C. BABBITT, London 1960. Plutarch's opinion was echoed by Pierio Valeriano in the 16th century, stating that an octopus attached to rocks and constantly changing color, taking on the color of the stones he touches symbolizes a man who insincerely adapts to the moods and desires of other people. Valeriano concluded that in addition to the fact that the octopus does this naturally, because his transparent body enables him to do so, he does it on purpose and this is an expression of his cleverness. In support of his thesis, he cited an opinion about the octopus widespread among the Church Fathers: that of St. Ambrose, who attributed the octopus' actions to malevolent intentions, claiming that the octopus does it in bad faith in order to attract unwary fish to himself and eat them, and Basil the Great, who in his work *De gentiliū lectione* described the octopus as a flatterer, because he changes his color depending on the ground, like a flatterer changes his words to the delight of his listeners. Valeriano, however, recalled the archaic positive valuation of this affliction, noting that Odysseus, changing his behavior according to circumstances, gained his reputation as a wise man mainly for this reason (P. VALERIANUS, *Hieroglyphica seu De sacris Aegyptiorum aliarumque gentium literis commentarii*, XXI, Lugduni: Paulus Frelon, 1610 [cetera: VALERIANUS, *Hieroglyphica*]). Nicolas Caussin, on the other hand, reiterated the opinion of authors from the Imperial period by claiming that octopuses are by nature prone to deception and trickery. Caussin also claimed that the octopus was a symbol

Conclusions

In summary, it may be observed that, in the writings of authors from the 1st to the 3rd century CE, episodes dedicated to the octopus and the associated anecdotes strongly reflect the literary currents of the Imperial period, rather than constituting isolated instances of individual authorial craftsmanship⁴⁶. The manner in which this cephalopod is portrayed gradually assumes a distinct form and character, serving as evidence of an existing yet still evolving literary tradition⁴⁷. In Pliny's account, the octopus is a sea monster that comes out of the sea to steal salted fish from salt pools. He pictures him as a thief who, according to literary tradition, climbs a tree, and when he is caught in his foul deed engages in a fierce and ultimately losing battle. Oppian portrays the octopus as a thief who lurks in back alleys at night to attack unwary passersby by surprise, rob them and then flee. Aelian, in turn, appears to synthesize narrative elements found in his predecessors, while introducing a novel dimension by casting the octopus in the role of a pirate – a figure emblematic of sophisticated storytelling. His octopus is a thief who makes his way into the city at night to rob the inhabitants. In Aelian's case, the octopus, for which the natural environment was the marine element (which is an archetypal symbol of otherness and foreignness) becomes an obvious representative of the threats from it, described in the sophisticated spirit. For the delightful narrative

of superfluity and envy, as he considered him the most covetous of fish. He drew this conclusion from the belief that lust leads octopuses to death, as after the act the male is so exhausted that the helpless one is eaten by predators, and the female dies soon after giving birth (N. CAUSSIN, *Polihystor symbolicus: electorum symbolorum, et parabolarum historicarum stromata, XII libris complectens*, VIII, LXVIII, Coloniae Agrippinae: Ioannis Kinckius, 1623 [cetera: CAUSSIN, *Polihystor*]). In the seventeenth century, I. Masen, followed by F. Picinelli, citing the example of the octopus, which changes color due to his location, advised that a court servant should do the same, that is, cheat by adapting to the circumstances. It was considered that since such action allows octopuses to deceive their opponents and hunt them down, it is effective and worthy of imitation (I. MASEN, *Speculum imaginum*, LXVII, XVII, 11; LXXIV, XXXII; F. PICINELLI, *Mundus symbolicus, in emblematum universitate formatus, explicatus, et tam sacris, quam profanes eruditionibus ac sententiis illustratus: subministrans oratoribus, praedicatoribus, academicis, poetis et innumera conceptuum argumenta*, VI, XXXVI, 193, Coloniae Agrippinae: Hermannus Demen, 1687 [cetera: F. PICINELLI, *Mundus symbolicus*]). In a handbook of symbolic art of the 16th and 17th centuries, the octopus figures as a symbol of a flatterer (A. HENKEL, A. SCHÖNE, *Emblemata...*, p. 703).

⁴⁶ S.J. Digiulio argues that the motif of the octopus should be programmatically interpreted as a discourse on miscellanist reading and compositional practices, identifying in it a metaphor for the literary principles of Aelian. According to Digiulio, the octopus's ability to change color symbolizes the writer's craft, whereby skillful camouflage of content allows the author to subtly capture the reader's attention. Thus, the capacity for transformation becomes the essence of the literary artistry characteristic of the miscellanist author (S.J. DIGIULIO, "ποικίλα ποικίλωσ": *Situating Aelian's Miscellanistic Programs...*, p. 239–245).

⁴⁷ In this context, it is noteworthy that in the treatise on dream interpretation by Artemidorus of Daldis, who lived around the second century CE, the octopus is emblematic of criminals (C.A. INGEMARK, D. INGEMARK, *Representation of Fear...*, p. 226).

of the octopus not only reflects a genuine awareness of linguistic forms and literary heritage, as evidenced by calling the octopus by the Homeric term “robber” and attributing to the octopus the characteristics perpetuated by literary tradition, but it also turns out to be an example of the use of fantasy in literary prose, which characterizes the sophistic practice of the Imperial period, when a kind of play with historical and literary heritage, thanks to rhetorical techniques, led to the creation of imaginative romantic-adventure plots created to the delight of the reader⁴⁸.

A wandering thief, deceiver, and bandit – the octopus in literary works produced during the Roman Imperial era did not enjoy a favorable reputation. It came to personify a literary figure to whom negative moral attributes were ascribed and who was endowed with a specific symbolic significance. Moreover, this “bad fame” then accompanied him for centuries. It is significant that in the *Physiologos*, written down in Greek, the figure of the octopus does not appear⁴⁹; Greek is assumed to have been a popular early Christian theological writing, created for didactic purposes, in order to put down the most important principles of the Christian faith and, by the example of exemplary individuals, instruct on the proper way of life. Moreover, the absence of the octopus is noticeable in medieval bestiaries by Epiphanius or Hugo of Folieto⁵⁰. It is not until the 16th century that the octopus becomes a regular visitor to symbolic compendia and emblems. In most of the Latin treatises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries devoted to the symbolic interpretation of nature, the octopus, however, lost the thief-like and piratical attributes ascribed to it by ancient authors, in favor of an emphasis on its greed and voracity⁵¹.

⁴⁸ According to Th. Fögen, Aelian's attribution of moral qualities to certain animals, as well as Pliny's, was intended to make reading more enjoyable for readers (Th. FÖGEN, *The Implications of Animal Nomenclature...*, p. 50).

⁴⁹ Some scholars date the text to the 2nd century CE (*Fizjolog*, trans. K. JAŹDŹEWSKA, Warszawa 2003, p. 10).

⁵⁰ *Fizjologi i Aviarij. Średniowieczne traktaty o symbolice zwierząt*, trans. S. KOBIELUS, Kraków 2005, p. 5–9.

⁵¹ Pierio Valeriano, citing Pliny the Elder and Aelian, argues that an octopus is called a man who without thinking collects and gathers everything that falls into his hands (VALERIANUS, *Hieroglyphica*, XXVII, 16). On the voraciousness of the octopus, one can read at Horapollon (HORAPOLLON, *Hieroglyphica*, II, 105, Augustae Vindelicorum: David Hoeschelius, 1595, p. 124). What's more, Valeriano quotes the thesis, debunked in antiquity by Pliny the Elder (PLINY, *Natural History*, IX, 87; cf. PLUTARCH, *Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer*, 27), and propounded again in the Middle Ages, that octopuses are so greedy that they eat themselves (VALERIANUS, *Hieroglyphica*, XXVII, 19; cf. A. MAGNUS, *De animalibus* XXIV, 100; CAUSSIN, *Polihystor*, VIII, LXIX). This opinion, although criticized by Guillaume Rondelet (RONDELETIUS, *Libri de piscibus*, p. 514; cf. GESNER, *Historiae animalium*, p. 739), was also repeated by Iacob Masen and Filippo Picinelli (I. MASEN, *Speculum imaginum*, LVIII, XL, 102; LXXIV, XXXII; LVIII, XLI, 108; F. PICINELLI, *Mundus simbolicus*, VI, XXXVI, 184–185).

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- AELIAN, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, vol. III, Books XII–XVII, English trans. A.F. SCHOLFIELD, London 1959 [= Loeb Classical Library, 446], https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.aelian-characteristics_animals.1958
- ALDROVANDI U., *De piscibus libri V, et de cetis liber unus*, Bononiae: Bellagamba, 1613.
- ARISTOTLE, *Historia animalium*, vol. II, Books IV–VI, English trans. A.L. PECK, London 1970.
- ATHENAEUS, *The Deipnosophists*, vol. III, Books VI–VII, English trans. Ch.B. GLICK, London 1957.
- CAMERARIUS I., *Symbolorum et emblematum centuriae quatuor: rariores proprietates historias ac sententias memorabiles non paucas breviter exponit*, Moguntiae: Ludovicus Bourgeat, 1668.
- CAUSSIN N., *Polihistor symbolicus: electorum symbolorum, et paraboliarum historicarum stromata, XII libris complectens*, Coloniae Agrippinae: Ioannis Kinckius, 1623.
- Fizjolog*, trans. K. JAŹDŹEWSKA, Warszawa 2003.
- Fizjologi i Aviarium. Średniowieczne traktaty o symbolice zwierząt*, trans. S. KOBIELUS, Kraków 2005.
- [GESNER C.], *Conradi Gesneri medici Tigurini Historiae animalium liber IV*, Francofurti: Andrea Cambieri, 1604.
- HOMER, *The Odyssey*, vol. I, Books I–XII, English trans. A.T. MURRAY, London 1960.
- HORACE, *Epodes*, [in:] *The Odes and Epodes*, English trans. C.E. BENNETT, London 1960, p. 359–418.
- HORAPOLLON, *Hieroglyphica*, Augustae Vindelicorum: David Hoeschelius, 1595.
- LONGUS, *Daphnis and Chloe*, English trans. G. THORNLEY, London 1955.
- MAGNUS A., *De animalibus libri XXVI*, Buch XIII–XXVI, ed. H. STADLER, Münster 1910.
- MASEN I., *Speculum imaginum veritatis occultae*, Coloniae Ubiorum: sumptibus viduae et haeredum Ioannis Antonii Kinchii, 1681.
- OPPIAN, *Halieutica, or Fishing*, [in:] *Oppian, Colluthus, Tryphodorus*, English trans. A.W. MAIR, London 1958, p. 200–534.
- OPPIAN, *Halieutica. Poemat o rybach i rybakach*, trans. K. BARTOL, Poznań 2020, <https://doi.org/10.14746/amup.9788323236412>
- OVID, *Metamorphoses*, vol. I, Books I–VIII, English trans. F.J. MILLER, London 1960.
- PICINELLI F., *Mundus symbolicus, in emblematum universitate formatus, explicatus, et tam sacris, quam profanes eruditionibus ac sententiis illustratus: subministrans oratoribus, praedicatoribus, academicis, poetis et innumera conceptuum argumenta*, Coloniae Agrippinae: Hermannus Demen, 1687.
- PLAUTUS, *Aulularia*, [in:] *Plautus in Five Volumes*, vol. I, English trans. P. NIXON, London 1961, p. 231–323.
- PLAUTUS, *Rudens, or The Rope*, [in:] *Plautus in Five Volumes*, vol. IV, English trans. P. NIXON, London 1959, p. 287–435.
- PLINY, *Natural History*, vol. III, Books VIII–XI, English trans. H. RACKHAM, London 1956.
- PLUTARCH, *Causes of Natural Phenomena*, [in:] *Moralia*, vol. XI, English trans. L. PEARSON, F.H. SANDBACH, London 1965 [= Loeb Classical Library, 426], https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.plutarch-moralia-causes_natural_phenomena.1965
- PLUTARCH, *How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, [in:] *Moralia*, vol. I, English trans. F.C. BABBITT, London 1960.

- PLUTARCH, *On Having Many Friends*, [in:] *Moralia*, vol. II, English trans. F.C. BABBITT, London 1956.
- PLUTARCH, *Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer*, [in:] *Moralia*, vol. V, English trans. F.C. BABBITT, London 1957 [= Loeb Classical Library, 406], https://doi.org/10.4159/DLCL.plutarch-whether_land_sea_animals_are_cleverer.1957
- RONDELETIUS G., *Libri de piscibus marinis, in quibus verae piscium effigies expressae sunt*, Lugduni: Matthia Bonhomme, 1554, <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.64229>
- VALERIANUS P., *Hieroglyphica seu De sacris Aegyptiorum aliarumque gentium literis commentarii*, Lugduni: Paulus Frelon, 1610.
- VOSSIUS G.I., *Etymologicon linguae Latinae*, Amstelodami: P. et I. Blaeu, 1695.

Secondary Literature

- ANDERSON G., *The Second Sophistic. A Cultural Phenomenon in the Roman Empire*, London–New York 1993.
- BEAGON M., *Roman Nature. The Thought of Pliny the Elder*, Oxford 1992, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198147268.001.0001>
- DENSON R., *Divine Nature and the Natural Divine: The Marine Folklore of Pliny the Elder*, “Green Letters. Studies in Ecocriticism” 25.2, 2021, p. 143–154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2021.1951325>
- DETIENNE M., VERNANT J.-P., *Les ruses de l’intelligence. La mètis des Grecs*, Flammarion 2018.
- DIGIULIO S.J., “*ποικίλα ποικίλω*”: *Situating Aelian’s Miscellanistic Programs between Greek and Roman Models of Variety in the Second Sophistic*, “TAPA” 153.1, 2023, p. 213–251, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apa.2023.a901021>
- ESHLEMAN K., *Defining the Circle of Sophists: Philostratus and the Construction of the Second Sophistic*, “Classical Philology” 103.4, 2008, p. 395–413, <https://doi.org/10.1086/597183>
- FÖGEN Th., *Pliny the Elder’s Animals. Some Remarks on the Narrative Structure of “Nat. Hist.” 8–11*, “Hermes” 135.2, 2007, p. 184–198, <https://doi.org/10.25162/hermes-2007-0019>
- FÖGEN Th., *The Implications of Animal Nomenclature in Aelian’s “De natura animalium”*, “Rheinisches Museum für Philologie” 152, 2009, p. 49–62.
- HENKEL A., SCHÖNE A., *Emblemata. Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1967, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-03056-6>
- HINDERMANN J., *Aelian und die ποικιλία. Ordnung und Unordnung in “De natura animalium”*, “Rheinisches Museum für Philologie” 159, 2016, p. 71–98.
- HOLZBERG N., *Der antike Roman. Eine Einführung*, Düsseldorf 2001.
- INGEMARK C.A., *The Octopus in the Sewers: An Ancient Legend Analogue*, “Journal of Folklore Research” 45.2, 2008, p. 145–170, <https://doi.org/10.2979/JFR.2008.45.2.145>
- INGEMARK C.A., INGEMARK D., *Representation of Fear. Verbalising Emotion in Ancient Roman Folk Narrative*, Helsinki 2020.
- LHERMITTE J.-F., *L’animal vertueux dans la philosophie antique à l’époque impériale*, Paris 2015.
- LIBONATI E., *An Aspect of the Object Habit: Pliny the Elder, Audience and Politics*, “Museum History Journal” 10, 2017, p. 127–139, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2017.1328791>
- LI CAUSI P., *Gli animali nel mondo antico*, Bologna 2018.
- LI CAUSI P., *I leoni provavano gratitudine? La mirabolante storia di Androclo (e di altri) e il dibattito antico sugli animali*, “Habis” 52, 2021, p. 89–113, <https://doi.org/10.12795/Habis.2021.i52.05>

- LI CAUSI P., *Les animaux qui souffrent sont-ils les animaux qui pensent? Pour une relecture du livre VIII de la "Naturalis historia" de Pline l'Ancien*, [in:] *Ani-Maux Souffrances animales, remèdes humains. Antiquité, Moyen Âge, Époque moderne*, ed. F. COLLARD, É. SAMAMA, Paris 2024, p. 26–40.
- LLOYD G.E.R., *Science, Folklore and Ideology. Studies in the Life Sciences in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge–New York 1983.
- The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites*, ed. R. STILLWELL, Princeton, NJ 1976.
- SCHNIER J., *Morphology of a Symbol: The Octopus*, "American Imago" 13.1, 1956, p. 3–31.
- SMITH Ch., *Pliny the Elder and Archaic Rome*, [in:] "Vita Vigilia Est". *Essays in Honour of Barbara Levick*, ed. E. BISPHAM, G. ROWE, London 2007 (= "Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London" 50), p. 147–170, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-5370.2007.tb02469.x>
- URBANUS J., *Rome's Imperial Port*, "Archaeology" 68.2, 2015, p. 26–33.

Marta Czapińska-Bambara

University of Lodz
Faculty of Philology