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**Shakespeare’s Starlings**

Three Act Tragedy

Hey y’all, I’m mailing in this month’s article from my vacation at Bodega Bay on the foggy Pacific coast of California. It may be all organic coffee, art galleries, surfer dudes and flip-flops but this quaint coastal community is notorious for being the location for a most sinister film: ‘The Birds’ (1963). Alfred Hitchcock has long gone but flocks of the film’s stars still sit ominously perched on telegraph wires as if unaware that the portly director yelled “cut” 56 years ago. But unlike the local hummingbirds, phoebes and chickadees these particular birds look reassuringly familiar to me. They are *Sturnus vulgaris*, the European Starling, the same species we see wheeling around Brighton’s West Pier in their dramatic amoeboid murmurations. And, like me, they don’t really belong here. The Starlings are here thanks to Henry IV. Well, ‘Henry IV Part 1’ to be precise.

Act I: London, 1597. William Shakespeare scribbles the word ‘Starling’ in his epic tale of power and treachery. With that feathered flourish of his quill, Shakespeare would unknowingly be the author of an ecological catastrophe that would play out until the present day.

Act II: New York, 1877. Enter stage right Eugene Schieffelin, a socialite who would later be remembered as “an eccentric at best, a lunatic at worst”. He chaired the American Acclimatization Society, a group which, despite their nationalistic sounding name, were very keen to welcome foreigners. In fact, their aim was to import animals of economic or cultural interest from the Old World to the New. Schieffelin, a big fan of Shakespeare, had a dream: to populate America with every bird mentioned in Shakespeare’s writings. And so the bard’s birds were boxed up in England and brought to New York where Skylarks, Pied Wagtails, Bullfinches, Nightingales, Chaffinches and many more were ‘liberated’ into Central Park. The majority of them died. But on March 6, 1890, 60 Starlings (a bird mentioned only once by Shakespeare) were released in Central Park and they fared better. Much better. Today there are around 200 million of them across the United States.

Act III: United States, present day. The story of Schieffelin’s Shakespearian motivation may just be an urban legend but the legacy of his misguided American Acclimatization Society is very real. Today European Starlings are widely vilified by Americans as aggressive pests that have destroyed precious ecosystems and turfed out native species. Which is pretty rich coming from a bunch of invasive Europeans who have been doing just that for the past few centuries! And since then there have been many who have appeared hellbent on dismantling this country’s environmental regulations which protect wildlife, the landscape and our planet. But sure, let’s blame the birds. As Mr Shakespeare (almost) once wrote, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our Starlings, / But in ourselves”.