The Role of Celia Thaxter in American Literary History: An Overview

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by JANE VALLIER

There are two stories to tell about the lives of many women writers in nineteenth-century America. The first story, whether it be told about Margaret Fuller, Emily Dickinson or Celia Thaxter, is a rather conventional melodrama about a talented woman who stole time from her domestic duties to write an amazing quantity of literature, some of it a recognizable variation on the "standard" literature written by Emerson, Longfellow and Whittier. The superficial "first story" has been chronicled in American literary history by generations of critics and historians who concluded that women in nineteenth-century America—with the exception of Emily Dickinson, perhaps—wrote an enormous pile of second-rate literature, the imputed inferiority of which was based in the erroneous but widespread belief that female experience was in itself an inferior form of human experience.

Typical of the muddled judgment women's writing has received is this statement made by Robert Spiller in The Cycle of American Literature, 1955: "There is something about the way women lived in the nineteenth century that encouraged repression." 1 Spiller, like most of the literary historians of his and earlier generations, was content to leave that "something" a vague and unsolvable mystery; "something" was not worth investigating. There was, he assumed, neither rhyme nor reason to women's literary expression. The question of what was repressed or why anything was repressed did not seem worth pursuing; rather, the critic-historian threw up his hands in despair and sighed, "Women! We'll never understand them!"

The repression of which Spiller speaks has become one source of entry into the "second story"—the real story—of the lives of female writers in America. Today, when the literary profession appears to be flooded with information—all that eager graduate students and tireless computers can compile—we still know precious little about the lives and works of women writing in nineteenth-century America. Thanks to the language of modern psychology and to the social revolution which calls for a total re-evaluation of female experience, one dimension of which is lit-

erary expression, the labor and the pleasure of telling these “second”
stories is now before us.

No study of female literary experience in the nineteenth century
would be complete without reference to Sandra Gilbert and Susan
Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nin­
teenth Century Literary Imagination*, a comprehensive study which
covers not only the popular canon of such writers as Jane Austen, Char­
lotte and Emily Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and
Emily Dickinson, but takes the reader into the lesser known texts of
these famous authors wherein can be found unmistakably the “second
story.” Gilbert and Gubar devise a revolutionary method which affords
entry into the turbulent and enlightening “second stories,” filled as they
are with the images of entrapment, metaphors of physical and mental
illness, and the reality of madness. That is what Spiller’s mysterious
“repression” is all about.

Much of that which nineteenth-century female writers repressed
comes to life in the letters, the diaries, the unpublished fragments of
poems and the autobiographies that these women wrote. Thus it be­
comes imperative that the full canon of each writer be available before
literary and historical judgments be made on their work. The “second
story” cannot be told until the texts upon which the “first story” is
based are clearly and accurately established. As Thomas Johnson pro­
vided this scholarly material in establishing the case for Emily Dickin­
son, and as Paula Blanchard has done in assembling the facts of the case
for Margaret Fuller, so this study will begin to compile the facts of the
case for Celia Thaxter, a poet whose work represents the popular taste
of her day, and even more importantly, whose literary life stands as sign
and symbol for all that women in the nineteenth century could—and
could not—accomplish.

A rewriting of the female literary history is perhaps the major aca­
demic and aesthetic responsibility of our generation of literary scholar­
ship. The study of Celia Thaxter is part of the vast amount of work to
be done, work that includes the establishment of accurate texts, the re­
casting of biographies, and the re-evaluation of literary traditions. In
the case of Celia Thaxter, perhaps the most widely published woman
writing poetry in America during the last half of the nineteenth century,
the establishment of an accurate text is not a problem, although the as­
sembling of the canon into a complete and usable volume remains to be
done.

The challenge for today’s student of Celia Thaxter’s poetry lies in
transcending the conventional reading of the poems, a reading which


too often ends in dismissal of Thaxter as a serious poet. A serious and self-conscious artist she was, and so the "first story" of her life and art must be written accurately so that the "second story" can be read. It will be found that many of the difficulties other female writers such as Dickinson and Fuller met will also be found in Celia Thaxter's literary life. The themes and patterns that Gilbert and Gubar find hidden in works of Austen, the Brontës, Eliot, Barrett Browning and Dickinson will be found in works of Thaxter, acutely aware as she was of literary traditions and conventions of her time.

The external events of Celia Thaxter's life are in themselves so dramatic that readers might be content with just the recounting of the "first story": Her childhood at the White Island Lighthouse, her arranged marriage to Levi Thaxter, her experiences as wife and mother, her widespread popularity as a poet, her friendships with Whittier and Annie Fields, her later years which alternated from the depths of illness and poverty to the heights of public adoration as a Cult of the Beautiful centered around her poetry, her garden, and her life.

Telling the "second story" of Thaxter's life requires not only the complete re-reading of her prose and poetry, but also the assembling of all extant correspondence, and an investigation into the domestic realities of her everyday life. For example, one of the central facts which emerges in Thaxter's letters is the exhaustion caused by the daily domestic labor. Illness seemed to be the normal state of affairs in the Thaxter family life, leaving Celia the only vigorous and healthy one. The burden of caring for her brain-damaged child, Karl, and an invalid husband, Levi, must have weighed heavily, given the fact that there was no medical treatment from which either the child or the husband could benefit. Just this one example of the difficulties with which she struggled on a daily basis would be enough to discourage any writer. The recounting of some of these burdens, then, becomes a method of measuring how fully committed Thaxter was to her role as a poet. Finally, her story illustrates how strong, how invincible was the tradition of the female literary imagination in nineteenth-century America.

Part II: The Island Miranda

The cross-currents of the mid-nineteenth-century American culture flowed through the life of Celia Thaxter. A third generation Transcendentalist, Celia began her public career as a lyric poet, and then progressed through successive stages of development as a folklorist, a juvenile author, a free-lance journalist, a dramatic actress who wrote her own material, and finally a highly respected naturalist who won the admiration of John Burroughs. The variety of Thaxter's talents, abilities and interests can be accounted for only in terms of genius.

In 1851 Nathaniel Hawthorne spoke for literary New England when
he referred to sixteen-year-old Celia Thaxter as the "Island Miranda," thus identifying Celia with two important literary sources: First, the obedient daughter of King Prospero in *The Tempest*, and second, the learned daughter of a wise father who saw the necessity of his daughter's education. The second "Miranda," who serves as an ideal example in Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century*, was raised somewhat as Celia was, outside of the constraints of a traditional female education. Uncomfortable as Hawthorne was with Margaret Fuller herself, he recognized in young Celia many qualities Fuller had hoped women might cultivate in the nineteenth century. The unusual combination of intelligence, common sense and natural beauty that Hawthorne saw in Levi Thaxter's young bride was recorded in his *American Notebooks*; furthermore, he commented that she was unspoiled and unaffected by the models of femininity that Boston had to offer.

Ten years before Hawthorne's visit to the Isles of Shoals, he and Levi Thaxter had joined James Russell Lowell, Maria White, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and other young Boston intellectuals in Elizabeth Peabody's bookstore perhaps to hear Margaret Fuller's brilliant conversations, not the least of which were about the role of women in American life. Margaret Fuller's discussions on education for American women must have fallen on receptive ears, for from this group called "the Brothers and Sisters" were to come several men whose social and intellectual relationships with women were to break away from traditional norms. It is probable that Levi Thaxter heard Fuller elaborate on the importance of education for women: "The position I early was enabled to take was one of self-reliance. And were all women as sure of their wants as I was, the results would be the same. . . . The difficulty is to get them to the point from which they shall naturally develop self-respect and learn self-help." That education was the road to self-reliance and self-respect for women Levi knew in his heart, but time would reveal that he was a man who could seldom match ideals with actions. He did, however, place Celia in a social position where her talents would be appreciated—notwithstanding the fact that she was a woman. First as Celia's tutor, and later as her husband, Levi Thaxter was to introduce the "Island Miranda" to Boston Brahmin society where she would win the affection and the interest of Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Howells, Dickens and Browning.

Quite by accident, young Celia Laighton had received somewhat the same education that Bronson Alcott was trying to achieve in his experi-

mental school and that Margaret Fuller was trying to prescribe in *Women in the Nineteenth Century*. Celia was educated by her father at the White Island Lighthouse during the long winters of her early childhood. Thomas Laighton taught Celia not only her reading and arithmetic, but he taught her at a very young age to think for herself—just as Margaret Fuller hoped that all women would someday be able to do. Margaret Fuller’s description of Miranda’s education serves as a prophecy for Celia:

Her father was a man who cherished no sentimental reverence for Woman, but a firm belief in the equality of the sexes. She was his eldest child, and came to him at an age when he needed a companion. From the time she could speak and go alone, he addressed her not as a plaything, but as a living mind. Among the few verses he ever wrote was a copy addressed to this child, when the first locks were cut from her head; and the reverence expressed on this occasion for that cherished head, he never belied. It was to him the temple of immortal intellect. He respected his child, however, too much to be an indulgent parent. He called on her for clear judgment, for courage, for honor and fidelity; for such virtue as he knew. In so far as he possessed the keys to the wonders of this universe, he allowed free use of them to her, and by the incentive of a high expectation, he forbade, so far as possible, that she should let the privilege lie.  

Whether or not her head was a “temple of immortal intellect,” Celia was recognized by her father as having an uncommon mind. Celia’s childhood play was spent in imitation of her father’s activities; that is, she launched little purple boats of mussel shells and orated to the gulls, the rocks, and the waves. What a thrill of power the child must have felt as she climbed the lighthouse stairs to light the mirrored lamps which then shone for miles into the darkness. As she surveyed the rolling sea, little Celia must have felt like a princess in a tower. What a sense of drama must have seized her imagination—indeed the island was her stage in the vast ocean!

But all of her childhood moments were not so carefree, and she recalls that during a storm in 1839, while she and her family were living at the lighthouse: “We were startled by the heavy booming of guns through the roar of the tempest—a sound that drew nearer and nearer, till at last, through a sudden break in the mist and spray we saw the heavily rolling hull of a large vessel driving by, to her sure destruction, toward the coast...and well I remember that hand on my shoulder which held me firmly, shuddering child that I was, and forced me to look in spite of myself.”  

Celia learned later that day that it was the brig *Pocahontas*, homeward bound from Spain, and that the vessel and all her crew were lost. The “firm hand” that Celia recalled was that of her father, introducing her to the world outside the domestic sphere—a new world which Margaret Fuller herself saw as the domain of women in the nineteenth century.

Little Celia Laighton was not a pampered child hidden away from the

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harsh world by her father, nor did any stale classroom confine her. Fuller's description of Miranda's education again applies equally to the White Island child:

This child was early led to feel herself a child of the spirit. She took her place easily, not only in the world of organized being, but in the world of mind. A dignified sense of self-dependence was given as all her portion, and she found it a sure anchor. Herself securely anchored, her relations with others were established with equal security. She was fortunate in a total absence of those charms which might have drawn her bewildering flatteries, and in a strong electric nature, which repelled those who did not belong to her and attracted those who did.\footnote{Fuller, p. 39.}

Hawthorne had observed that Celia was easy-mannered and unaffected, but his opinion was contradicted by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the only intimate who ever wrote an unflattering remark about young Celia. Higginson had been Levi Thaxter's college roommate and intimate friend; furthermore, he might have felt a bit rejected when Levi turned his attention and affection toward Celia. Higginson wrote that she was silly and prone to exaggeration;\footnote{Mary Thacher Higginson, Letters and Journals of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1846-1906 (New York: Da Capo, 1969), p. 25.} nonetheless, Higginson was willing to defer judgment until Celia was older—she was only fifteen at the time, and perhaps too high spirited for his taste.

Margaret Fuller's Miranda, however, was completely winsome. Stressing the importance of friendship, Fuller wrote of Miranda words that were often used to describe Celia: "With men and women her relations were noble,—affectionate, without passion, intellectual without coldness. The world was free to her, and she lived freely in it. Outward adversity came, and inward conflict; but that faith and self-respect had early been awakened which must always lead, at last, to an outward serenity and an inward peace."\footnote{Fuller, p. 39.} The ideal that Fuller held for her Miranda was to be echoed in the words of Celia Thaxter's friends throughout her life.

When in 1846 Levi Thaxter took over the tutorial duties of Thomas Laighton, he was still in regular contact with the young Transcendentalists who had grouped a few years earlier around Margaret Fuller. Levi Thaxter was just the man to experiment with Fuller's ideals, for he was a model of the Transcendental spirit, sustained, as so many of the serious Transcendentalists were, by private income. Thus Levi Thaxter, trained professionally as both lawyer and actor, could proceed to complete the education of Celia Laighton with leisurely strolls along the beach, dramatic story-telling around the family hearth, and occasional investigations into the scientific lore of seaweeds and mosses.

Like the formal education of most women in her day—including Margaret Fuller's a generation earlier—Celia Thaxter's education was un-
even and unsystematic. Fuller had written that if a woman knows too much, "she will never find a husband; a superior woman hardly ever can." 14 Levi Thaxter recognized early that his young pupil was a genius and that she would probably out-distance him, but that realization did not cause him to direct her education in any manner except by haphazard conversations about whatever was on his mind—or whatever was blowing in the wind.

Although both Mr. Laighton and Mr. Thaxter had begun their pedagogical tasks with enthusiasm and idealism, neither man was capable of carrying on Celia’s education with systematic rigor. The press of business in Mr. Laighton’s life and the absence of structure in Mr. Thaxter’s life pulled the two men in opposite directions. After about the age of ten, Celia was left to educate herself.

The neglect of Celia Thaxter’s formal education, seen in retrospect, was a sin of omission on the part of both her father and her husband. Lacking a traditional, Latinate education, Celia was reluctant to acknowledge her own talent and her own genius. In one of her letters she asks her editor, James T. Fields, “Don’t you know I never went to school? I can fancy you smiling and saying to yourself that there is little need of telling you that.” 15 Thaxter’s letters abound with such self-deprecating comments and apologies. The lack of a formal education so undermined her self-confidence that she could seldom free herself from an editor long enough to experiment and grow artistically. Thus little development is found in either her prose or her poetry. Rather, Thaxter skipped from one genre to another—from lyric to ballad to mystery tale, from local history to juvenile fiction to hymns and greeting card verse.

Where could a talented woman turn for support? Speaking of the mythical “Judith Shakespeare” whose story she so convincingly wrote, Virginia Woolf posed the classic problem of the female poet: “It seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare’s sister as I had made it . . . that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would probably have gone crazed. . . . For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered . . . that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.” 16 Both Fuller and Thaxter would have undoubtedly testified that a woman in the nineteenth century might also go crazed, limited as she was not only in expression but also education.

The lack of systematic formal education might also have been a factor in Celia Thaxter’s preference for oral rather than written literature. It could be said that Thaxter wrote poetry “by ear” much in the same way

14. Fuller, p. 120.
an untrained person with some musical talent might play the piano “by ear.” A generation earlier Margaret Fuller had seen that most American women were in fact educated “by ear,” and she set about in her conversations to induce active thinking rather than passive listening in the minds of the Boston women whom she hoped to liberate from male intellectual domination. But Thaxter, like Margaret Fuller herself, continued to seek advice and inspiration from the public lectures and private conversations of such men as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. The pulpit and the lecture hall demanded the masculine voice, and there was little that the idealism of Fuller or the wide-ranging intellectual curiosity of Celia Thaxter could do to change that fact.

The Transcendental ideals of education were, unfortunately, not to serve Celia Thaxter very well. Although self-reliant, individualistic, sensitive to the intimations of nature around her, Celia was not possessed of the additional resources that it would take for a woman in the late nineteenth century to succeed at a serious literary career. From today’s perspective it can be seen that there were some stringent requirements for a woman’s becoming a writer whose reputation was more than ephemeral. Seen in retrospect, economic issues lay at the root of these requirements:

1. A formal Latinate education, either public or private. Only the wealthy could afford to educate their daughters. It was difficult to compete with the popular poets of the day—Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes—without some classical studies.

2. Freedom from the daily press of domestic chores. Cooking, cleaning, child-care, and invalid nursing were the economic as well as the moral responsibilities of women. (Neither Thaxter nor Fuller had a “Lavinia” to care for her as Emily Dickinson did.)

The economic straits of most nineteenth-century American women were all but inescapable, and Celia won a degree of financial independence too late to do her career any good. Levi’s high-minded Transcendentalism didn’t include such mundane considerations as allowing his wife household help, and thus Celia was forced to write most of her poetry in a state of mental, physical and emotional exhaustion.

In the earlier days at the lighthouse Celia’s mind had been allowed to range freely, but at the Thaxter household in Newtonville she was a prisoner, a slave to Levi’s wishes. Margaret Fuller predicted a generation earlier what would happen in this type of marriage:

For the weak and immature man will often admire a superior woman, but he will not be able to abide by a feeling which is too severe a tax on his habitual existence . . . he loves, but cannot follow her; yet is the association not without an enduring influence. Poetry has been domesticated in his life; and though he strives to bind down her heavenward impulses, as art of apothegm, these are only the tents beneath which he may sojourn for a while, but which may be easily struck, and carried on limitless wanderings.”

17. Fuller, p. 127.
Levi's own failures as a man and as an artist eventually made it impossible for him to live with his wife's success. Celia's letters of the 1870's period sound much the same note as those written by Margaret Fuller a generation earlier when Margaret was forced by necessity to assume the financial burden of her family, educate her younger brothers and sisters, and still manage to steal time for her own writing.

In theory, the Transcendentalists should have been leading the way for women's education and women's rights. In practice, it was quite the opposite. Emerson gave lip-service to the idea of a woman's developing her individual talents, but he was uncomfortable around women, such as Fuller, who did. The most positive contribution to women's rights was made by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who supported not only women's political rights, but also their artistic rights. His willingness to encourage the poetic genius of Emily Dickinson along with that of several other writers such as Helen Hunt Jackson and Harriet Spofford must be applauded. Likewise, Levi Thaxter played a supportive role from time to time in young Celia's education, but he could not possibly provide psychological support and he refused to provide financial support once her promising career was established. He undermined her career at every turn. The youthful idealism of the "Brothers and Sisters" was difficult, if not impossible, to sustain when the responsibilities of maturity came.

On the other hand, Margaret Fuller was a Transcendentalist who lived out her idealism to the end. Unlike her high-minded Boston brethren who were content with small scale experiments such as Brook Farm and Walden Pond, Margaret put her words into action and transcended the provincial life of New England. Fuller could hardly be called "popular" in her own day; rather, she was highly respected by a few intellectuals whose opinions, in fact, did matter: Emerson, Giuseppe Mazzini, Adam Mickiewicz and the Brownings recognized Fuller's genius and paid her the homage that was due. Fuller's dream was to redeem American womanhood, and from today's perspective it can be recognized that in her maturity she did have the intellectual power to have done so. The opportunities that Margaret Fuller found for personal growth in New York and later in Rome were denied Celia Thaxter. Fuller was tested in the crucible of the Italian Revolution, and she herself tested the Transcendental philosophy beyond the imagination of even Emerson. Celia Thaxter never sought to develop the international reputation that Fuller achieved, Thaxter's reputation being for the most part regional. As in the case with many popular artists, Thaxter was to outlive her own reputation.

It was the inner life, the psychological dimension of Celia Thaxter's life, that Margaret Fuller was able to predict with such remarkable accuracy. Writing of the paucity of educational opportunities for women in 1844, Fuller stated: "Women have a tendency to repress their im-
JANE VALLIER

247

pulses and make them doubt their instincts, thus often paralyzing their action during the best years.”18 Repression, self-doubt, and emotional paralysis are the story of Celia’s adulthood. Thaxter’s letters to Annie Fields reveal a ritual which sustained her for thirty years. The letters would begin with an anguished account of her daily heartbreaks: Levi’s irresponsibility, her son, Karl’s, mental instability, her parents’ prolonged illnesses; then after the frustration was expressed, Thaxter would pull herself together with some consolation. In a letter dated March 22, 1876, Thaxter writes: “I am so blue (let me whisper in your kind ear!) that I feel as if I bore the scar of Juggernaut upon my back day after day. I totally disbelieve in any sunrise to follow this pitch-black night. I believe I am going to see everything of a funereal purple color from this time forth and forever! But nobody guesses it. I don’t tell anybody but you.”19 Her letters follow much the same pattern as many of her poems. Occasionally Celia was able to break free, as in the two years after she left Levi in 1872, and the two years after his death in 1884, but the weight of her energy was always to be expended on the welfare of her children, her brothers and her parents. Ironically, when Celia was no longer needed by her family, she literally had no place to go. Financially and artistically denied, Celia was homeless and hence dependent upon the charity of friends.

At the end of Women in the Nineteenth Century Fuller wrote an observation which might be elevated to a prophecy: “The lot of Woman is sad. She is constituted to expect and need a happiness that cannot exist on earth. She must stifle such aspirations within her secret heart, and fit herself as well as she can, for a life of resignations and consolations. The life of Woman must be outwardly a well intentioned cheerful dissimulation of her real life.”20 Celia Thaxter led that outwardly cheerful life Fuller had predicted, and only by remarkably good luck did Thaxter’s letters survive to reveal the dissimulations. She poured out her heart to Annie Fields through the ritual of the daily letter while no one else ever spoke of the details of her suffering which were known only to Annie Fields. The hopes that Margaret Fuller had voiced in her description of “Miranda” were not to be fulfilled for the “Island Miranda” whom Hawthorne had christened into the literary world.

Heartbreak aside, Margaret Fuller and Celia Thaxter represent succeeding generations of feminine achievement. There are remarkable similarities in patterns of their professional lives as well as in their personal lives. Both women were known as brilliant conversationalists, further evidence of their education “by ear,” and each woman had an admiring group of followers: Fuller for her conversations and teaching in the Boston area, and Thaxter for her poetry readings at the Appledore

20. Fuller, p. 159.
Hotel where hundreds of New Englanders spent their summers. Bearing sometimes the entire financial responsibility for their families, both women turned to journalism, one of the professions open to them since they had dependent families and had to remain in their homes. Their experiences in journalism, although separated by twenty years, led both writers away from romantic themes and toward realism. Each ended her career with a manuscript for publication which was grounded in the experience of the outside world rather than the inside world of the domestic imagination. Unfortunately Fuller's manuscript of the Roman Revolution was lost in her fatal shipwreck, but Thaxter's *My Island Garden*, the work of an amateur naturalist in the tradition of Thoreau, has survived and has recently been reprinted.

Although their talents were not similar—Fuller's gift was analytical and historical whereas Thaxter's was narrative and lyrical—their psychological patterns are surprisingly similar. Margaret Fuller warned "Let it not be said that wherever there is energy or creative genius, 'She was a masculine mind!" Because both Fuller and Thaxter possessed vigorous problem-solving skills and physical stamina, they were often described as "masculine." Self-possessed and self-reliant, neither woman could afford the luxury of being dependent on anyone for long. Thaxter's physical vitality, her shunning of the sentimental, her vigorous problem-solving skills—all were prompted by her early childhood training and tested in the daily round of activities in which she took charge of the lives of so many people. She, like Margaret Fuller, was not afraid of responsibility, although they both yearned for a strong spiritual companion with whom they could share their unusually heavy family burdens. Each woman was ultimately responsible for herself.

In order to escape the domestic quagmires in which they found themselves, both Fuller and Thaxter developed self-concepts as stage personalities or actresses. In 1844 Fuller wrote that it was not winning an admiring audience that was so difficult, it was attaining the "platform" in the first place. Fuller and Thaxter both enjoyed playing the role of the public personality. It was often said that Fuller played at being "Margaret." Aware of her stage presence and how she looked in public, Margaret took pains to dress beautifully, elegantly, and tastefully. Like Thaxter, she had fantasized that she was a queen, a royal foundling left on her parents' dreary doorstep. Celia used this same image in her autobiographical fragment, only she is a royal foundling left in the care of ignoble fishermen. Thaxter may well have borrowed the theme from her favorite poem, "Aurora Leigh," Elizabeth

21. Fuller, p. 43.
22. Fuller, p. 104.
Barrett Browning’s story of the abandoned female artist. Clearly Fuller and Thaxter, as well as Browning, saw themselves as set apart from even their own families by those superior intellectual qualities which in turn separated them from their culture at large.

The feeling of not belonging even to their own families may have lead Fuller and Thaxter and other talented women to form strong supportive relationships with men who were established successfully in their respective fields: Fuller with Emerson, Thaxter with Whittier—even Dickinson with Higginson. As mentors to these women, Emerson, Whittier and Higginson were probably flattered and somewhat bewildered. The relationships were safe ones for the women: Friendships were free to grow on an idealized plane that was totally acceptable in New England society. Perhaps to evade the issue of their sexual lives it was said that both Fuller and Thaxter had great talents for “friendship.”

The fact that each of these female artists chose a strong, culturally powerful male to authenticate, verify or support their work ties the women’s reputations securely to the men who were their mentors.

Part III: New England—and the World

To Appledore Island, less than a mile square, came New England and then the world, first in the form of the aesthetic and scholarly Levi Thaxter, and later in the form of Celia’s friends—James and Annie Fields, William Dean Howells, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Horace Greeley, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Sarah Orne Jewett, Lucy Larcom, William Morris Hunt, Childe Hassam, Julius Eichberg, Ole Bulle, John Greenleaf Whittier. The painters and musicians who came for the summer seasons provided entertainment for the wealthy guests of the Appledore Hotel, many of whom were women recovering from bad cases of “nerves,” or so they were diagnosed by the famous Dr. S. Weir Mitchell of Philadelphia. The resort hotels on the Atlantic coast welcomed the rich and the sick, victims of both urban blight and medical quackery. By the 1880s science and medicine were rumored to be related, but exactly how the general public didn’t know. Rest and fresh air were still the treatment for everything from tuberculosis to insanity, while hypnotism and séances served simultaneously as religion, science and entertainment. The Appledore Hotel was definitely middle-class America: Someone like Henry James would have preferred to have stayed in Boston.

It was Levi Thaxter, however, who in the 1840s set the tone for what the summer life on the islands was to become. He himself had been sent to the White Island Lighthouse to recover from nervous depression, and it was to support his sinking spirits that his artist friends—Hawthorne

25. Fields and Lamb, p. 5.
among them—first came to the islands. Even before the hotel was built in 1849, Levi had begun a tradition of poetry readings for his friends and family in his cottage on Appledore Island.

Levi's friends were a motley group, many of whom had been participants in the Brook Farm experiment of the early 1840's. Levi himself might have been tempted to join Hawthorne, John Weiss and the others at Brook Farm had he not had such an aversion to manual labor. (In fact, Levi required the presence of a servant even while he lived in a fisherman's cottage.) The remote Isles of Shoals gave the second-generation Transcendentalists a place to contemplate the glories of nature and escape the growing pressures of urban American life. Unitarian ministers such as Weiss and Higginson met on Appledore to talk long into the night about the issues of slavery and of church government. Out on the islands there always seemed to be endless time and respite from the clamor of Boston life. Hawthorne notes in his journal a convivial evening in Mr. Thaxter's cottage, an evening filled with laughter and singing: "At about 10 o'clock Mr. Titcomb and myself took leave and emerging into the open air, out of that room of song, and pretty youthfulness of women, and gay young men, there was the sky and the three-quarters waning moon, and the old sea moaning all around the island." It was this haunting beauty as well as the spirit of friendship that brought people to the islands, and it was on this night, only two years after Margaret Fuller's tragic death in a shipwreck that Hawthorne christened Celia Thaxter the "Island Miranda."

The second-generation Transcendentalists who had gathered around Margaret Fuller for enlightenment on the social issues of the early 1840's had turned enthusiastically to the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning long before the Brownings had reached the height of their popularity in England and Europe. An enthusiasm for Browning was in the wind in Boston by 1842 and Levi Thaxter quickly gained the distinction of being the best reader and interpreter of Robert Browning in Boston. Not only did Levi read Browning to the "Brothers and Sisters," the romance of whose leaders, James Russell Lowell and Maria White, seemed to parallel the heroic love story of the Brownings; Levi had also read Browning to his young pupils—little Celia Laighton and her two brothers—at the White Island lighthouse.

The effects of the Brownings on the early poetry of Celia Thaxter should not be underestimated. Several of Thaxter's sonnets will be seen as comparable in style and quality to those of Mrs. Browning, the best example being "O were I loved as I desire to be." Thaxter was to become proud of her own sonnets, although she readily admitted that her attempts to treat the subject of idealized love in lyric and narrative


verse were unsatisfactory. Most important to the poetic development of Celia Thaxter, however, were the dramatic monologues of Browning which she must have heard Levi read with great mastery. Her own dramatic monologues, “In Kittery Churchyard” and “The Spaniards’ Graves,” were Thaxter’s most successful poems.

From the mid 1860’s until her death in 1894, Celia Thaxter gave poetry readings daily throughout the summer season at the Appledore and Oceanic hotels on the Isles of Shoals. She read her own poetry first and foremost, and that is perhaps one reason why she did not polish the written versions of all of her poems, especially the later ones. They came to life in oral performance, not on the written page. Some of her poems go flat in the same way Margaret Fuller’s recorded bits of conversation do, since part of their meaning is implicit in the personality and reputation of the speaker.

The reputation of the poet and the tradition of oral performance bring to mind a major cultural cross-current in mid to late nineteenth-century America: The institution of the fireside poets. These poets, Bryant, Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes and Lowell with their formidable literary powers as critics, editors and anthologizers, shaped the literature of their day by their examples—both negative and positive. They dominated New England literary life until the last quarter of the century when Howells, Twain and the realists divided and conquered new literary territory.

Being both poet and journalist, Celia Thaxter had friends in each camp. The poetry of Thaxter belonged at the fireside, but her prose, like Mark Twain’s, was precisely realistic. The poet, James Russell Lowell, admired her poetry while the novelist, William Dean Howells, admired her prose. The influence of the fireside poets can be seen in Thaxter’s conventional prosody and her dogged optimism. “The sunrise never failed us yet” is the closing line of a hymn that Thaxter wrote during one of her darkest personal moments, and predictably the words struck a responsive chord in the hearts of hard-working and uneducated New Englanders, people who probably needed a good dose of daily optimism.

Celia Thaxter could not accurately be called a fireside poet: That title was reserved for men only, men who wrote what might be called secular sermons in poetry or verse. Entertaining and edifying, fireside poetry was written for family reading which often meant that the father read to his wife and children. The audience for fireside poetry included men, even well-educated men, who would have found “feminine sensibility” in poetry inappropriate for themselves to read aloud. The fireside poets depended on a tradition of male authority in their verse.

From the firesides of Boston and New England homes came an ever-increasing demand for the poetry of Longfellow, Holmes, Whittier and Lowell. The coals for those flames were kept constantly stirred by the ingenious publisher, James T. Fields, whose unusual combination of lit-
erary judgment and business sense made the publishing house of Ticknor and Fields largely responsible for the financial prosperity of these fireside poets. At least financially speaking, James T. Fields was the ideal editor to direct the early career of Celia Thaxter, sharing as they did their native Portsmouth, an informed and intelligent optimism, and the didactic legacy of Enlightenment poetry. Testimony to their deep friendship is the story of how Celia Thaxter was with Fields the moment he died—listening to Annie Fields read Thomas Gray's *Letters*. 28

As partner in the firm of Ticknor and Fields and as editor of the *Atlantic* from 1861 to 1871, James T. Fields virtually controlled the popular poetry market in America. He created the market for fireside poetry by keeping the social and intellectual lives of the poets in the public eye. With his genius for publicity, Fields tantalized the curiosity of hardworking readers with exotic visions of the poets striving toward the peak of Parnassus. The Ticknor and Fields imprint was the guarantee of good literature, the best that America and England had to offer; however, Fields was not prepared to deal with the innovators in American literature—Whitman, Dickinson, even Henry James. Fields could tolerate neither Whitman's sensuality nor Henry James' irreverence toward America. (Henry James thought Fields bore an extraordinary resemblance to his wire-haired fox terrier.) 29 Although Fields himself wrote reams of light-hearted humorous verse which he read on public occasions such as his high school class reunion, he preferred to publish only the moral, the earnest, the genteel.

From James and Annie Fields, then, Celia Thaxter absorbed many of the literary standards and opinions that made her popular. Thaxter's earliest poems were remarkable for their freedom from moralizing and their sensuality, but as the influence of James and Annie Fields grew, so did the didacticism of Celia's poems. Before she was drawn into the Fields' social and literary life, Celia had only Levi Thaxter and his tastes for Browning and the Pre-Raphaelites to guide her. If Celia's first poem "Landlocked" had marked the beginning, not the height, which her poetry would reach, one can only speculate where her talent might have taken her.

But speculation is pointless: the fact was that James and Annie Fields were virtually to control Celia's literary life. Their friends were her friends, and their opinions seemed to become hers. Having neither the education nor the aesthetic confidence to go very far beyond the Fields' literary horizons, Celia became dependent on them, and thus limited by them. Furthermore, James Fields' enthusiasm for Longfellow served as a criterion against which he measured all poets. Unfortunately, it was

that same enthusiasm—specifically for Longfellow's "Hiawatha"—which became the turning point in Fields' magnificent publishing career. His defense of the literary merit of "Hiawatha" weakened his reputation for discriminating editorial taste, and when he tried to persuade the Boston newspapers to "puff" the reviews of "Hiawatha" he was accused of letting financial profit dictate his literary judgments. Fields' dedication to genteel poetry helped pave the way for Celia Thaxter's success as a popular poet in the 1870's.

With the fireside poets, however, Celia Thaxter did share a belief in the moral responsibility of a poet. Although she could never espouse a traditional Christian view of the world, she did believe in the virtues of love, loyalty, friendship and truth. Had she succumbed to Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' efforts to convert her to Christianity, Thaxter might have been an even more popular poet. "The consolations of religion I cannot bear," Thaxter wrote in 1877, and that one statement differentiates her from many of her sister New England writers—Phelps, Lucy Larcom, Harriet Beecher Stowe, even Annie Fields.

The female counterparts to the fireside poets were the writers of Sunday School fiction and verse, women such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Lucy Larcom who wrote the stories and verses for the popular juvenile magazines, Our Young Folks, St. Nicholas and the Youth's Companion. Their authority seemed best exercised upon children or upon other women. Although Celia Thaxter enjoyed the friendship of both Phelps and Larcom, she could never adhere to their religious tenets. Thaxter wrote a number of excellent poems and stories for children, but the theme was always the inexorable laws of nature rather than the laws of God: a canary is killed by a butcher bird, or a hunter shoots a burgomaster gull only after the merciless burgomaster has ravaged a flock of gulls. One historian of children's literature lauds Thaxter as being "sane and hale," not a sentimentalist.

Religion, however, played a role in Thaxter's life; her fascination with spiritualism and eastern religions harks back to the earlier generation of New England Transcendentalists. She approached spiritualism from a scientific point of view, and when a significant number of the experiments in which she participated failed, she was able to discard her interest entirely. After Mrs. Thaxter suffered two heart attacks, however, her attitude toward Christianity softened, and she was able to tell her solicitous Christian friends that she had begun to see the light.

Thaxter's unorthodox religious beliefs prohibited her from being included in a recent study of nineteenth-century American popular culture which developed the thesis that New England ministers and women "exploited the feminine image and idealized the very qualities that kept..."
them powerless: timidity, piety, narcissism, and a disdain for competition." Although Celia Thaxter was a popular writer in every sense of the word, she was not a "feminizer." Her literary topic was "reason," and her approach was seldom sentimental. She used several of the topics of sentimental literature—graveyard scenes, morbid isolation, nature's soothing powers—but she seldom reduced herself to being the victim of adversity; she was rather the opponent of adversity, the problem solver. She was not what Albert Gelpi has called "a lady poet." An admiring neighbor of Thaxter's and a fellow poet, John Albee, wrote a tribute to Celia Thaxter that reveals her to have fit the ideal expressed in the cult of true womanhood.

She knew how to play all the parts belonging to woman. She could make a musician play his best, the poets and scholars say their best—bring forward the modest, shut the door on the vulgar, and disengage one talent from another and give to each its opportunity . . . a poet with poets, an artist with artists . . . (she was) equally at home in the kitchen, . . . or with spade and trowel in her island gardens, or with fishermen and their wives and children, or as a nurse to the sick.

Because she was a good woman, she had the potential, or so her admirers thought, to be a good writer.

So talented, so resourceful, so individualistic was Celia Thaxter that her life resists easy generalizations. It can be said that she was a local color author like Sarah Orne Jewett, a children's author like Lucy Larcom, a journalist like Margaret Fuller, a romantic lyric poet like Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Perhaps she was too many things, and that is why she is so often included in lists, as she was in the premiere article in the first issue of Women's Studies, 1972, where she was not clearly differentiated from other female local color writers. Even in that journal dedicated to a more judicious view of women's accomplishments, Thaxter's individuality escaped the researcher.

Had Thaxter written several local histories rather than one, Among the Isles of Shoals, or several books on horticulture rather than just one, My Island Garden, or several collections of juvenile literature rather than one—in addition to over 300 lyric and narrative poems—Celia Thaxter might have been easy to classify. The case for her literary survival rests, like that of Margaret Fuller, not so much on what she wrote as that she wrote, and that she dared to live out her singular life with a self-awareness and personal integrity rarely seen in the fragments that survive as records of the lives of nineteenth-century American women.

In the end, Celia Thaxter, the "Island Miranda," might have said along with Margaret Fuller:

I stand in the sunny noon of life. Objects no longer glitter in the dews of morning, neither are yet softened by the shadows of evening. Every spot is seen, every chasm revealed. Climbing the dusty hill, some fair effigies that once stood for symbols of human destiny have been broken; those I still have with me show defects in this broad light. Yet enough is left, even by experience, to point distinctly to the glories of that destiny; faint, but not to be mistaken streaks of future day. I can say with the bard, "Though many have suffered shipwreck, still beat noble hearts."  

Celia Thaxter would have found in the voice of Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century* a kindred spirit and a thinking woman's consolation. Both women struggled against convention and prejudice in order to unburden themselves of the truth of life as they knew it. In the twentieth century Adrienne Rich speaks for those of us who have continued that very struggle:

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Today when I see "truthful"
written somewhere, it flares
like a white orchid in wet woods,
rare and grief-delighting, up from the page.
Sometimes, unwittingly even,
we have been truthful.
In a random universe, what more
exact and starry consolation?
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35. Fuller, p. 38.