

## Ornithological Passions of American Poet Celia Thaxter

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### Abstract

American poet Celia Leighton Thaxter (1835–1894) was shaped by both environmental beauty and destruction she witnessed in her New England community. As a woman who spent much of her life on a small wind-swept island, she was educated by seasons and migrations that later informed her work. A brief education among Boston's literary elite launched her creative career, where she focused on her local ecology. At that time, over-hunting and newly fashionable plumed hats and accessories had created a serious possibility of avian decimation. By creating awareness of humans' culpability for birds' endangerment, Thaxter's work evoked public sympathy and contributed to social and political change.

This essay applies ecofeminist and cultural analyses to Thaxter's work written as part of the 19th century bird defense movement, by examining the emotional rhetoric employed and activism implied in her poems and prose about birds, specifically: "The Kittiwakes," "The Wounded Curlew," and "The Great Blue Heron: A Warning." Little attention has been paid to Thaxter's didactic poems which use birds as subjects to instruct children and adults about the fragility of birdlife and to warn of humans' destructive behaviors. These works illustrate Thaxter's ecological sensibility and her use of emotion and reason to communicate an ecological message. Her poetry and prose about birdlife fortified the budding Audubon Society and contributed to the birth of the environmental movement. We can learn from such poetic activism, from attention to nature turned commodity, and the dangers of depleting finite resources. In our global environmental crisis, we recognize the interwoven relationships between birds and humans. Perhaps poems can help stymie our current ecological trajectory.

*Keywords:* birds, ecology, poetry, Audubon, Thaxter.

### Resumen

La obra de la poeta estadounidense Celia Leighton Thaxter (1835-1894) fue moldeada tanto por la belleza medioambiental como por la destrucción que esta presencié en su comunidad de Nueva Inglaterra. Como mujer que pasó gran parte de su vida en una pequeña isla azotada por el viento, fue educada por las estaciones y migraciones que luego conformaron su trabajo. Una breve educación entre la élite literaria de Boston catapultó su carrera creativa, en la que se centró en la ecología local. En ese momento, la caza excesiva y la nueva moda de sombreros y accesorios con plumas habían desencadenado la posibilidad real de la extinción de ciertas aves. Al crear conciencia sobre la culpa de los seres humanos en este asunto, el trabajo de Thaxter despertó la simpatía del público y contribuyó al cambio social y político.

Este ensayo aplica análisis ecofeministas y culturales a la obra de Thaxter escrita como parte del movimiento de defensa de las aves del siglo XIX, examinando la retórica emocional empleada y el activismo implícito en sus poemas y prosa sobre aves, específicamente: "The Kittiwakes," "The Wounded Curlew," y "The Great Blue Heron: A Warning." Se ha prestado poca atención a los poemas didácticos de Thaxter que utilizan a las aves como sujetos para instruir a niños y adultos sobre la fragilidad de las aves y advertir sobre los comportamientos destructivos de los humanos. Estos trabajos ilustran la sensibilidad ecológica de Thaxter y su uso de la emoción y la razón para comunicar un mensaje ecológico. Su poesía y prosa sobre la avifauna fortalecieron la incipiente Sociedad Audubon y contribuyeron al nacimiento del movimiento ecologista. Podemos aprender de ese activismo poético, de la atención a la naturaleza convertida en mercancía y de los peligros de agotar los recursos finitos. En nuestra crisis ambiental global, se ha de reconocer las relaciones entrelazadas entre aves y humanos. Quizás la poesía puede ayudar a obstaculizar nuestra trayectoria ecológica actual.

Palabras clave: aves, ecología, poesía, Audubon, Thaxter.

Climatologists today catalogue an alarming decrease of bird populations worldwide. In the United States, a similar decline began in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It was then that ornithologists noticed dwindling populations of migrating songbirds and shore birds, particularly along the Eastern seaboard. Over-hunting, driven in large part by newly fashionable plumed hats and accessories, created this avian decimation. Boys with slingshots and men with guns took on mercenary work to bring down millions of birds to sell to the millinery industry. As women paraded down city streets wearing plumage on their heads, birds were disappearing from their natural habitat. The connection between human behavior and ecological health was clear.

Writer Celia Leighton Thaxter (1835–1894) was dismayed by this avian destruction and in response, she took up her pen. This article argues that Thaxter’s poetry and prose about birdlife and its destruction contributed to social and political action in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Little attention has been paid to Thaxter’s didactic poems which use birds as subjects to instruct children and adults about our responsibility to birdlife and our shared ecosystem. As an early environmental writer, Thaxter created awareness of birds’ gifts and their endangerment, thus raising public sympathy. Her poetry and prose fortified the budding Audubon Society and contributed to the birth of the environmental movement.

Ecofeminist theory is an apt lens through which to view Thaxter’s work. As a theory which endorses the interconnectivity of all living entities, at its most basic level ecofeminism stresses “that human realities are embedded in ecological realities” (Cuomo 1). Philosophers Karen Warren and Val Plumwood first endorsed a wider theory that includes tensions of oppression and liberation. As Warren has argued, feminists who plead allegiance to equality must recognize environmental degradation as much as sexism or other forms of subjugation. Plumwood notes that dominant forms of rationality acknowledge those on the other side as inferior. The “master model” is taken for granted as the human model “while the feminine is seen as a deviation from it” (23). This dualism impedes a healthy ecological culture.

Cultural and historical studies inform our view of any literary text by embedding it in its own unique context, its distinctive web of time and place and circumstance. As Lawrence Buell has noted, our understanding of environmental writing can be imagined in waves, much like the feminist movement, with crests and valleys which are only apparent in hindsight (*Emergence of Environmental Criticism*). Thaxter’s nature writing is part of “a dynamic tradition of response to the rise and development of capitalist ecosocial order [...] how nature writers see and understand nature has everything to do with how they see and understand the society whose relations with it they hope to change” (Newman). Thaxter’s writing was a direct response to her environment, to the destruction she was witnessing and the commodification of the wildlife she held dear.

This article is also informed by Karen Kilcup’s ecofeminist work on 19<sup>th</sup> century women writers and Angela Sorby’s cultural studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century bird defense

movement. These related frameworks allow us to read Thaxter's life and work in the context of her time and as the sum of her ecological experiences and aptitudes. In *Fallen Forests* (2014), Kilcup asks pressing questions about how nineteenth century women writers engaged in environmental activism. A notable contribution is Kilcup's articulation of emotional intelligence in Thaxter's essay, "Women's Heartlessness," which chastises women's fashion participation in the "plume bloom." Kilcup explores Thaxter's rhetorical turns, including satire, moralizing, and even shame, in her essay, and how print can foster transformation in attitudes and ultimately, human behavior. Sorby's "The Poetics of Bird Defense in America, 1860 – 1918" illustrates how some nineteenth century poems "came to adjudicate between romanticism and realism" (2) and form a bridge between metaphor and science. Poetry was an instrument to teach children and shape their understanding of the natural world. In addition to the hybridity of metaphor and reason, poems connect to birdsongs through their musicality. Sorby shows how some bird poems were targeted towards youth to affect a future eco-sensitive constituency.

This essay expands and deepens these discussions by examining the techniques employed and activism fueled by Thaxter's poems about birds. No scholarship to date has shed light on this body of work. I focus on three poems: "The Kittiwakes," "The Wounded Curlew," and "The Great Blue Heron: A Warning," all which inform her later essay, "Women's Heartlessness." Analysis of these poems illustrates Thaxter's rhetoric, her bridge of metaphor and message, and her attention to music. Pitching her work at children (and likely mothers and teachers who read to them), Thaxter's uses emotionally charged rhetoric to affect change in attitudes and future behaviors. These poems, as well as her essay, exemplify her non-hierarchical admiration for her ornithological community, her commitment to its longevity, and her belief in the integrity of non-human entities in our shared ecosystem. They illustrate her use of print to communicate and to activate ecological commitment.

Thaxter's ornithological poetry was spawned by the ecological education granted by her unusual Atlantic island childhood. Daughter of a lighthouse keeper, Celia Leighton Thaxter's childhood was spent in intimate company of shorebirds that nested on tiny White Island, part of the Isles of Shoals, a group of islands nine miles off the coast of the northeastern United States (see Figure One). Here, she learned to appreciate the natural world and gain an understanding of her place within its cycles. Recalling her childhood, she writes of dancing "after the sandpipers at the edge of the foam" and shouting "to the gossiping kittiwakes that fluttered above" (*Among the Isles of Shoals* 123).<sup>1</sup> As a child, she coexisted with birds in the dynamic intertidal zone. Yet, in living in the shadow of the lighthouse, young Celia also learned of the danger of its light. While it served as a warning of perilous ledge, it also attracted migrating birds which would fly into the brightly lit glass. "The lighthouse, so beneficent to mankind, is the destroyer of birds" (AIS 110). Thus, she understood the tensions inherent when humans domesticate the landscape.

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<sup>1</sup> *Among the Isles of Shoals*, henceforth AIS.

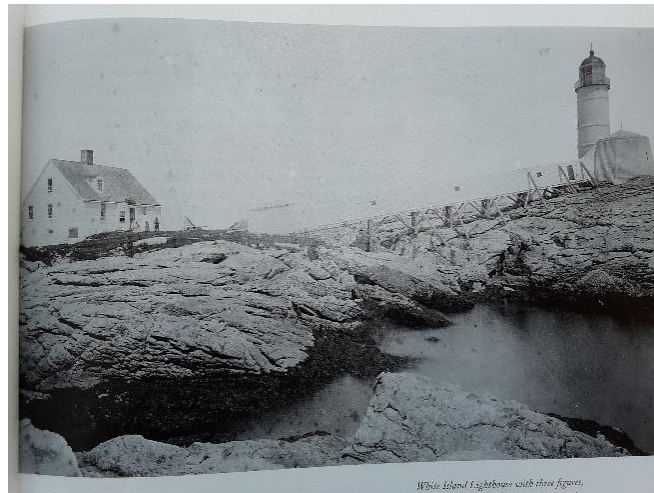


Figure 1: Thaxter's Home on White Isle c. 1850. Courtesy of the Isles of Shoals Corporation.

Celia's primary education included the tides, seasons, migration, and meteorology, until her formal schooling began when she was eleven and a Harvard-educated summer guest, Levi Thaxter, was hired to tutor the children. The arrangement was a precursor to Celia's education as a poet. Thaxter not only taught her to write on lined paper, he also grew enamored with his young student. They were wed in 1851 when she was sixteen; Levi was twenty-seven. The couple settled outside of Boston, and within eight years she had three sons. She had spent most of her young life on small wind-swept islands and had little context for a fully-fledged domestic life on the mainland. Moreover, as friend Annie Fields writes of the couple: "His retiring scholarly nature and habits drew him away from the world; her overflowing, sun-loving being, like a solar system in itself, reached out on every side, rejoicing in all created things" (xiii). This marriage is critical to her writing because Levi introduced Celia to a coterie of writers who encouraged her art and its publication.

Longing for her islands, Celia returned there with her family in the summers, where her parents had moved to neighboring Appledore Island, and built a summer hotel. After a sailing accident, Levi vowed to avoid the sea (Bardwell 63); thereafter Celia returned to the island with only her oldest son alongside her. Meanwhile, Levi would take the two younger boys hunting, an activity that contrasted with her pacifistic philosophies. In one letter she writes, "The boys and Levi have guns and go around murdering the country in the name of science till my heart is broken into shreds. They are horribly learned, but that doesn't compensate for one little life destroyed, in my woman's way of viewing it" (*Letters* 29). The contrast between Celia's environmental sensitivity and Levi's destructive bent, is notable. She understood subjugation and saw it extended to nature.

Her unhappy marriage, landlocked her away from the ocean, compromised her relationships with nature and the sea. Her subordinate relationship to her husband was made insufferable by his fascination with hunting and killing the feathered creatures she loved. The marriage amplified gendered hierarchy and linked Thaxter's body with caregiving and childbearing, rather than a body coexisting in nature. Yet writing would become an extension of her body, her voice, and reclaim her relationship with nature.

While Thaxter delighted in bird life, the "Plume Boom," the fashion of decorating ladies' hats, dresses, and accessories with bird feathers, reached a climax and caused an ornithological crisis in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Women adorned their hats with feathers, wings, and even fully taxidermized birds, with gaping eyes and beaks. This caused a significant decline in the bird population and led to extinction of some (D'Souza 1). While bird feathers have been part of personal ornamentation for millennia, the decoration was previously of a modest scale and did not affect bird populations (Graham 24). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a middle class emerged in the United States, women sought to imitate the ladies' fashion of the European continent. The rise in magazine's circulation such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Godey's Lady's Book* spread European styles to the East coast where an evolving aesthetic, literary, and artistic movement was taking cues from Europe. Plumes were the rage.

Women's fans, boas, and muffs were decorated with bird parts. In one advertisement from *Godey's Ladies Book* for November of 1883, not only were bonnets trimmed with birds, one black velvet muff featured a taxidermized kitten's head (Welker, illustration 37). Plumage became more excessive and soon the mounting of entire birds was *haute couture*. The trend for fashion in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the "natural look." This included flowers, grasses, mosses, as well as fur and feathers (Mason). Far from what we now consider "natural," instead "The top of a woman's hat became transformed into a grisly *nature morte* of chiffon lace and taffeta ribbons intermingled with plumes, wings, and indeed the entire bodies of birds (the grotesqueness heightened if the specimen happened to be any of the long-billed shorebirds)" (Graham 25). The May 1886 issue of *Godey's* fashion was dedicated to bird ornamentation, suggesting birds to coordinate with shades of ribbons and bows. One dress is described as having an "upper skirt of white crepe draped back by birds of brilliant plumage" (Blum 69). For this fashion statement, taxidermized birds are sewn onto the skirt, as though they are flying in a circle. The woman's corresponding head piece of bird feathers resembles wings, as though the wearer is part of nature herself.

The millinery trade and its plume harvest resulted in millions of American birds sacrificed annually. One *aigrette* alone required the feathers of four egrets (Serratore). Although adult male hunters were responsible for much of the avian hunt, boys were also rewarded for their bounty with toys and sweets (Mason 2). Concerned, ornithologists began to collect detailed data from dealers: Hunters in a New York coastal town collected 70,000 birds in four months; a New York exporter was contracted to supply 40,000 skins to a Paris market; 40,000 terns were killed on Cape Cod in one summer (Welker 202). One ornithologist reported that while walking in Manhattan in 1886, he counted 525 hats topped by feathers or birds (Wade). From England, Le Grand T. Meyer wrote:

ill-concealed vanity yearly signs the death warrants of millions of birds simply because they possess an attractive plumage. Recently, an item in an exchange read 'Lady Gemini appeared in the reception room with a dress decorated with patches of three thousand Brazilian Hummingbirds!' Not long ago I saw a woman in a cable car wearing a hat with the heads of, by actual count, twenty-one Quails.



Thaxter was horrified by such fashion trends. She chose a simple palette in her island dress, of white, black, or grey (the same colors as the sandpiper, notes Glasser, 14). To accessorize, she wore strung seashells as jewelry or pinned rose hips to her dress. Annie Fields, writes “She never wore any other colors, nor was anything like ‘trimming’ ever seen about her [...] I remember her as I first saw her with the sea-shells which she always wore then around her neck and wrists” (*Letters* ix, x). She was not tied to whims of fashion. Writing from Appledore Island one spring she exclaims, “This is what I enjoy! To wear my old clothes every day, grub in the ground, dig dandelions and eat them too, plant my seeds and watch them [...] *This is fun!*” (*Letters* ix). This pleasure in leisure, in abandonment of fashion protocols, was a gift of the remote island. The landscape also granted her a natural environment, which she documented with drawings of botanical accuracy, paintings, and poems, dozens of them focused on bird life.

In *Stories and Poems for Children* (1878), Thaxter devotes twenty-two poems to birds. Perhaps she knew that the future of our ecological health depended on our children learning to be stewards of the earth and all its inhabitants. Perhaps she also knew that mothers (likely) reading with their children might also feel empathy for the feathered creatures described there and consider their own fashion choices. The poems teach attributes like kindness, sympathy, empathy, and responsibility to one another and to all living entities. All contain a sonic design that draws the reader into the poem’s heartbeat.

“The Kittiwakes,”<sup>2</sup> first published in the popular American children’s magazine, *Saint Nicholas*<sup>3</sup> in September of 1874 (and later included in *Stories and Poems for Children* 205, 206), is an example of an early instructional poem which admonishes hunting for plumage. Thaxter’s eight rhyming quatrains follow an ABAB pattern in tetrameter, a sonic soundscape like a bird song. The poem opens with a portrait of a flock in its natural habitat:

Like white feathers blown about the rocks,  
Like soft snowflakes wavering in the air,  
Wheel the Kittiwakes in scattered flocks,  
Crying, floating, fluttering everywhere. (1-4)

The repetition of “like” introduces the reader to the visual image and relates the birds to other elements of nature. Next, Thaxter adds auditory language, a soundscape of crying and fluttering. Birds are later compared to “snow and cloud” (5) and like them, “they soar and whirl” (5). Like women, they have “downy breasts” (6) and “eyes of jet” (9); “lovelier creatures never sailed the air” (11). The cultural association of birds with women is long and deep (Kilcup 208) and the anthropomorphism here establishes both beauty and sympathy. Like children, too, the kittiwakes are “Innocent, inquisitive, and bold, / Knowing not the dangers that they dare” (11-12). They do not notice “a beaconing hand” (13) nor do they “of evil understand” (15) that “the gun awaits them full in sight” (16). The violence of the gun appearing at the end of the fourth stanza comes as a surprise to the reader, as to the flock of birds. Though the shot is not heard on the page, the fifth stanza illustrates the avian carnage the gunners have caused:

<sup>2</sup> Kittiwakes are common small shore birds of the gull family, named for its “ki-ti-wassk” calling.

<sup>3</sup> Other environmentalists, such as Rachel Carson also first published in *St. Nicholas* (Musil).

Though their blood the quiet waves makes red,  
Though their broken plumes float far and wide,  
Still they linger hovering overhead,  
Still the gun deals death on every side. (17-20)

The repetition of “though” and “still” creates a mantra: The word “still” could be read as adverb, adjective, and noun. Up to the present time, the birds *still* linger. The gun *still* deals death until it is surrendered. The dead bodies are not moving; they are *still*. The slaughter occurs in the *still* of the day. Yet since they are “innocent” and “inquisitive” they do not scatter. They remain.

The speaker employs an emotional appeal to the birds to fly away: “Oh, begone, sweet birds, or higher soar! / See you not your comrades low are laid?” (21-22). The image of warfare is clear; comrades are gunned down by the enemy. In the penultimate stanza the speaker addresses the gunman:

Nay, then, boatman, spare them! Must they bear  
Pangs like these for human vanity?  
That their lovely plumage we may wear  
must these fair, pathetic creatures die? (25-28)

Thaxter uses the first-person plural “we” in the third line of that stanza. Rather than chastising others, she chooses a softer inclusive pronoun “we” to yield maximum sympathy. She concludes the poem with this coda: “I beseech you, boatman, do not fire! / Stain no more with blood the tranquil sea” (31-32). The sea is soiled with the blood-red waves, a consequence of the hunter acting on market demand for “lovely plumage we may wear” (28). The images of “plumes” (18), “plumage” (27), and “feathers” (30) reiterate the hunter’s purpose. Thaxter appeals to both the executioner and to consumers who have commodified innocent and vulnerable birds for fashion. While this poem contains sentimental notes, such details are necessary to reframe our relationship with the environment. Emotion informs reason. Natural uncorrupted beauty must trump profit.

Even before the millinery trades set in, gulls were already reduced by English settlers who “had brought from the old country a taste for gulls and their eggs” (Graham, *Gulls* 69). Gulls were considered banquet food and gull chicks were swiped from their breeding grounds and fattened in specially designed gull houses. It was also common for a gull to be delivered to a neighboring home as a culinary gift. Thaxter would have been familiar with the habits of gulls, as their eggs were a source of food for coastal communities, and “egging expeditions” where eggs were raided from nests were common (Graham, *Gulls* 71). When gulls became targeted also for their long white plumage, the market demand increased. Gulls, Herons, and terns were among the birds particularly vulnerable to hunters due to their shoreline nesting grounds. Gunners could surround a flock and shoot down hundreds in only a few minutes. By the 1870s, gulls had disappeared from the southern New England coasts and were only found north of Cape Cod. It’s fitting that Thaxter’s first didactic poem features a flock of gulls.

“The Wounded Curlew” (*Stories and Poems for Children* 211) describes an injured shore bird. The eight quatrains, with ABAB rhyming lines, alternate between iambic pentameter (five stresses per line) and iambic trimeter (three stresses per line). This

meter evokes the musicality of the bird's call, which alternates short and long trills. The song repeats through metrical environment of the poem. In the opening stanza, Thaxter describes "a lonely bird in somber brown and gray" (3) who "limps patiently about" (4). The wounded bird stands on a ledge "crying, with none to heed" (8). There is a shift in the third stanza, where his isolation is interrupted:

But sometimes from the distance he can hear  
His comrades' swift reply;  
Sometimes the air rings with their music clear,  
Sounding from sea and sky. (9-12)

The distant birds' song echoes from water and air as it fills the atmosphere. The repetition of "sometimes" emphasizes the curlew's loneliness *most* of the time, when he is separated from a flock, from his nation of birds, his "comrades." The curlew suffers: "his tender voice, so sweet, / is shaken with his pain" (13, 14). His flight feathers, once strong, are broken, "never to soar again" (16). The bird and his comrades are anthropomorphized, a rhetorical move that serves to make the bird less *other*. Our sympathies are taken with his loss of flight and pain. Prisoned on the earth, he is "wounded and lame and languishing" (17); though "once glad and blithe and free" (18). This contrast between his pain and his earlier bliss evokes sympathy from other birds: as other birds join the wounded curlew:

The little sandpipers about him play,  
The shining waves they skim,  
Or round his feet they seek their food, and stay  
As if to comfort him. (21-24)

The curlew's "comrades" show empathy and care; their proximity is meant to comfort him. The birds model kindness to the reader. The human speaker does not enter until the seventh stanza, "My pity cannot help him" (24), though his lament "brings tears of wistfulness" (25) to the speaker. The bird must "grieve and mourn" (26) as the injury cannot be undone.

The final two stanzas close with moral instruction, addressed to boys known to target birds with guns or slingshots: "Oh, bright-eyed boy!" (29) the speaker calls, isn't there a better way to spend the day, than to "make sorrow" (31) and "despairing pain?" (32). This direct question to the reader heaps responsibility on him and admonishes this behavior, dramatized by the exclamation marks. The poem concludes:

O children drop the gun, the cruel stone!  
Oh, listen to my words,  
And hear with me the wounded curlew moan –  
Have mercy on the birds! (33-36)

The poem includes pleas of mercy, as it evokes sympathy for an innocent creature wounded by a boy whose action has caused permanent damage. An inferred pedagogical lesson is to think before acting, to abandon "play" things that can cause harm. The repeated use of exclamation points amplifies the instruction. This poem was widely anthologized in children's readers throughout the early twentieth century; we can see a lesson to care for creatures in nature as we might care for one another. Such a poem may encourage a boy to hang up his slingshot.



Long Billed Curlews are now rarely found on the East Coast of the United States, although until the late 1800s they were a common sight migrating along the Atlantic. Today, only a relict population remains. According to the Audubon Society, wild shorebird hunting and habitat loss was the cause of its serious decline. Thaxter's poem shows us the dawn of the bird's endangerment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century .

The devastation of shore birds spawned the first concrete action towards bird protection, in the creation of the American Ornithologists Union (AOU) in 1883 in New York. The group was formed by ornithologists concerned with local birds as part of New England's cultural and ecological heritage. The birds in most demand for the millinery industry were those with long aigrette feathers, which grew only during the breeding season. Their harvesting could mean almost certain extinction of their vulnerable chicks. One such bird with extraordinary feathers is the Great Blue Heron.

Thaxter's "The Great Blue Heron: A Warning" published in *St. Nicholas*, Feb 1885 (and included in *Stories and Poems for Children*, 230), contains another overt critique of hunting. Thaxter employs common motifs of anthropomorphism and pathos for the reader (the child, the mother or teacher reading to the child) to connect to the bird, and ample emotional rhetoric. The poem's subtitle: "a warning" already alerts the reader of danger ahead. The poem is again composed of rhyming quatrains, ABAB, in tetrameter to evoke a bird call. The opening stanza is devoted to the majesty of the bird itself:

The great blue heron stood all alone  
by the edge of the solemn sea  
on a broken boulder of gray trap stone;  
He was lost in a reverie. (1-4)

The solitary bird, gazing out to sea, may remind the reader of a human activity, gazing to the sea to check for impending weather, to look for returning sails of fishermen. The bird's "reverie" implies a dreaming, romantic tendency. Thaxter gives this bird masculine gender (his size must have been an indication), perhaps to appeal to male children who could more easily see themselves in this majestic bird, rather than, for example, the downy breasted kittiwake.

In the second stanza a human figure emerges, climbing over a wall to gather driftwood, and there the speaker sees the stately bird "as if carved from the broken block" as Michelangelo envisioned his masterpiece of David. The bird is given the same heroic stance, standing quiet as a statue, "Like a part of the boulder of blue grey rock / for never a feather he stirred" (11, 12). The image of a feather is critical, for it is these feathers that make him a target for execution by hunters looking for plumes. "O beautiful creature!" (14) the speaker cries out to him. "Do you know you are standing here close to your death, / By the brink of the quiet tide!" (231, 15-16). Her colloquial language, addressing the bird as kin, shows her concern for his welfare, her responsibility to warn him.

You cannot know of the being called Man!  
The lord of creation is he,  
And he slays earth's creatures wherever he can,  
In the air or the land or the sea. (17-20)

This is a bleak synopsis of this “being called Man,” ruthless and sadistic, slaying the “earth’s creatures.” An exclamation point adds to this frenetic energy. The speaker aligns herself with the heron, not this tribe of “Man” who is to be feared in air or on land or sea. She goes on with her warning of man, “he’s not a true friend”:

Straight he goes for his gun, its sweet life to destroy,  
for the mere pleasure of killing alone.  
He will ruin its beauty and quench all its joy,  
Though ‘t is useless to him as a stone. (25-28)

Man is bloodthirsty, killing “for the pleasure of killing alone.” The bird’s beauty is “useless.” While Thaxter’s ornithological concerns are valid, the industry of bird feathers was a lucrative economic machine. Man was mercenary in his killing, though there was likely economic purpose in the execution. Yet in writing for children, Thaxter warns them about the behaviors of this “being called Man” who relishes in the kill regardless of monetary return.

The speaker cries out to the bird, “Fly! Before over the sand / the lord of creation arrives” (29-30) yet the heron remains “unconscious of danger or will” (36). Again his innocence and trust in his environment adds to his vulnerability in the presence of this gun-toting man. Again she pleads, “Fly! To some lonelier place, and fly fast! / To the very North Pole! Anywhere!” (37-38). The desperation of the speaker’s warning and the bird’s delayed response amplifies the tension. Alas, in the penultimate stanza the bird “rose and soared high, and swept eastward at last” (39). The tension, now resolved, allows the speaker a coda: “Now perhaps you may live and be happy” (41), she concludes: “Sail away, Beauty, fast as you can! / Put the width of the earth and the breadth of the sea / Betwixt you and the Being called Man” (42-45). The heron is heroic, successfully fleeing impending danger. His happiness depends on the distance he can create between himself and this vile creature called Man. There is no co-existence possible here; the bird cannot live near man in this threatening climate. The speaker has saved him with her warning, yet clearly, other birds may not be so fortunate.

In these three poems, aside from the speaker, the humans are threatening male subjects: boys with stones, boatmen with guns, and gunners on the shore. The intervening poet/speaker is the voice of empathy, compassion, of interconnection between humans and birds. The birds themselves are described in anthropomorphic ways. They have comrades, they sing, they feel pain when wounded. They are innocent and need warning, for they have not developed suspicion of human predators. Through the speaker’s emotional appeal, the birds are memorialized or liberated. The narrative arc of all these poems acts as a bridge between romanticism and realism; Thaxter’s position emphasizes the intra-connectedness of all living beings.

Thaxter’s poems pay close attention to the habits of local birds she knew well. These and other poems served to teach children, and adults, about bird life as well as to document violence against shore birds. These narrative poems became lessons in ecology and empathy as they allow readers to bridge romanticism and realism, “to think about nature both metaphorically (as a reflection of the self or the divine) and scientifically (as a mutable and potentially endangered ecosystem)” (Sorby 1). In these poems, emotion

and reason are woven together to create an ecological lesson. As American bird poems became part of a new cultural conversation, Thaxter's work helped to develop the canon.

In addition to these works that focus on the devastation of birds when harmed by humans, Thaxter wrote many poems that simply celebrate bird song and migration. For example, among those included in *Stories and Poems for Children* are "The Birds' Orchestra" (127, 128), "Yellow Bird" (132, 133) and "Wild Geese" (196, 197). "The Birds' Orchestra" catalogues dozens of local wild birds and their unique song in one stanza, with alternate indented lines of rhyming couplets. Semicolons separate the birds and their talents, but there is not a period until the end of the 44 lines:

Bobolink shall play the violin,  
Great applause to win;  
Lonely, sweet, and sad, the meadow lark  
plays the oboe. Hark!  
that inspired bugle with a soul -  
T is the Oriole; (1-6).

Again we see Thaxter employ anthropomorphism, granting each bird an instrument to match its natural musical song. All vocalizations are celebrated, for together their orchestra creates a delightful cacophony. The use of one stanza reinforces the idea of the orchestra performing as one. Another poem, "Yellow Bird," also praises bird song: "You never learned it at all, the song / Springs from your heart in rich completeness" (132, 9-10). "Wild Geese" applauds the birds as hallmarks of the changing seasons. When they return north in the spring, they escort warmer air, "Bear the winter off with you, O wild geese dear! / Carry all the cold away, far away from here" (197, 13-14). These poems and others remind us that birds have many gifts; they should not be turned to profit.

Nevertheless, the bird slaughter continued. In 1886, the American Ornithologists Union reported that five million North American birds of roughly 50 different species were killed annually for the fashion industry (Graham, *Ark* 25). This disturbing data spurred the nascent bird defense movement, joining men and women who were committed to stopping "the slaughter of birds for commercial enterprise" (Berle vii; quoted in Graham, *Ark*). It was a moral force with a vision to transform public sentiment from seeing birds as commodities, to creatures to be protected and sustained for the future. The Audubon Society was one of the first organizations to represent "America's environmental conscience" (viii). Efforts were made to educate boys not to aim sling shots at birds, and to appeal to women whose desire for plumed hats had created such demand for feathers.

George Grinnell, editor of the popular magazine, *Forest and Stream*, first proposed the environmental group, appealing to a wide cross-section of the population. In his proposal for the formation of the Audubon Society, his opening statement addresses the "abominable" fashion of "wearing the feathers and skins of birds" (Neimark and Rhoades). He also appeals to men and agricultural commerce by noting how the decimation of birds presents danger to farmers: They are "injured in two ways; by the destruction of the birds, whose food consists chiefly of insects injurious to the growing crops" and also loss of vultures "which prey upon the small rodents which devour the crop after it has matured."

The symbiotic relationship between farmer and birdlife highlights the mutual dependency and links a healthy ecosystem to a healthy food chain. In this way, the protection of birds was not simply a sentimental gesture. Thus the Audubon Society was founded upon three objectives: “to prevent, so far as possible (1) the killing of any wild birds not used for food; (2) the destruction of nests or eggs of any wild bird, and (3) the wearing of feathers as ornaments or trimming for dress” (Grinnell).

The inaugural issue of *The Audubon Magazine* (1887) featured Celia Thaxter’s essay “Woman’s Heartlessness,” an attack on the vanity of women who wore plumes. Kilcup discusses this essay’s “connections among fashion, nature, home, and women’s cultural disadvantage” (205). Here, Thaxter employs humor, satire, and compassion for birds and their sacrifice for women’s unmitigated vanity. In this piece, she scolds “educated and enlightened” women whose “indifference and hardness” to the plight of birds’ slaughter baffle her. She recalls one woman’s attitude: “I think there is a great deal of sentiment wasted on the birds. There are so many of them, they will never be missed any more than mosquitos. I shall put birds on my new bonnet” (1). Thaxter’s summary of women’s voices continues: “Another [woman], mockingly, says, ‘Why don’t you try to save the little fishes in the sea?’ and continues to walk the world with dozens of warblers’ wings making her headgear hideous” (2). Thaxter’s condemnation in this essay is more biting than her poetry. She ridicules the fashion news from Paris, where

‘Birds are worn more than ever.’ Birds ‘are worn!’ Pitiful phrase! Sentence of deadly significance! ‘Birds are worn,’—as if that were final, as if all women must follow one another like a flock of sheep over a wall, and forget reason, forget the human heart with, forget everything but the empty pride of being ‘in the fashion.’

The voice here drips with distain at the passive phrase, “birds are worn.” She repeats this three times, punctuating the sentences between with finger-shaking exclamation points. Birds are not meant to be worn; they are meant to fly, to sing, to fledge and nest and mate. Such bird “wearing” women behave like thoughtless sheep, forgetting their faculties of reason. What is the rationality for wearing a bird on one’s head? “Forget” is also repeated three times, as in a liturgy. The “empty pride” of choosing fashion over conscience reeks of vanity, a most unchristian attribute.

The essay also uses similar emotional appeals launched in her earlier poems. She addresses the bird, “Your beauty makes you but a target for the accursed gun” which will silence the “delicious voice” and the bird’s dead body will be worn on “some woman’s head and call all eyes to gaze at her!” She warns the birds to save themselves and fly far away: “millions of miles away from the haunts of men; to the outermost parts of the earth.” Birds can only be safe when they do not share man’s habitat. “Fly! Dear and beautiful creature; seek the centre of the storm, the heart of the Artic cold, the winter blast. They are not so unkind as-women’s vanity.” As in the poems, the solution is to flee, to use one’s wings to seek another place. Thaxter demonstrates her poetic training in this essay: her use of repetition, metaphor, and emotional appeal. Yet this didactic prose was an anomaly for Thaxter. She was more comfortable in the room of a poem than the editorial page of a newsletter. Yet both genres showcase her commitment to birdlife and the ecosystem.

The first response to the Audubon movement was largely positive and widespread. Literary celebrities and Thaxter's colleagues, such as Henry Ward Beecher, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and John Greenleaf Whittier signed pledges and endorsed the battle cry. Thaxter's local chapter in Massachusetts grew to 1,284 Audubon members, including 358 school children, to assure the next generation would respect and protect the birds. Legislative actions followed, in time. In 1901, the Audubon Model law passed, protecting birds from plume hunting (Graham, *Ark* 31). The Migratory Bird Treaty of 1918 was the culmination of twenty years of lesser laws aimed at protecting migratory birds of Canada and the United States. This treaty set limits on waterfowl and placed a ban on the shooting at any time of sandpipers and plovers (Graham, *Ark* 97). According to the Audubon Society, this treaty saved the Snowy Egret, the Woodhill Duck, and the Sandhill Crane.

Thaxter would be both pleased at the growth of the movement and dismayed at myriad mounting environmental concerns. Today, the Audubon movement thrives as a nonprofit across the United States, and with partnerships in Canada and the Americas, setting up wildlife refuges, gathering data on bird species' population and health, and publishing fields guides. Though the Appledore Hotel and most of the outbuildings burned to the ground in 1914, The Isles of Shoals is now listed as a New England Natural Area, managed by the Shoals Marine Laboratory on Appledore. That island is home to Studies in Marine Biology, managed by Cornell University and the University of New England. The entire archipelago of seven islands is part of their study. Today bird loss is not from overhunting, but from loss of habitat and climate change. Coastlines have been clogged with hotels and luxury homes. The Gulf of Maine, which extends from Nova Scotia to Cape Cod, is now the most rapidly warming water of all our oceans. We have lost three billion birds in North America since 1970, likely due to habitat degradation and loss (Lambert). Environmental protection is now a partisan issue; without unity, losses will likely escalate.

The relationship between nature and fashion remains topical. Globally, there is some attention to sustainable fabrics and clothing's carbon footprint. Yet, in the United States, the most economical clothing is pieced together in deplorable working conditions, and what is not sold in department stores ends up in landfills. Cheap clothing may be good for one's bank account, but not for the environment. While in 1930, the average American woman owned nine outfits, today, that figure is 30 outfits—one for every day of the month (Johnson). Inexpensive clothing leads to more of it, and it ends up in landfills. In the United States, more than ten tons of clothing goes into landfills each year (Cline). Undoubtedly, the United States has a long way to go to reconcile fashion and the environment.

In many ways, Thaxter's environmental stance regarding ecological justice anticipated some contemporary views. Her poems and prose illustrate her devotion to the subjects that guided her moral compass: birds and their environment. These poems became a part of ecological activism that is still relevant today. Environmentalists can learn from Thaxter's poetic activism, her attention to nature turned commodity. In our current ecological crisis, with global connections made clearer than ever due to a raging pandemic, one can see the relationships between air, water, birds, and humans. There are



many ways to be an activist. Perhaps poetry and prose can stymie the current environmental trajectory, and bird songs will remain part of our soundtrack.

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