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Celia Thaxter’s Love Poems

by PAULINE WOODWARD

In its articulation of mother-daughter separation, Celia Thaxter’s poem, “Land-Locked” (1861), conjoins the rhythm of the sea and the call of the mother. It is the first of a series of laments observing maternal loss, resounding a theme which Adrienne Rich maintains goes unrecognized in patriarchal culture:

The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture (237).

Rich identifies the mother-daughter separation as involuntary, unnatural deprivation, for which no mythic ritual or literary protocol exists in our time, and certainly she is right. Because there are few voices in Western literature expressing mother-daughter passion, the efforts of a poet like Celia Thaxter (1835-1894) are either unnoticed or dismissed as anomalous. Thaxter, the poet of the Isles of Shoals, observing her own deep feelings of loss at separation from her mother, produced several love poems, elegiac in tone and exquisite in their ability to express love and reverence existing between mother and daughter. In the gynocritical study that follows,¹ my aim is to point out Thaxter’s uniquely female voice in the love poems and to generate further examination of the elegies, which reveal women’s bonding and strength as they contribute to a strong and viable literary tradition that needs to be recognized and recovered.

According to Rich, the mother-daughter schism was once acknowledged, but ritual observance has not been retained in modern time. She cites the barrenness visited on the land by Demeter in the religious mystery of Eleusis, which recounts Demeter’s forbidding the grain to grow until her daughter Kore (or Persephone), who had been raped or abducted, was returned to her, and for the period of restoration, nine months only, Demeter “restores richness and life to the land” (238). Sacred ceremonies were established at Eleusis between 1400 B.C. and 1100 B.C. to re-enact the birth-from-death ritual, thus symbolizing the ancient power of mother-daughter communion. The separation of Demeter and Kore came

about through violent abduction and signified the universal schism that occurs whenever mothers and daughters are taken from one another:

Each daughter, even in the millenium before Christ, must have longed for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death. And every mother must have longed for the power of Demeter, the efficacy of her anger, the reconciliation with her lost self. (Rich 240)

The interplay between Demeter and Kore is repeated in the love poems Celia Thaxter writes out of grief for her lost mother. Thaxter’s poems come from a tradition of love that finds its beginnings in mother-daughter intimacy that defies time and place.

Separated from her mother when early marriage took her away from her home on Appledore, one of the Isles of Shoals off the Maine and New Hampshire coast, Celia Thaxter found herself re-located in Newtonville, Massachusetts, expecting a third child when she was barely twenty-three. Out of desire for the restoration of the comforting bond between them, she writes an earnest appeal for reunion to her mother, Eliza Laighton. Rosamond Thaxter, granddaughter of the poet, shares part of the letter Eliza wrote in response to Celia’s petition:

Spring 1858

I am very worried about you and your coming confinement. You will be careful, won't you, dear. Do not reach up or start sudden or do any heavy work . . . . By what you say of your feeling, it should be a little girl. I long to talk it all over. Try to come to the island and bring the children. Father is quite lame and I don’t feel I ought to leave him for any length of time, but I shall try to come in the fall when I can stay two weeks. Father invites you all to come here. You must for my sake. Come early. I long to see the children. John must help his Dom make a sponge cake. I have made bed ticks, curtains, carpets, sofa coverings, cushions for the house this winter. . . .

I feel I am growing old fast.
Kiss the boys, your devoted mother,

Eliza Laighton. 2

The rupture of the mother-daughter bond is painfully evident in the mother’s letter. Bound by the custom of duty to her husband, Eliza Laighton is powerless to recover the distance between herself and her daughter. She can only hope that her daughter will undo the separation so that they can be re-united. Sadly, Rosamond Thaxter relates, the reunion did not take place; Eliza stayed by her husband’s side and Celia gave birth to a third son on August 28, 1858, in Newtonville. In the absence of Demeter’s force, the younger of the two women cries out in her pain and loss in the poem “Land-Locked,” Thaxter’s first poem accepted for publication (Atlantic, March 1861). The ancient mythology of the mother-daughter split is recalled in Thaxter’s cry to the sea from the land, her call to the mother from her land-bound home.

“Land-Locked” is a nostalgic piece, observing the speaker’s sadness at

separation from her home by the sea. On the surface, the lyrics express homesickness, an urgent appeal to the river to lead the persona of the poem back to the familiar sounds and sights of the sea, which symbolizes her mother:

*Land-Locked*

Black lie the hills; swiftly doth daylight flee;
And, catching gleams of sunset's dying smile,
Through the dusk land for many a changing mile
The river running softly to the sea.

O happy river, could I follow thee!
O yearning heart, that never can be still!
O wistful eyes, that watch the steadfast hill,
Longing for level line of solemn sea!

Have patience; here are flowers and songs of birds,
Beauty and fragrance, wealth of sound and sight,
All summer's glory thine from morn till night,
And life too full of joy for uttered words.

Neither am I ungrateful; but I dream
Deliciously how twilight falls to-night
Over the glimmering water, how the light
Dies blissfully away, until I seem

To feel the wind, sea-scented, on my cheek,
To catch the sound of dusky flapping sail
And dip of oars, and voices on the gale
Afar off, calling low,—my name they speak!

O Earth! thy summer song of joy may soar
Ringing to heaven in triumph. I but crave
The sad, caressing murmur of the wave
That breaks in tender music on the shore. (*Poems, 1*)

The lament for the sea here is a lament for the mother. While the speaker reminds herself that she should have patience, that there are joys in her land-bound home with husband and sons, her dreams take her to the delicious twilight “Over the glimmering water . . .” where the light “Dies blissfully away . . .,” allowing her “To feel the wind, sea-scented . . .” and “To catch the sound of dusky flapping sail / And dip of oars, and voices on the gale / Afar off, calling low,—my name they speak!” Voices, low and distant, speak the name of the daughter, resounding the themes of separation and reunion, the ancient call of Demeter to Persephone.

The voice of the sea is consonant with the voice of the mother, who beckons her home. The speaker craves “The sad, caressing murmur of the wave / That breaks in tender music on the shore.” In this elegy, the first of Thaxter's poems, the water calls lovingly and softly, inviting the reader to link the sea and the first lover, the earthly mother, who bestows a feeling of complete, sensuous, and enveloping security on her daughters. It is the secret language of women speaking to one another. Elaine
Showalter notes that females in ancient cultures created a distinctive language in order to communicate without violating the silence imposed upon them in public life (254). The nurturing images of the sea in “Land-Locked” show the power of such female-specific language, while the joys of earth are represented in abstract, lifeless terms. The stasis of summer glory is juxtaposed to the flowing motion of the river running softly to the sea, the child flowing free to the mother. The low voices in the poem evoke the female—sad, caressing murmur, tender music—in contrast to the language of the land—ringing, triumph—male in its loud, decisive thrust toward heaven. In the last stanza, the contrasting language becomes especially evident with the male-biased verb soar (earth’s “... summer song of joy may soar / Ringing to heaven in triumph”), while the verb crave suggests the quiet female longing for tenderness.

Celia Laighton Thaxter, daughter of Eliza, writes her lament for the sea out of her tired, young motherhood; it is in an impassioned plea to reunite with her earthly mother, who is symbolized by water in the poem. Adrienne Rich notes the mythic designation of the ocean as female space: “The ocean, whose tides respond, like woman’s menses, to the pull of the moon, the ocean which corresponds to the amniotic fluid in which human life begins, the ocean on whose surface vessels (personified as females) can ride... lies somewhere between the earth and moon in the gynomorphizing of nature” (108). In the consonance of sea and mother, Thaxter’s poem invokes the muse in its reach toward the creative mother. The movement of the poem suggests a composite of Robert Graves’ “White Goddess,” who embodies poetic inspiration3 and Neumann’s “Great Goddess,” to whom belongs “... all waters, streams, fountains, ponds, and springs as well as the rain. She is the ocean of life with its life-and-death-bringing seasons, and life is her child...”4 The tone of Thaxter’s poem suggests the archetypal mother, who empowers her daughter to create and to flourish. Thaxter’s poem is an elegy for the mother herself and the power of the mother to effect reunion.

To read “Land-Locked” as a poem celebrating the female bond with its contrasting male and female language and its juxtapositioning of earth as male space and the sea as female territory contributes to an aesthetics of female literature. In her effort to define the separateness of women’s writing, Elaine Showalter focuses on the central issues of style, genre, and experience. She asks how women’s writing is different, offering the term “gynocritics” for the specialized discourse that attempts to express that difference, and she recommends the study of women as writers—the history, style, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women (248–249). In the case of Celia Thaxter’s love poems grieving maternal loss, we must

look at style, genre, and experience together to discover the uniqueness of the poet's art. The integrating of the experience of separation and loss in a lament for the lost mother points toward a genre which illuminates the poet's discovery of her lost self in its fervent desire for reunion.

In her study of elegiac poetry, Abbie Potts borrows Aristotle's term, \textit{anagnorisis}, variously translated as recognition or revelation, to explain the distinctive character of this poetic form:

\ldots elegy is the poetry of skeptical and revelatory vision for its own sake, satisfying the hunger of man\{woman\} to see, to know, to understand. Whether the reader be purged or indoctrinated, he must be enlightened. In its latest as in its earliest guise elegy labors toward human truth as its end in view. (37)

The application of Potts' definition of elegy to Thaxter's love poem to her mother produces feelings of ambivalence about the female condition; it demands that attention be focussed on a reenactment of the Demeter-Persephone myth. The truth exacted from this gynocritical interpretation is that both the mother and the daughter are seen as victims. Eliza cannot recall her daughter, nor can the younger woman, the elegist, erase the biological process that made her a mother.

In the elegiac lines of "Land-Locked," the daughter poet laments both the loss of her mother and the loss of her former self in a recognition of female powerlessness. The disclosure (anagnorisis) of inevitable female sacrifice in Thaxter's love poem to her mother encapsulates the Demeter story. Grace Stewart sees the Demeter myth as a portrayal of "\ldots the young maiden as a victim of rape, motherhood as a consequence of that act, and both mothers as victims of biological processes that deprive them of their maidenhood and inhibit them physically and spiritually." The speaker in "Land-Locked" sorrows over her mother and, therefore, the loss of her other self (before marriage). The pull toward the sea is stronger than the pull of the earth, but the attracting influence of the mother is not strong enough to undo male power. Freedom and joy are overshadowed by sorrow and loss in this poem.

Seen in relation to the Demeter-Persephone myth, as an elegy for the loved one and for the lost self, Thaxter's poem, "Land-Locked," prepares the twentieth century reader for the subsequent expressions of separation and loss in the love poems she wrote after the death of her mother in 1877. In these laments, Thaxter the poet, having come to terms with the loss of her former self, focusses on the nearly unbearable loss of her mother. Within the nineteenth century tradition of female love and reverence, these poems reflect an intimacy and longing for reunion that modern readers have sometimes found excessive, if not suspect, so loving is the language and so deprived is the tone of the lover.

Thaxter's letter to Bradford Torrey, a naturalist with whom she cor-

\footnotesize{5. Grace Stewart, "Mother, daughter, and the birth of the female artist," \textit{Women's Studies}, 6 (1979) 132.}
responded regularly, reveals the inconsolable nature of her loss. She had written to Torrey to thank him for the gift of a book of poems by Edith Thomas (The Inverted Torch), relating the subject matter of the poems, the death of Thomas' mother, to her own loss:

Believe me, there is not one line, one word of it all that I do not fully recognize and thoroughly appreciate. Alas, I have been through all this sorrow! Step by step I could go with her on the way. In the little parchment volume I sent you, the verses 'Impatience,' 'Her Mirror,' 'Compensation,' all grew out of my sorrow for the loss of my dear mother, a loss to which I could never become fully accustomed. (February 8, 1890)6

The three poems mentioned in Thaxter's letter are not unusual in their fervor, given the intensity of feeling and the intimacy of the relationship between mother and daughter. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg concludes from her study of letters and diaries written by nineteenth century American women, this was a time when women valued one another and cared for the welfare of sisters, daughters, and mothers as well as friends: “An intimate mother-daughter relationship lay at the heart of this female world. The diaries and letters of both mothers and daughters attest to their closeness and mutual emotional dependency. Daughters routinely discussed their mother's health and activities with their own friends, expressed anxiety in cases of their mother's ill health and concern for her cares.”7 Further, Smith-Rosenberg's study of family patterns shows that separation by marriage, and its consequent physical distancing, caused feelings of acute distress for both mother and daughter.

It does not seem surprising then that Thaxter responds to her mother's call when illness and old age devour Eliza's vitality, but the choice to divide herself between the needs of her Shoals family and her husband and children in Newtonville must not have been an easy one for Celia Thaxter, as this letter to Feroline Fox, an old friend, shows:

Perhaps you don't know that I am a fixture here for the winter. My mother has been so poorly I could not leave her, and she would not leave my brothers, so I must leave my family to take care of themselves, and stay with her, for our family is so destitute of women it is really forlorn! No sisters, daughters, aunts, cousins, nothing but a wilderness of men. (November 13, 1873, Letters 50)

The impoverishment of families by the absence of female members was a very real hardship to bear, for such an absence meant being deprived of the practical nursing that only women could provide.

For the daughter who wanted to fulfill her dual role as caretaker for two families, the beloved island of summer became a bitter place with unrelenting cold and constant worry for Eliza Laighton's health. In a letter to John Weiss, friend and frequenter of the Appledore Hotel, operated by her brothers after the death of her father, Thaxter expresses her concern: “Your E. . . . is pretty well, but every time the temperature

6. Rosamond Thaxter, 57.
goes down, her strength and spirits go with it. The cold destroys her. I dread the winter with an inexpressible dread” (October 17, 1874, *Letters* 62).

The letters show exceptionally severe weather in the next few winters, sometimes holding the residents of Appledore prisoners for days. Finally, in August 1877, Eliza was persuaded to move to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where she would be more comfortable and closer to medical help, but, not surprisingly, before she could experience the relative ease of a mainland winter, Eliza Laighton died, her passing first reported by Thaxter in a letter to her friend, Annie Fields:

**November 14, 1877**

Dearest Annie, this morning at half past seven, the sweetest mother in the world went, God knows where, away from us! There is no comfort for us anywhere except by the gradual hand of time. The ‘consolations of religion’ I cannot bear. I can bear my anguish better than their emptiness, though I am crushed breathless by my sorrow. It seems as if I could never fill my lungs with air again, as if I never wished to look upon the light of day. (*Letters* 80–81)

Thaxter’s reverence for her mother in life transfers naturally to a beautiful death ritual in a continuum of love and intimacy. The letter to Fields describes the comfort of performing the death rites for the beloved:

I never left her a moment this last week; she clung to my hand day and night. We had no stranger. Mina [Norwegian household helper and family friend] and I did everything ourselves, night and day. This morning when she died, we did for her all that was necessary, and made her comely and beautiful for her coffin, with only our own hands. . . . We carried my dear mother out to the island and buried her by my father. . . . All was done as she would have wished: no alien eyes watched her last moments, no strange hands touched her after she was dead; all was as she would have wished. (*Letters* 89–90)

The honoring of her mother’s body in preparation for burial is not the last tribute Celia Thaxter offers, for even the deepest hurt can be relieved by expressing the pain in words. At this point daughter becomes poet, continuing the lament, working to fashion a structure conforming to her own loss and, transcendant, looking toward reunion:

**Impatience**

*E.L.*

Only to follow you, dearest, only to find you!

Only to feel for one instant the touch of your hand;

Only to tell you once of the love you left behind you,—

To say the world without you is like a desert of sand;

That the flowers have lost their perfume, the rose its splendor,

And the charm of nature is lost in a dull eclipse;

That joy went out with the glance of your eyes so tender,

And beauty passed with the lovely smile on your lips.

I did not dream it was you who kindled the morning

And folded the evening purple in peace so sweet;

But you took the whole world’s rapture without a warning,

And left me naught save the print of your patient feet.
I count the days and the hours that hold us asunder:
I long for Death's friendly hand which shall rend in twain,
With glorious lightning flash and the golden thunder,
These clouds of the earth, and give me my own again.

(Poems 199-200)

Like the early poem, "Land-Locked," this one contains impassioned insistence on following the object of the heart's desire. As the young daughter-poet seeks to follow the river to the sea, to the place where her mother lives, so the mature artist seeks to recover her mother in that place beyond earthly dwellings. The violence of physical separation in "Land-Locked" is recalled in this new elegy, but the tone changes from one of sad nostalgia to a demanding cry for cataclysmic reunion. Whereas in "Land-Locked" the persona craves "... the sad, caressing murmur of the wave / That breaks in tender music on the shore," the speaker in "Impatience" demands lightning flash and thunder clap to effect female reunion. No longer able to endure patiently what earth offers, this new persona is impatient to escape earth's pallid glories for reinstatement with the mother.

In calling for violent reunion, the language of this elegy contributes to a sacred literature, a revelation invoking the apocalypse in its observance of tragic loss. Like the separation of Demeter and Kore, this mother-daughter schism becomes mythic, and it is ritualized in a love poem. Thaxter applies her art to a devastating life experience, contributing to women's place in literature and shaping a striking, bold demand that female love be honored.

Often regarded as eccentric, even pathological, Thaxter's elegies have created problems for critics who have difficulty placing them within the male literary tradition or who are uncomfortable with the lover's language in the poems and the underlying mother-daughter relationship. Sometimes critical judgements are made in light of Thaxter's interest in spiritualism and her disposition to consult mediums. For instance, Jane Vallier assigns the imagery in the "death poems," as she terms the love elegies, to the many seances Thaxter attended "to make contact with her departed mother" (115). But interest in psychic phenomena in mid-nineteenth century was commonplace among all levels of people. Hawthorne, who visited the Shoals to recover from nervousness incurred during periods of intense writing, matter-of-factly notes the presence of spiritualist literature on the Thaxters' reading table. He is, however, obviously more impressed by the charms of young Celia:

Saturday September 4th [1852]
We found Mrs. Thaxter sitting in a neat little parlor, very simply furnished, but in good taste. She is not now, I believe, more than eighteen years old, very pretty, and with the manners of a lady—not prim and precise, but with enough of freedom and ease. The books on the table were 'Pre-Raphaelitism,' also a tract on spiritual mediums ... and one or two others.8

Hawthorne's routine observation concerning Thaxter's reading material and the proliferation of interest in spiritualism in America (in 1855 there were over two million adherents)\(^9\) testify to the normality of Thaxter's interest in spiritualism, given the time in which she lived.

Regarding Thaxter's allegedly unhealthy attachment to her mother, the reader must not only look at the time in which she lived but deeper into the mother-daughter realm. Perry Westbrook's assessment of Thaxter's work is influenced by the intensity of the mother-daughter relationship as it is expressed in the elegies:

The pagan-like grief of Celia Thaxter for her mother is not to be simply explained. Mrs. Elizabeth Laighton was, we are told, a most remarkable woman; it was mainly she who not only made the early life at White Island Light bearable for the family but actually converted it into a beautiful experience. She must have been an authentic New England matriarch—almost the pioneer woman in her inexhaustible capacity to take on her own shoulders most of the vexations of family life.\(^{10}\)

Westbrook sees this maternal influence as detrimental in that it causes "... an unwholesome dependency." He claims that when mothers like Eliza die their children lose faith, being forced to cast about endlessly looking for a substitute anchor to maintain their connections to reality. It is precisely this mythic quest that informs Thaxter's love poems. It is the cry that proclaims: 'Oh! the difference to me' (Potts 39), propelling the poet's vision toward the mother, who, alone, protects and empowers her daughter.

Each of these criticisms fails to consider the essential femaleness of Thaxter's love poems and fails to recognize that by its very nature a love poem to a mother cannot be categorized or placed in a traditional literary mode, for this is an old aesthetic, pre-dating our customary critical approaches and demanding from us a new inquiry and fresh insight. As Adrienne Rich maintains, there must be a re-vision; we need to look at literary text with new eyes, ones that are able to comprehend a wholeness in female culture, ones that are able to see again the chamber where women live and love each other. In paying mourning tribute to her mother, Thaxter joins with sister poet Emily Dickinson, who ponders the mystery of mother loss in a letter she wrote in the spring of 1883:

"... All is faint indeed without our vanished mother, who achieved in sweetness what she lost in strength, though grief of wonder at her fate made the winter short, and each night I reach finds my lungs more breathless, seeking what it means. ..."\(^{11}\) The essential hurt of the mother-daughter split is a grief so loud that it must be buried deep to be endured, but it will be expressed by the daughter-poets who have not

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been silent, only unheard as they search the ultimate mystery of female wholeness.

In 1994, the centennial of Celia Thaxter's death will be observed, offering an opportunity to see her work again, this time in light of what it can say about female energy and love. Writing in nineteenth century New England, Thaxter, along with Sarah Orne Jewett, Alice Brown, Rose Cook, and Mary Wilkins Freeman, among others, is most often considered a regional writer. Her work, like theirs, comes from New England hardness, but it is not limited by the character of the region or the time in which she wrote, for the discovery of the self knows neither time nor place. Thaxter's work offers a wondrous female landscape to explore, a real garden, not of flowers and herbs as she describes in *An Island Garden* (1894), but one of trials, the common experiences discovered and endured by women from the beginning.

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