ONE of the strangest examples of unnatural natural history which caught the fancy of Elizabethan writers is the curious account of the little fish called the remora. It has further interest because an examination of the various uses to which the story was put reveals the casual way in which many Elizabethans treated factual knowledge. Stephen Batman, though a good Elizabethan, is conscious of this fact as he is struck by the “diuere opinions of this fish.”¹ There is, of course, a great deal of agreement, since writers used more or less the same sources, but the divergences from the originals are sufficiently interesting to be noted.

There is disagreement at the start concerning the name of the fish. Most writers call it the *remora* or *delayer*, taking the name which the Romans used, or else they call it by the Greek name *echeneis* [*echineis*] or *shipholder*. These terms are used alternatively today for the sucking-fish or shark sucker, which attaches itself to passing sharks, turtles, and even ships, by means of a sucking disk on the top of the head. But Bartholomaeus Anglicus, apparently following Isidore of Seville, also called it a *moron* [*moram*] or delayer and a *herendo* [*haerendo*] or adherer.² Stephen Batman, in his additions to Bartholomaeus, called it an *ethneis*, while Reginald Scot chose the word *remiligo*.³ Other authors use English names for the fish, Adrian Junius, John Maplet, and Holland’s Plutarch calling it a *stay-ship*, and John Swan altering to *stop-ship*.⁴ Caxton, in his version of Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum Mundi*, calls the fish *eschinus*, and Thomas Johnson uses the word *echines*;⁵ these two writers may be
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confusing the word with *echinus*, although what they write has to do entirely with the *echeneis*.

There was one author, however, who clearly confused the *echeneis* with the *echinus* or spiny sea urchin, since he joins the descriptions of both animals to produce a rather remarkable creature. This was Laurence Andrewe, in what seems to be a partial translation of the *Hortus Sanitatus*; he spells the name of the fish *echyns*, describes its ability to hold a ship (a supposed quality of the *echeneis*), but goes on to say that it has spines like feet (a characteristic of the *echinus*). Andrewe’s account is as follows:

Echyns is a lytell fysshe of half a fote long/ & hath sharpe pryckles vnder his bely in stede of fete & he hath wynges vnder his bely lyke fete. & this litell fisshe can holde styl städinge a shype of .ii. c. tőne wt all his ballast & berynge all his sayles though he haue grete stőge wynde that he shall nat meue . . . / and whā this fisshe perceyueth that there shalbe any tempest thā sinketh he to the botom of the water and fetcheth there a stone & fleteth therewt* so surely that ye wawes of the water can nat cast hym out.*

Nowhere else have I met with an account of the echeneis holding to a rock to avoid the ravages of a storm, although Oppian states that when a fierce storm arises the prickly urchin will lift a stone upon its back and hold it with its spines; it can thus withstand the force of the tempest, avoiding the danger of being washed ashore. Interestingly enough, Jerome Cardan, who ordinarily is rather careful with details, compounds the confusion by stating that the echeneis comes from the family of conchs or mussels, that the Latins call it the remora, and that it is also known as echinus.* Part of the difficulty apparently comes about through the linking of two descriptions in Pliny. Immediately following the section in which Pliny calls the remora a sucking fish which clings to the hulls of ships and slows them, he discusses the murex, a bivalve shell fish, stating
that a number of them can bring a ship to a standstill. In a third section, Pliny discusses the echinus or sea urchin, but he nowhere suggests that the echinus can attach itself to a ship, though he does speak of its custom of clutching a rock before a storm, recounting that it is thus used to forecast a rough sea.

Lest we are too inclined to smile at this jumbled muddle of sixteenth-century thought, it may be well to examine the notes on the remora in two modern editions of the play *Eastward Ho*. John W. Cunliffe glosses the word *remora*: "a barnacle,—which was thought able to stop a ship's progress," while Felix Schelling and Matthew Black have a note which reads, "Barnacle, supposed to delay ships."

The habitat of the remora is as variously stated as its name. Batman, Oppian, and Ælian locate the fish upon the high seas. Aristotle and Pliny think that the remora lives among the rocks, and Maplet quotes Pliny to this effect. In giving an account of India and the animals and fish inhabiting that country, Andrewe's English version of Vincent states that the remora lives in the Sea of India, while Holland's translation of Plutarch's *Moralia* places the fish in the Sicilian sea. Writing at a later period, Rabelais places the fish in Satin, that is, Zay-tūn (Marco Polo's Zaitun), now Chuan-chow or Tsingkiang—a seaport in the Fukien Province of China. After remarking that the fish is found on the high seas, Batman adds, "By trauallying the coastes of America, the later trauaillers reporte to haue felt the strength and vertue of the same kind of fish."

Most of the authors who comment on the remora are amazed not so much that a fish can hold a ship as that this fish is extremely small, though again they disagree on the exact dimensions. Pliny, followed by Isidore of Seville, and later by Laurence Andrewe and Reginald Scot, states that
The fish is not over half a foot in length. Vincent of Beauvais thinks it can be no longer than a foot; and Batman accepts Oppian's belief that it is about a cubit or half a yard in length.

Other physical characteristics are also named. Batman writes of the remora as being "of a browne coulour," while Oppian says that it is slender, slippery, dusky in color, and spotted. Oppian, however, seems to confuse the fish with a lamprey since he says that it is in nature like an eel. Both Andrea Alciati in his Emblemata and Geoffrey Whitney in his A Choice of Emblemes seem to have read Oppian, since each presents an engraving of an eel-like fish entwined around an arrow, with an accompanying text using the echeneis as a moral. Plutarch's Moralia indicates that the head of the echeneis is long and sharply pointed. The only description of the mouth occurs in Oppian, where we learn that it is located under the head, sloping sharp and crooked "like the barb of a hook." Philemon Holland in his translation of Pliny declares that "Aristotle thinketh, that it hath a number of feet, the finnes stand so thicke one by another." The truth is, however, that Aristotle says that some people state that the echeneis has feet, but that it actually does not, and that these people are misled because the fins resemble feet. Maplet gives Aristotle as his source that the echeneis has feet "placed in a maner like a birdes winges"; and Andrewe, too, speaks of "wynges vnder his bely lyke fete."

Seemingly, not much was known about the means by which the remora attached itself to a ship: Bacon, Holland's Pliny, and Holland's Plutarch say that it "sticks" to the ship; Bartholomaeus says that it "cleuyth," as do Johnson, Junius, and John Swan. According to Vincent of Beauvais' The Myrrour & dyscrypcyon of the worlde, "as sone as they touch a shyp one alone reteineth him styly." Oppian is per-
haps somewhat more precise, since he states that the remora holds to the ship by gaping its tiny mouth.

The location on the ship where the fish attaches itself would scarcely be in doubt, since it would be obvious that the only possible places would lie below the water line and on the outside. Thus, Swan says the remora cleaves to the bottom, while Pliny, Oppian, and others, say it attaches itself to the keel. Bacon, however, says it sticks to the sides of ships, while Thomas Johnson in his *Cornucopiae* (1596) has a rather curious variation as he relates that the fish accomplishes its shipholding by “cleaving to the keele or mast of the Ship.” Johnson’s point of view apparently is that if it be true that so small a fish can actually impede the progress of a large ship in some mysterious way, it does not matter much where it attaches itself. It is further noted by Aristotle and Pliny that the remora is not an edible fish, though Elizabethan writers rarely comment on this fact.

Robert Greene, with his usual propensity for making science ancillary to literature, uses the remora as one of about fifteen fishes appearing in his works. This fish is referred to in *The Carde of Fancie* and in *Orpharion*, and the phraseology is almost identical in both cases as we learn that “the Fish Remora, lystening to the sound of a Trumpet is caught of the Fishers.” Since this myth of the remora’s reaction to the trumpet is not present in the encyclopedias readily available in the period, nor in the other works where reference to the remora is found, the conclusion is inevitable that this is another example of Greene’s inventive genius at work on unnatural natural history. Presumably he found it easier to invent illustrative details than to search the standard works of reference.

According to most writers the actions of the remora were detrimental to human beings, since the delaying of a ship
could possibly ruin a cargo and would surely decrease the profits. Thus the usual descriptions of the fish emphasize its ability to hold a ship "stydastely in the see, as though the shyppe were on grounde ther in," or to "staye and re-teyne a greate shyppe beinge vnder saylle." Oppian gives a vividly dramatic account of a ship straining under the force of a strong wind and running over the sea with full sails spread, when suddenly the little remora stops the ship as firmly "as if it were in a harbor." The canvas groans, the ropes creak, the yardarm bends, the steersman gives the ship free rein, but the ship is held against its will:

The sailors tremble to see the mysterious bonds of the sea, beholding a marvel like unto a dream. As when in the woods a hunter lies in wait for a swift-running Deer and smites her with winged arrow on the leg and stays her in her course; and she for all her haste, transfixed with compelling pain, unwillingly awaits the bold hunter; even such a fetter doth the spotted fish cast about the ship which it encounters, and from such deeds it gets its name.

Frequently we have references to actual ships which were held by the remora, to the inconvenience of the sailors and passengers. Batman, in his additions to Bartholomaeus Anglicus, states that "one of these Fishes stayed the Galley of Caius Caesar." Again, Jerome Cardan relates that Caligula once had his trireme delayed by such a fish, and in Rabelais we find a report that the ship of Periander the Tyrant was held by a remora; Pliny, however, gives a more circumstantial account, as he tells of Periander's messenger being stopped by murexes clinging to the ship while he was carrying dispatches ordering the castration of certain noble youths, and for this reason these bivalves were worshipped at the shrine of Venus at Cnidus.

On the other hand, some authors think of the remora as being helpful to sailors in time of storm. Thomas Johnson, for example, says that a remora can "so retaine the shippe
that no violence of winde or weather can remoue it." John Maplet is even more specific when he says that the remora "is said to be a good stay to the ship, when as tempests arise."

Because of the remarkable qualities which the remoras have, the sorceress Medea used them in her rites, according to Lucan. Indeed, many people used these fish as charms. Pierre Le Loyer in his Treatise of Specters, for example, states that according to Aristotle this fish is "good for love, and for happie successe in suits of law"; what Aristotle actually said, however, was that some people used this fish as a charm to bring luck in love affairs and in law cases. Pliny in the Historie of the World reverses the belief, stating that the fish is an evil omen in law and in love: it has "a bad name in matters of love, for enchanting as it were both men and women, and bereaving them of their heat & affection that way: as also in law cases, for delay of issues and judicall trialls." He goes on to point out, however, that "both these imputatious slaunders, it recompenseth againe with one good vertue and commendable qualitie that it hath: For in women great with child, if it be applied outwardly, it stayeth the dangerous fluxe of the wombe, and holdeth the child unto the full time of birth."

Many attempts were made to understand the nature of the remora's remarkable capacity. John Maplet remarks, however, that even though this fish "amazeth also . . . the beholder by his hid and occult set or vertue," it is still no more extraordinary than the loadstone or magnet, a comparison mentioned also by J. C. Scaliger; Aquinas adds that only the ignorant think it remarkable that a small fish should stop a ship or that the magnet attracts iron. Maplet also suggests that the two attractions are somewhat similar, stating that the remora "coueteth the Shipbord euen as the
Lodestone doth iron," while Reginald Scot thinks the remora no more curious than rhubarb, which will purge choler but will have no effect on phlegm or melancholy. Laurence Andrewe thinks of the remora as another example "that god dothe meruelous thiges in his creatures"; Batman thinks of this fish as an illustration of God's working through nature; and John Swan, in calling attention to both the remora and the loadstone, remarks: "neither is it possible to shew the cause of all secrets in nature."

In Holland's translation of Plutarch's *Moralia*, we find not an accounting for all the secrets of nature, but at least a very interesting passage which attempts rather perceptively to explain the belief in the powers of the remora:

Chaeremonianus the Trallien, upon a time when divers and sundry small fishes of all sorts were set before us, shewed unto us one with a long head, and the same sharpe pointed, and told us that it resembled very much the stay-ship fish, called thereupon in Greeke *Echeneis*, and he reported moreover, that he had seene the said fish, as he sailed upon the Sicilian sea, and marvelled not a little at the natural force and property that it had, so sensible in some sort to stay and hinder the course of a shippe under saile, untill such time as the mariner who had the government of the prow or foredecke, espied it sticking close to the outside of the ship. Upon the relation of this strange occurrent, some there were in place at that time, who laughed at Chaeremonianus; for that this tale and fiction, devised for the nonce to make folke merry, and which was incredible, went currant with him, and was taken for good paiment: againe, others there were, who spake very much in the defence of the hidden properties, and secret antipathies or contrarieties in nature. There you should have heard many other strange passions and accidents; to wit, ... that a wilde bull, how wood and furious soever he be, will stand gently and be quiet, in case he be tied to a fig-tree; ... But I for my part, said: ... I am of this mind ... that one and the same cause, staieth the shippe, and draweth the little fish *Echeneis* to sticke unto the side thereof; for so long as the ship is drie, nor not overcharged with moisture soaking into it, it stands with great reason, that the keele glideth more smoothly away, by reason of the lightnesse thereof, and
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cutteth merrily thorow the waves, which yeeld and give way willingly unto it, all the while it is cleane and void of filth; but after once (by being long drenched and soaked in the water, it hath gotten about the keele a deale of mosse, reits, kilpe, and tangle, wherewith it is overgrown and furred; then the wood of the said keele or bottome, becometh more dull, and not able to cut the waves so Easily; and the water beating upon the mosse and filth there engendred, resteth there still, and passeth not so easily away. The mariners therefore, seeing this, use to cleanse the sides of the ship, and to scrape off this mosse, reits, and such like baggage, from the planks and ribbes thereof, unto which it is like that the said fish willingly cleaveth, as being a matter soft and tender: so that we may very well thinke, that by reason of it, as the principall cause the ship is staied, and that it is not a consequent or accessorie of that which causeth the slownesse thereof.52

Thus we have a more or less reasonable explanation of the remora-myth. It is not that the fish actually delays the ship but merely that when a slow ship is beached and scraped the sailors observe at times a remora among the seaweed, moss, barnacles, and other material attached to the bottom; they therefore conclude that the remora can stop a ship, whereas actually it attaches itself to the ship because the soft and tender delaying matter is attractive to remoras. Such an explanation would also account for the linking of the echeneis with the stories about the murex and the echinus. It is rather odd, however, that none of these writers seems to have observed the sucking-disk on the top of the remora’s head.

When the word remora appears in a work which is purely or essentially literary, it is ordinarily used figuratively as a type of some delaying action. Francis Bacon, for example, speaks of certain discoursing causes as “hindering the voyage and progress of science” as the remora does a ship.53 For John Donne,

Life is a voyage, and in our lifes wayes
Countries, Courts, Towns are Rockes, or Remoraes.54
You must let judgment and discretion, like a remora, "stay thy fond affections and lusts" (i.e., "the great shippe of thy desire"), cautions Thomas Walkington, "lest it going on, thou make shipwracke of thy life and good name." John Milton, in writing on divorce, wonders "what mighty and invisible Remora" there is in matrimony to make it able "to contemne all the divorsive engines in heaven and earth." And Alexander Leighton speaks of "Remora-Prelats" who blocked the passage of certain parliamentary acts which were intended to redress some religious grievances.

The word "remora" occurs in Ben Jonson's works two or three times, according to whether or not he wrote the passage cited below in Eastward Ho. In Poetaster (III.i.i.1-5) the word is used for the social bore from whom it is difficult to escape; in Eastward Ho (IV.i.6-20) it stands for a court order to keep a son-in-law's ship from sailing. In The Magnetic Lady (II.i.) Jonson uses the word in a somewhat elaborate simile as he likens the green sickness to a remora, because it keeps a girl at home when she wants to go gadding. Mrs. Polish tells Keep of the green sickness, calling it

The maiden's malady; which is a sickness:
A kind of disease, I can assure you,
And like the fish our mariners call remora—...
For it will stay a ship that's under sail;
And stays are long and tedious things to maids!
And maidens are young ships that would be sailing
When they be rigg'd; wherefore is all their trim else?

The myth of the remora would naturally appeal to the imaginative minds of the makers of emblem books and others who wished to draw moral sentiments from the fruitful realm of natural history. Geoffrey Whitney uses a motto and an engraving from Andrea Alciati (an eel-like fish entwined around an arrow, with the superscription Maturan-
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dum) and completes the moral with a verse on making haste slowly:

About the arrowe swift, ECHENEIS slowe doth foule:
Which, biddes vs in our actions haste, no more then reason woulde.58

Alciati finds the story of the remora so useful that he employs it in a second emblem, with the engraving of a ship under full sail and the somewhat less appropriate supercription, "In facilè à virtute desciscentes."59

Edmund Spenser also uses the remora for the purpose of moral allegory. In the "Visions of the Worlds Vanitie," written on the theme of the ability of the weak to injure and to serve the mighty, he devotes a sonnet (9) to this fish.

Looking far foorth into the Ocean wide,
A goodly ship with banners brauely dight,
And flag in her top-gallant I espied,
Through the maine sea making her merry flight:
Faire blew the winde into her bosome right;
And th' heavens looked louely all the while,
That she did seeme to daunce, as in delight,
And it her owne felicitie did smile.
All suddenely there cloue vnto her keele
A little fish, that men call Remora,
Which stopt her course, and held her by the heele,
That winde nor tide could moue her thence away.
Strange thing me seemeth, that so small a thing
Should able be so great an one to wring.

Commentators generally agree that this passage is indebted to Alciati's Emblemata. It is therefore rather interesting to note some other parallels to ideas expressed here. James Aikins in his translation of Pliny, under the title The Secrets and wonders of the world (1585), lists some examples of the weak injuring the strong:

Of little beasts we finde Cities destroyed and people driven away. In Spayne with Conies. In Thessaly with Moles. In Fraunce with Frogs. In Affricke with Locustes. In the Ile of
Similarly, Stephen Gosson in *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579) writes:

One little sparke, fyers a whole Citie: One dramme of *Eleborus* Ransackes euery vaine: The Fish *Remora* hath a small body, and great force to staye shippes against winde and tide: *Ichneumon* a little worme, overcomes the Elephant: The Viper slayes the Bul: The Weesell the Cockatrice: And the weakest Waspe, stingeth the stoutest manne of warre.

Even more arresting is a passage in Holland's Pliny, in which the wind and tides are joined; the capacity of the weak is shown able to overpower and injure the strong; and the whole is tied together as an illustration of the world's vanity:

The currant of the Sea is great, the tide much, the windes vehement and forcible; and more than that, ores and sailes withall to helpe forward the rest, are mightie and powerfull: and yet there is one little sillie fish, named *Echeneis*, that checketh, scorneth, and arresteth them all: let the winds blow as much as they will, rage the storms and tempests what they can, yet this little fish commaundeth their furie, restraineth their puissance, and maugre all their force as great as it is, compelleth ships to stand still: . . . Shee bridleth the violence, and tameth the greatest rage of this universall world, and that without any paine that she putteth her selfe unto . . . .

What should all our fleets and armadoes at sea, make such turrets in their decks and forecastles? what should they fortifie their ships in warlike manner . . . ? See the vanitie of man! alas, how foolish are we to make all this adoe? when one little fish, not above halfe a foot long, is able to arrest and stay perforce. . . .

This passage in Pliny is much nearer to Spenser's sonnet than is either of the passages in Alciati. Neither of Alciati's emblems mentions the capability of the weak to conquer the strong, or uses the remora as an example of the vanity of the world.

Carroll Camden
"Little Fish, that Men Call Remora"

NOTES


4. Adrian Junius, *The Nomenclator, or Remembrancer* (London, 1585), p. 66b; John Maplet, *A greene Forest, or a naturall Historie* (London, 1567), fol. 84; John Swan, *Speculum Mundi* (Cambridge, 1635), pp. 382-383. According to Trevisa's 1495 translation, Bartholomaeus seems also to call the fish an effourus, though he may be confusing it with the fish which was said to be so small that it could not be caught on a hook. Also see Plutarch, *The Philosophie, commonlie called, The Morals*, trans. Philemon Holland (London, 1607), pp. 676-677 ("The Symposiums", Book II, 7th Question).


6. Laurens Andrewe (trans.), *The noble lyfe & natures of man, Of bestes / serpents / foules & fisshes yt be moste knowen*, Antwerp (1527?), sig. R3v. The copy in the Cambridge University Library lacks the title, which I have supplied from the notes to John Russell's *The Boke of Nurture*, E.E.T.S., O.S., vol. 32, p. 229. The colophon of the Cambridge copy reads: "Here endyth the wonderfule shape & nature yt our sauyor cryste Ihesu hath crelted in bestys serpetys on ye erth / fowles in ye ayre and fisshes & monsters in the water & see / to the behoue of vs mankinde his simple leuyge Creatures that he hath created of nonght [sic]. . . . Translated by me Laurens andrewes of the towne of Calis / in the famous cite of Andwarpe Emprésented by me Iohn of Doesborowe." Professor William A. Jackson informs me that the cuts in this book are taken from the *Hortus Sanitatis*.


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(London, 1585), sig. E3v; Pliny, Natural History, III (1940), 231 (IX.li.100).


15. Andrewe, loc. cit.

16. Plutarch (Holland), loc. cit.


19. Pliny (Holland), II, 425; Isidore, loc. cit.; Andrewe, loc. cit.; Scot, loc. cit.


22. Andrea Alciati, Emblemata (Paris, 1589), p. 99 (Emblema xx); Geffrey Whitney, A Choice of Emblemes (Leyden, 1586), p. 188.

23. Plutarch (Holland), loc. cit.


25. I, 249.

26. Loc. cit. Pliny himself gives a correct interpretation of Aristotle by saying that Aristotle denies that the echeneis has feet, and that he adds the information that the limbs resemble wings. See Pliny, Natural History, III (Harvard University Press, 1940), 215-217 (IX.xli.79-80).


29. Vincent, loc. cit.

30. Oppian, loc. cit.


32. Johnson, loc. cit.

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37. Oppian, loc. cit.
38. Batman, loc. cit.
39. Cardan, loc. cit.; Alciati (p. 303) relates a similar occurrence happening to the Cardinal of Tours.
41. Johnson, loc. cit.
42. Maplet, loc. cit.
45. Holland’s Pliny, I, 249.
46. Maplet, loc. cit.
49. Maplet, loc. cit.
50. Scot, loc. cit.
51. See the pages indicated previously in Andrewe, Swan, and Batman.
52. Holland’s Plutarch, loc. cit. An attempt to explain the remora-myth has also been made in modern times. V. Walfrid Ekman of the Nansen North Polar Expedition believes that stories of the ship-staying powers of the remora are actually early accounts of manifestations of a phenomenon which he calls “dead-water.” This phenomenon occurs when a stream of fresh water flows under certain conditions into a body of salt water, producing two temporarily immiscible layers of water of differing density; ships caught in a “dead-water” find it almost impossible to move, whether they be sailing ships or motor ships. Ekman writes, “Some old stories also tell us about certain strange adventures on the Mediterranean which doubtless were cases of dead-water, although owing to the narrators’ modes of explanation, they would rather seem to be myths. Vessels propelled by oars or running before a fair wind were suddenly stopped by a strong, un-
known force. It was commonly believed that this was caused by a small fish, the Remora, sucking itself fast to the ship’s body, and it was said that but one of these fishes was required to hold a ship immovably. The belief in this power of the Remora seems to have survived far into later times, and for that reason it seems probable that the phenomena in question have appeared occasionally.” Ekmans goes on to relate a story about the remora, which an Italian correspondent of his found in Bartolomeo Crescentio Romano, Nautica Mediterranea (Rome, 1607); according to it, the devil, wishing to embarrass the religious, caused a galley to be delayed in its progress until three monks were removed from the deck; Romano adds the obscurantistic comment, “This occurrence would have caused scientists to suppose that a very small fish, resisting the progress of the vessel, had got the better of the force of sails and oars and made the vessel stop.” See V. Walfrid Ekmans, “On Dead-Water,” The Norwegian North Polar Expedition, ed. F. Nansen, no. xv, V (London, 1904), 8-9, 31-32.

53. Bacon, loc. cit.
60. Sig. D3v.
62. Holland’s Pliny, II, 425-426. Of course, Spenser could not have used Holland’s translation, but the original Pliny contains all of these pertinent items, including the moral comment on the vanity of man.