Philosophies of Sex
Etching of Julia Ward Howe. By permission of The Boston Athenaeum
Philosophies of Sex

Critical Essays on The Hermaphrodite

EDITED BY

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hough writing can be a solitary activity, publishing is always collaborative. The editors of this collection are particularly appreciative of the intelligence and professionalism of all of the contributors, whose work delights and challenges us. We are grateful for the conversations that these essays grew out of and continue to encourage. We are also very grateful to Ohio State University Press. Sandy Crooms, Senior Acquisitions Editor, nurtured this project, practically from inception. The external reviewers who read the first complete draft offered helpful insights and suggestions. Eugene O’Connor managed the production end seamlessly. Chris Dodge indexed and proofread with an eagle eye. We are very grateful to all of them. Thanks also to Jana Argersinger and Augusta Rohrbach, editors of ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance, for permission to reprint Suzanne Ashworth’s essay, which appeared in Issue 57.4 (2011).

The Nineteenth Century American Women Writers Study group is a remarkable collective that has changed American literary study for the better. We are grateful to the group in general, and to Karen Sanchez-Eppler and Elizabeth Young in particular, for convening the 2005 meeting at Amherst College that led to this collection of essays. The European analog of the Nineteenth Century American Women Writers Study Group, hosted by Professor Asun López-Varela of Madrid’s Universidad Complutense, provided a first opportunity to air some of the work in this volume at a conference in Madrid in 2009 on hermaphrodisim. Other professional organizations, including the American Studies Association, the Society for the Study of American Women Writers, and the American Literature Association, have offered additional conference opportunities for presentation of a good deal of this volume’s
material. These networks—intellectual and social—have been deeply important to us.

The following libraries and museums were kind enough to grant permission for us to include visual images from their archives: The Boston Athenaeum, Yale University, Musée du Louvre, The Perkins School for the Blind, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. We thank them.

At Simmons College, Renée Bergland’s colleagues in English and Gender and Cultural Studies have been supportive of this project in many ways. Graduate Student Anni Irish acted as research assistant for the manuscript. Rachel Lacasse provided hours of good conversation as well as meticulous administrative support. A grant from the Simmons College President’s Fund for Faculty Excellence supported the project. Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Harvard University granted research privileges that were very helpful in researching this project. At Dartmouth College, Women’s and Gender Studies has been a second home for Renée. Cristen Brooks has offered great wisdom and joyous companionship along with unflagging administrative support, while colleagues affiliated with WGST at Dartmouth have listened to formal (and many informal) discussions of the project with generosity and keen insights. Renée wishes to express her gratitude to Dartmouth College and Harvard University, and most of all, to Simmons College. Further, she is grateful to the members of her writing group: Betsy Klimasmith, Sarah Luria, Robin Bernstein, Laura Saltz, and Augusta Rohrbach. Family members Mary Jo Litchard, Christopher Bergland, Sandy Bergland, Annelise Bergland Brinck-Johnsen and Kim Brinck-Johnsen have all enriched the years spent working on this book, and their love and generosity is an infinite gift. Finally, Renée wishes to thank Gary Williams for these years of joyful collaboration. He is as kind as he is keen-witted, he writes a damn good email, and he knows how to find the best conference hotels out there. In short, he is the best colleague a scholar could ever hope for.

At the University of Idaho, Gary Williams is grateful for the support of his English department and college colleagues and two deans, Kurt Olsson and Katherine Aiken, who successively offered financial support and encouragement as work on this collection proceeded. Research for his essay was funded in part by a sabbatical leave in 2005 and sustained with the help of curators and librarians at Harvard’s Houghton Library, the Boston Athenaeum, and the New York Public Library, as well as the University of Idaho’s superb library staff. Office assistants Brittney Carman, Lacey Schwab, and Karyn Resch provided much-valued logistical interventions. Joy Passanante, Idaho colleague and life-partner, has now been on the Julia Ward Howe Express for
over two decades and has shown unwavering enthusiasm for the places this train has taken us.

When Renée introduced herself to Gary via email on May 3, 2003, she reported having been on a “delightful detour” from her work on Maria Mitchell due to absorption in Hungry Heart and the Laurence manuscripts. Music to his ears, of course. What a boon to have had this collaboration, this collaborator, and a profusion of delightful detours along the road.
On the last page, with his anomalous body arrayed in grave-clothes and laid in a coffin, Laurence, the hermaphrodite, speaks to us. He may or may not be dead, but he is certainly conscious. As he puts it, “[m]y brain was now excited to a vivid consciousness of the horror of my fate” (Howe, H 198). As we now know, Laurence’s fate—or at least the fate of the Laurence manuscript—was to rest unregarded for nearly a century and a half among the many unpublished letters, journals, and manuscripts that are Julia Ward Howe’s paper legacy before its—and his—resurrection for public viewing in 2004.

This unclassifiable work has driven a surge in interest in Julia Ward Howe at the turn of the twenty-first century. Before its publication, late-twentieth-century readers knew Howe, if at all, as the author who rewrote the mid-nineteenth century marching song “John Brown’s Body” as “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Apotheosized by artists as diverse as Marian Anderson, Elvis Presley, and Judy Garland, and regularly featured in events like the Day of Prayer service at Washington’s National Cathedral three days after September 11, 2001, the words of the “Battle Hymn” defined Howe as spokeswoman for U.S. patriotism, faith, and activism in righteous causes. Occasionally, Howe was also remembered as an ardent campaigner for women’s rights (and particu-
larly women's colleges) in the 1860s–70s, or as the founder of Mother's Day. These somewhat sentimental characterizations might have surprised those who knew the woman as a daring poet. Nathaniel Hawthorne was among many who admired her first collection, *Passion-Flowers*, despite feeling that because the poems “let out a whole history of domestic unhappiness,” “the devil must be in the woman” who would choose to publish them (Hawthorne, *Hawthorne, CE* 17:177). Howe did not hesitate to make her marital difficulties public in her poetry. Married to a prominent doctor and abolitionist who had achieved early fame by assisting the Greeks in their fight for freedom from the Turks, she spent much of her married life fighting for her own fame and freedom, achieving a sense of personal equilibrium and purpose only after her husband's death in 1876. But a century later, Julia Ward Howe was more likely to be thought of as an icon of American “family values” than as a passionate rebel.

For twenty-first century readers and critics, the resurrection of the mysterious Laurence changed everything. Laurence's tale—of his ambiguous sexuality, the decision of his parents to raise him male, his aborted liaison with a beautiful widow, his alliance with sixteen-year-old Ronald for whom he becomes a love object, his tutelage at the hands of a Roman nobleman Berto and his family, his crucifixion on a cross of love—is literally like nothing else in nineteenth-century American literary history. No other antebellum American writer ventured into territory even remotely close to Howe's contemplation of a being who dresses alternately as a man and as a woman and who understands that “fervent hearts must borrow the disguise of art, if they would win the right to express, in any outward form, the internal fire that consumes them” (Howe, *H* 121). Its emergence propels us to rethink our image of Howe, but, more important, it forces us to reexamine what we thought we knew about the range of possibilities entertained by writers in Howe's era concerning variations in sex, gender, and sexuality. As our understanding of the history of ideas about sex shifts, our present is also changed. The essays in this collection begin to map this altered territory, past, present and future.

Aside from a brief mention in a letter to her sister and a mysterious diary entry, Julia Ward Howe left no information about the composition of the manuscript we now know as *The Hermaphrodite*. We can only guess at the circumstances of its creation. Perhaps she sat at a heavy wooden desk (we know from the photographs that later in her life her study was ornately furnished), or perhaps she sat at a delicate table in a public room. Since the time frame is not certain, it is not clear whether Howe worked on the manuscript in her rented palazzo in Rome or in a drafty apartment in the Perkins Institution building on the outskirts of Boston, or if she started it after she'd
moved to “Green Peace,” her cottage near Perkins. Perhaps she worked with her young daughters nearby, but at least at Green Peace she had a private “den” that afforded refuge. Howe was pregnant with her third child in 1847 when she wrote the letter to her sister that mentioned that she had written “quite a little romance” that winter (Williams, HH 80).

Despite the distractions of childbearing and childrearing and moving back and forth from Italy to Boston and from Boston to Newport, the surviving pages offer evidence of some thoughtful revision. A few pages are carefully cut and reassembled with reddish blobs of wax, the Victorian precursor to cellophane tape. The separate sections of the manuscript, in slightly different hands and on different types of paper, also show that Howe returned to the project at several different times, possibly over the course of years. An entry from a diary begun in 1843 (but most likely from a period several years later) presents an extract of a letter to an unknown correspondent that probably describes an early version of The Hermaphrodite:

My pen has been remarkably busy during the last year—it has brought me some happy inspirations, and though the golden tide is now at its ebb, I live in the hope that it may rise again in time to float off the stranded wreck of a novel, or rather story, in which I have been deeply engaged for three months past. It is not, understand me, a moral and fashionable work destined to be published in three volumes, but the history of a strange being, written as truly as I know how to write it. Whether it will ever be published, I cannot tell, but I should like to have you read it, and to talk with you about it. (quoted in Williams, HH 81)

At some point, Howe put the manuscript away. She would never publish a novel, though in subsequent years she published collections of poetry, plays, philosophical essays, travel narratives and even a biography. Howe’s reasons for abandoning the project are as mysterious as her reasons for embarking on it. Perhaps she feared that the subject matter was too embarrassing—though her willingness to publish the personally revealing poems in Passion-Flowers makes the case for prudence weak. It’s also possible that she found the manuscript unwieldy and strange and could not decide how to fit the sections together. Maybe she was unable to float the “stranded wreck.”

Or maybe Howe finished the book, pulling all of the parts together into a single internally coherent narrative. And then perhaps she put it by, deciding to keep it completely private or to share it with one or two intimate friends. Having finished it and deciding not to publish (because it was not “moral,” or because it was not “fashionable,” or both), she may have decided to store
it in a safe place. Perhaps she lost that final draft in one of her many moves. Conversely, it is possible that Howe decided to destroy the novel because she was dissatisfied with it. The papers that remain may be parts of early drafts that were overlooked when Howe actively tried to destroy the novel, or they might represent the closest thing to a final draft that Howe preserved with care, or they may have another completely different history. We simply don't know.

At any rate, the surviving manuscript was for decades relatively easy to overlook because it did not have a first page or a title page. The preserved manuscript was a jumble of pages—the closest to a possible first page begins midsentence, on a page that is carefully numbered with a “2.” It is possible that Howe removed the first page in order to hide the manuscript in plain sight. If her first page was embellished with a provocative title or subtitle, removing it might have been a conscious, cautious strategy for rendering the manuscript invisible. Of course it is also possible that page 1 was lost by accident and that Howe or her loving literary-executor daughters preserved the fragments carefully and felt frustration and annoyance over the missing first page. Or that the daughters (like contemporary scholars) were overwhelmed by the sheer amount of their mother’s manuscript materials and simply bundled this folder with the rest, unaware of its peculiar nature. All of this is speculation. For at least a century, *The Hermaphrodite* manuscripts were shrouded in mystery.

What we know for certain is that Howe’s granddaughter Rosalind Richards bequeathed a voluminous portion of the papers to Harvard University’s Houghton Library in 1951. *The Hermaphrodite* was included in the part of the collection that was described (as it still is) as “10 boxes of unsorted prose manuscripts and speeches.” There is no public record of who examined the ten unsorted boxes, nor is it clear that everyone who looked through the boxes would necessarily have noticed the strange wreck of a novel deposited in one box along with a number of unsorted old letters and drafts of speeches.

We can surmise that Deborah Pickman Clifford, a collateral descendant of Howe, looked through the papers as she was preparing her 1979 general-audience biography, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*. But Clifford does not mention the strange manuscript. This lacuna is relatively typical of Clifford’s approach to Howe’s private papers. There are many disparities between the abridged story Clifford tells about the early married life of Julia Ward and the much richer narrative emerging from the huge store of unpublished letters and journals in the Houghton. *The Hermaphrodite* is just one among many private papers that Clifford does not engage.
The first scholar to publish anything about the fragmentary novel was Mary H. Grant, whose dissertation on Howe eventually appeared in print in 1994. Grant's *Private Woman, Public Person: An Account of the Life of Julia Ward Howe from 1819 to 1868* was published as #5 in a series edited by Gerda Lerner called “Scholarship in Women’s History: Rediscovered and New,” eleven notable works that had for various reasons not moved in a timely way from dissertation to book. Grant had finished her graduate work in history at The George Washington University in 1982, relying heavily on Harvard’s Howe collections to uncover (as Lerner noted in her introduction) “a freer, more powerful and creative writer beneath the persona of the author of ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic’ than we have hitherto known” (Lerner xvi). Freer indeed: Grant described a text so free that—one would think—it could not possibly be ignored. 

Grant situated the manuscript in her discussion of other fragments from the mid-1850s, introducing it as an unpublished novel she titled *Eva and Raphael* [sic]:

Apparently it was begun as a play in the 1840s, possibly around 1847. After several false starts, Julia gave it up until the 1850s, when she changed the cast of characters. The play then became a novel and a minor character, Laurent (or Laurence), became the protagonist. Although this work is incomplete, the remaining fragments are sufficient to provide a rough story line. The tale concerns not Eva and Raphael so much as Laurence/Laurent, an androgynous character, reared and educated as a man but renounced, at the age of twenty-two, by his father for his sexual inability to perpetuate the family name. (Grant 121)

Grant’s discussion of the text (or texts) would surely have awakened interest in those who mentored her project at George Washington University. She observed that its story is “exactly the sort of novel that a Victorian (or any) father might forbid his daughter to read. One taboo subject after another appears: seduction, rape, madness, confused sexual identity, sodomy, and that particularly Victorian horror—the burial of a person still alive” (Grant 122).

Gary Williams read Grant’s book in July 1995 while at work at the Houghton on the study that eventually became *Hungry Heart: The Literary Emergence of Julia Ward Howe* (1999). He had not previously seen the manuscript fragments she described, nor any reference to them in Houghton’s catalogs—yet there they were in, as it were, plain sight. Questions burgeoned. On what grounds had Grant determined its dates of composition? The fragments were
in a neat hand that matched Howe’s writing in a wide range of her pre-Civil War holographs, but the folder was undated except for a cryptic note (not in Howe’s hand) reading “Joseph Willard Feb. 1851” on a blue sheet at the front of the first folder. Pages in three sections of the collection were numbered, but without apparent reference to each other, despite the fact that two of them shared characters and a tonally consistent narrative voice. Pages in the top folder in the box—what Grant had referred to as the novel or play called Eva and Raphael—were out of numerical order. How had Grant settled which of the pieces were “false starts” and which were later accretions? Why did she call Laurence a “minor character” who “became” the protagonist, when he doesn’t appear in the Eva–Rafael section at all? Why, aside from its position in the top folder, did Grant consider the Eva–Rafael episode the root story and the Laurence episodes the development?

Beyond these and many other questions about the physical manuscript rose questions about the reasons for its continuing obscurity. What had happened in the dozen or so years since Mary Grant’s dissertation was filed in 1982? Was it the sheer bulk of unpublished and only nominally sorted materials in the Howe collection that kept any one piece within it—even such an obviously volatile piece—from coming sharply into focus for her or those who mentored her? Had the fact that Grant had conducted her study under the provenance of a history department determined the kinds of questions she was trained to pose? Had others possibly been deterred from examining it by Grant’s own inclination to downplay the interest of the narrative? Grant had published an article about Howe in a collection edited by Mary Kelley in 1979, but nothing since, and her footnote regarding the significance of the manuscript suggests a decision not to make too much of it: “The possible interpretations seem both limitless and limited, for although numerous ideas spring to mind, this is still only one piece of evidence rescued from a lifetime of writing and dreaming. Any interpretation, too, must be balanced by the recognition that normal, happy people may have weird fantasies from time to time” (Grant 227). What had become of Mary Grant?

(Although Williams was not aware of it at the time, in 1993 another scholar had opened the box at the Houghton and had been stunned by the Laurence manuscripts. Two years almost to the day before Williams read them, Valarie Ziegler had begun looking at the ten boxes and, like Grant, had concluded that the work began with Eva and Rafael. Ziegler and Williams eventually crossed paths in 1998 in Pullman, Washington, at a Howe symposium hosted by the journal ESQ and its editor Albert von Frank; they began to exchange notes and perceptions. Her reading would find expres-
sion in *Diva Julia: The Public Romance and Private Agony of Julia Ward Howe* [2003].)

But back to 1995. Williams’s questions about the prolonged invisibility of the manuscript soon gave way to questions of interpretation. Grant had—inevitably—been struck by its queer aspects. Laurence’s adventures, she wrote, “all revolve around his ambiguous sexual attraction. In one, Emma, a mature and beautiful widow, believing Laurence to be a man, falls in love with him and attempts to seduce him in a scene remarkable for its candid portrayal of feminine sexual drive” (Grant 121). And further: “The story ends on a note of crisis. Roland [sic], an adolescent who befriended Laurent earlier, has come to believe that Laurent is a woman. After a dueling scene in which he is stabbed, a bleeding Roland staggers into Laurent’s room and attempts to rape him” (Grant 122). Despite her apparently brief time with the various pieces of the text and her reluctance to over-read it, Grant’s comments outlined an interpretation that constructs the text as autobiography. The issue for her was what the text suggested about Julia’s own sexuality: “Clearly the novel offered an opportunity for Julia to express the sexual feelings which were stifled in her life” (Grant 122). Grant called attention to Emma von P’s rich, mature sexual power—unfulfilled though her desire is—and to the novel’s argument for the vanishing distinctions between women and men once women are given access to a superior education. But she also noted the sadness surrounding Laurence’s sexually ambiguous existence. Lacking clear gender definition, a person was doomed to “loneliness, misunderstanding, and pain” (Grant 123)—a perception Grant believed brought Julia to reject whatever in her own nature might be hermaphroditic. In the Berto portion of the text, Grant saw “sexual restraint, . . . sexuality held in abeyance, . . . true sexual natures disguised, undisclosed, undiscovered” (Grant 247–48). Berto’s sister Briseida, she suggested, was Julia’s mouthpiece for analysis of women’s threatened and bound condition—a character admirable for her insight and relative freedom, whose circumstances were completely enviable and totally unavailable to Julia.

Grant’s views spoke forcibly to Williams. Reading Howe’s letters in the Houghton three years before, he had already begun to feel that earlier published biographies of Howe had masked, rather than revealed, the woman behind the *Passion-Flowers* poems—that there was a story beneath the stories, one involving the crypto-homosexual Charles Sumner and the marriage difficulties of the Howes (first brought to focus for contemporary scholars by James Wallace’s 1990 *American Literature* article, “Hawthorne and the Scribbling Women Reconsidered”). Surfacing from that first immersion, Williams
had noted in his own journal the “seductive mystery” of these fragments of lives.

The more he pondered it, the more Williams was persuaded that a particular sort of marital discord was at the root of Julia’s decision to publish her first book of poems. The poems themselves, he speculated, were the covert record of Julia’s accommodation to her husband’s affection for Charles, and also her revenge. Williams’s attention focused on Charles Sumner and the deflections of homosexual desire in antebellum American culture. His first conference paper on the subject bizarrely anticipated the pages still hidden away in the Houghton. When the manuscript surfaced for him two years later, Williams was tempted to believe that he had written it himself, by way of illustration of his conviction.

It took some time to wean himself from the certainty that the manuscript’s primary significance resided in Julia’s efforts to somehow depict her husband as Laurence—to understand Samuel Gridley Howe’s indifference to her (and responsiveness to Charles Sumner) as corporeal, a principle of his very constitution. In his first attempt to write about it (a paper for the 1997 American Literature Association meeting in Baltimore), he leaned heavily on the relationship between Laurence and Ronald, and particularly on Laurence’s professed discomfort with the erotic elements in Ronald’s love for him. Other parts of the narrative—the Berto section, the Eva–Rafael fable—got little attention, as did difficulties in the Howe marriage beyond their interactions about Sumner. Those, he lingered over. He made much of Samuel Howe’s letter to Sumner in which he reports Julia’s conviction that Sumner ought to have been a woman, so that Howe could have married “her,” and he concluded that although Sumner was possibly not the sole cause of the discord between the Howes, he “grew to be for Julia more or less the focus of it.”

Hungry Heart interpreted Laurence as the “beautiful monster” Howe discovered she had married, but the book also pointed toward another interpretation of the character, one that Grant had hinted at but declined to develop. In an endnote, Williams suggested that Laurence might be understood as “Howe’s guilty sense of herself, a being fusing culturally ascribed impulses of both genders and thereby consigned to a loveless and sexless existence” (HH 240). More generally, he urged the book’s usefulness as a basis for new speculation about the nineteenth century’s understanding of gender assignment. Several reviews of Hungry Heart, expressing fascination with the Laurence manuscript, underscored this need. Wendy Dasler Johnson, writing in Legacy, devoted the majority of her review to the unpublished text; intrigued by this unprecedented work, she was also gently critical of the degree to which
Williams's insistence on autobiography “tend[ed] to preclude possible alternative readings” (Wendy Johnson 234). But the question of how precisely to understand Laurence was deferred for the moment, and, thanks to the enterprise of Sharon M. Harris, then co-editor of *Legacy*, plans began in the summer of 2000 to create and publish an edition of the manuscript. Williams's projected volume was to be the first in a new book series edited by Harris and Karen Dandurand, *Legacies of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*.

By the time the volume was published in 2004 under the provocative title of *The Hermaphrodite* (the title chosen by the University of Nebraska Press’s marketing division), scholarly interest in the manuscript had already been generated by *Hungry Heart* and *Diva Julia*. Scholars of nineteenth-century American women’s writing were eager to get their hands on the book. In the spring of 2005, Karen Sánchez-Eppler and Elizabeth Young hosted a meeting of the Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers Study Group that focused solely on *The Hermaphrodite*. More than fifty professors attended the meeting. At the meeting, Williams and Renée Bergland announced their intention to gather a collection of essays, and invited contributions from the discussants. This collection is the result.

Since 2005, *The Hermaphrodite* has become a staple of the nineteenth-century American literature curriculum. In 2008, Bergland included an excerpt from *The Hermaphrodite* in the Howe section that she contributed to *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, making it widely available to undergraduates. Students, like their professors, have responded to the text with great interest. The very qualities that made earlier scholars hesitant about *The Hermaphrodite* make today’s readers eager to consider it. The text contributes to a seismic shift in how we understand nineteenth-century gender awareness and sexuality in antebellum America.

As Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz explains in *Rereading Sex* (2003), seventeenth-century Americans tended to understand human anatomy in terms of the “one-sex” model described by Thomas Laqueur. Sex organs, in this model, were basically the same, regardless of whether they were male or female. Male genitalia were outside the body, while female reproductive organs were tucked inside. But that was the only significant difference. This understanding of anatomy lent a certain flexibility to sex identity: In early America, it was possible to imagine a female turning male if her sex organs popped outside of her body. Such accidental sex-changes didn't happen, but because they were possible in theory, there was something oddly non-essentialist about early American understandings of sex and gender. Although males and females had different places in family and social hierarchies, the difference was not necessarily imagined as physiological in its origin.
Because sexual difference was not inherently tied to anatomical difference (and because medicine was not solidified as a profession), doctors were not the authorities on sexual matters. When a person’s sex was hard to determine, as in the case of Thomas/Thomasine Hall in Virginia in 1629, Americans turned to the courts, and American judges called on many witnesses, including doctors and midwives, but also numerous bystanders (Reis 10). In puritan New England around the same time, the legal system was closely tied to the church, and sex identity, sexual relationships, and even sexual desires were religious questions as well as legal ones. When Mary Dyer gave birth to a still-born child with “monstrous” features in 1637, John Winthrop, John Cotton, and Thomas Weld all preached sermons offering religious interpretations of the physiological anomalies (Reis 4).

If the seventeenth century saw sex as a religious matter as well as a legal matter, by the end of the eighteenth century, sex had also started to become a question of aesthetics. Romanticism valorized androgyny, framing artistic genius as a perfect blend of masculinity and femininity. But the androgynous ideals of Romantic genius cut two ways: though male Romantics were often perceived as extraordinarily attractive because of their feminine qualities, female Romantics risked being perceived as monstrous because of their masculinity. Margaret Fuller, who saw herself as an androgynous woman of genius, reported that such women tended to “frighten those around them” (Fuller, Woman 91).

Julia Ward met Margaret Fuller around the same time that she met Samuel Gridley Howe, who was a medical doctor. Her understanding of sex identity drew on Romantic paradigms that had dominated the start of the nineteenth century at least as much as it drew on the medical models of sex and sex identity that would prevail by the end of the century. She tangled questions of ethics and religious philosophy, law and inheritance, aesthetics and romantic idealization, and family structures and social mores together in her novel, reserving the ambiguous pronouncements of “Medicus,” the voice of medicine, for its final, inconclusive pages.

The manuscript resists the medicalization of sex, just as it refuses any authoritative singular interpretation. Although it is possible that Howe may have finished a version of her novel, the manuscript that survived is unfinished in every way. Like its narrator, it resists categorization and even pushes back against coherence. It’s a mess. And in that respect, it seems wholly appropriate that the text was finally published in the twenty-first century. Current understandings of sex identity as a richly multiplicitous area open to philosophical as well as physiological interrogation make the manuscript legible for twenty-first century readers in a way that it might not have been for
a nineteenth-century audience. Perhaps a postmodern sense of comfort with the unfinished and the fragmentary also contributes significantly to the new appreciation for the manuscript. For students and scholars in the twenty-first century, the fact that The Hermaphrodite is a “stranded wreck of a novel” may be almost as compelling as the fact that it tells the strange “history of a strange being.”

Many years after she had stopped work on The Hermaphrodite, Julia Ward Howe published a passionate defense of women’s education, in which she remarked, “The philosophy of sex is thus far little understood in America, or anywhere else” (Howe, Sex 24). Her comment can be read as a call to arms or as an honest expression of confusion. This essay collection, Philosophies of Sex, uses Howe’s work to explore mid-nineteenth century American philosophies and confusions about sex and sexuality and about a range of other topics growing out of this focus. The Hermaphrodite brings forward a host of questions. It is destabilizing and difficult in ways that create an urgent need for interpretive frameworks. This collection begins to build those frameworks and hopes to foster an ongoing conversation among an infinite array of possible interpretations.

One incidental question answered in these pages is, “What became of Mary Grant?” Grant herself fills in the blanks in a foreword to this volume that invokes the excitement and frontier spirit of women’s history in the 1970s. Grant encountered the manuscripts under conditions bemusingly similar to those Howe experienced in producing them, feverishly taking notes during her spring break in 1977 while a friend watched her infant daughter. Also like Howe, Grant was obliged to contemplate the figure of Laurence mainly in isolation, potential discussion of this strange character inhibited by others’ unawareness of its existence and her own sense of being in territory for which she had no trustworthy map. Finally—and again with eerie echoes of her dissertation subject’s life—Grant narrates her own efforts to find a niche within a patriarchal structure from which she could offer guidance and intellectual nurture to young women, as teacher and then administrator for independent girls’ schools in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. This volume’s editors are delighted to reintegrate her perspective into ongoing discussions of Howe’s work.

The ten essays that constitute the heart of this collection exemplify the critical energy that Howe’s text has given rise to. Although collectively they could be said to offer a constellated argument for the novel’s pervasive engagement with the idea of indeterminacy, individually they lay out alternative and sometimes sharply conflicting readings of the text. Does Laurence’s ontological status bring him mainly sorrow, loneliness, and deprivation, or...
is it instrumental in emancipating him from strictures that others take for granted and can’t see beyond? Does Howe’s work on this text mark a stage in a steady movement toward progressive feminist consciousness, or is it a sign of her entrapment in her age’s conventions regarding gender roles? Is she writing about metaphorical or physical sex? Is this text indebted more to European or to American understandings of social and aesthetic conventions? Is the text firmly of its time, or does it range across multiple temporal landscapes and thereby liberate itself altogether from the constraints of time? Does its contemporary reconstruction as a continuous narrative negate its fascinating indeterminacy as a collection of unrelated manuscript fragments? The very issue of how we are led to think about the ambiguities and oppositions that pervade Howe’s text appears strikingly different to different readers. This generative richness is on display in this collection.

Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s essay appropriately opens the collection with a focus on the text’s manuscripts, emphasizing that we must include unpublished work as part of what counts as American literature. She argues that Howe’s physically indeterminate protagonist offers a provocative occasion for consideration of the nature of material form—Howe “seeks a model of identity freed from gendered flesh and a model of writing loosed from the public expectations of print.” Work by Marianne Noble and Laura Saltz focuses on contextualizing the narrative within the frames of European and American Romanticism and of Howe’s other writings. Noble explores The Hermaphrodite as marking a pivotal stage in Howe’s developing feminism, seen in full bloom in several poems of her 1854 collection Passion-Flowers. Like Sánchez-Eppler, Noble underscores the impermanent, disjointed nature of Howe’s project, regarding it equally as product and process. Saltz’s essay on “Magnetic Sex,” drawing on two lectures that Howe delivered at the Concord School of Philosophy, explains the importance of the “both/and” model that the idea of polarity offered for nineteenth-century Romantic philosophers and scientists. Polarity opened remarkably generative avenues for scientific exploration, but it also presented cultural models that were as terrifying as they were liberating.

Essays by Betsy Klimasmith, Joyce Warren, and Gary Williams begin with explorations of intertextual connections between Howe’s novel and other groundbreaking nineteenth-century works on gender, sexuality, and relationship. Klimasmith focuses on the transatlantic conversation about “intersexuality in widely-read medical, erotic, and literary texts . . . in order to show how Howe appropriates and revises elements of these discourses in her own transatlantic text.” Klimasmith also juxtaposes European and American structures for relations between women and men, noting that The
Hermaphrodite is possibly the only mid-nineteenth-century novel in English that does not include a married couple among its characters. Joyce Warren focuses on fascinating links to another long-unpublished manuscript, Louisa May Alcott’s “A Modern Mephistopheles,” written in the 1860s and published in 1995 as A Long Fatal Love Chase. Warren finds analogies between the two writers in their “questioning of the social construction of gender that marked as ‘freak’ or ‘monster’ any woman who transgressed conventional boundaries.” Williams offers a detailed exploration of shared themes between Howe’s Laurence and George Sand’s 1839 novel/play Gabriel, another work featuring an intersexed character struggling to define satisfying relationships with both men and women. Williams notes the rarity of an American writer entertaining questions about the constructedness of gender but notes that both the American and the European ultimately concede that the “triumph of either/or over both/and can lead only to madness.”

Bethany Schneider, in a provocative close reading of chapter 16, considers parallels between Harriet Jacobs’s account of her sexual relations with slave masters and Laurence’s narration of his struggles with Ronald. Both encounters are framed as rapes, Schneider argues, and both are strategically “undertold,” but Laurence’s engagement with Ronald may in fact be a representation of a “successful and mutually enjoyable sexual exchange.”

Renée Bergland and Suzanne Ashworth explore The Hermaphrodite’s suggestive invocations of two other kinds of “texts”: sculpture and theology. Bergland offers speculative connections between real statues that Howe studied and the fictional statues around which The Hermaphrodite is structured, arguing that sculpture provided a locus for Howe’s meditations on the vexed connections and disconnections between bodies and souls, anatomies and identities. Suzanne Ashworth turns our attention to Emmanuel Swedenborg’s Conjugial Love (1768) to contend that Howe’s reading of Swedenborg helped her to develop a notion of the posthuman that underpins the entwined stories of Nina and Eva in the work’s final section. Ashworth draws intriguing lines from the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic through mid-nineteenth-century America’s fascination with spiritualism to twentieth-century posthumanist theory. Finally, Dana Luciano’s essay “Unrealized: The Queer Time of The Hermaphrodite” returns us to the questions of unfinished manuscripts, unfinished bodies, and ongoing processes of literary reconstruction. Michel Foucault’s perceptions about shifts in the basis for family structure provide a framework for analysis of Laurence’s relations with his father and brother; Luciano argues that Howe’s disjointed history of Lawrence’s ambiguous body ultimately invites us “not to redress a lack in the history of sexuality, but to take the measure of its forms and multiply its possibilities.”
The volume concludes with Elizabeth Young’s witty afterword, “Howe Now?” Young asks, “Now that Julia Ward Howe’s Hermaphrodite has been recovered, how should we reread the words for which she became famous, ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’? What, in turn, is the legacy of these works for contemporary America?”—an America of both resurgent imperialism and an emergent movement for the “intersexed.” Young’s piece offers commentary on the complex echoes of Howe’s works in American culture today.

The work presented in this collection is emblematic of a robust critical interest not just in Howe’s remarkable narrative, but in finding ways to understand nineteenth-century American literature in terms that resonate for the twenty-first century. The experiences that several of the essayists have had in introducing this galvanic text in survey courses or in graduate seminars have shown that canonic staples are reinvigorated by efforts to understand them in the wider context Howe’s work creates. The editors offer these essays with the hope that they will encourage many long, rich, and generative conversations.

Note

1. JWH to Louisa, 31 March and 15 May 1847: “best of all, I am to have a den, leading out of the library, sacred to my books, my Prie Dieu, and my own thoughts. . . . I have fitted up a lovely oratoire, hung with muslin draperies, and my religious engravings—in a recess, lined with red, is Crawford’s lovely bas-relief of Apollo—my little brackets are placed on the walls, with statuettes on them—my Prie Dieu is there, with the crucifix elevated above it on a bracket supported by an angel’s head—my old chairs, and a little sofa complete the furniture of the room. . . .” (Julia Ward Howe Papers, MS Am 2119, Houghton Library).
“What a mess!” I thought as I stared at the box of papers. It was my spring vacation, 1977, and I had five precious days before I would have to return to my part-time jobs teaching history at The George Washington University and at the National Cathedral School in Washington D.C. I was racing to get through as many documents as I could while my infant daughter, Elizabeth, was stashed with my friend and colleague, Katharine Black. A classics scholar, Katharine had three children at home, as well as Ph.D. research of her own in ancient Greek. She understood my need to cram as much work as I could into the time available.

Things had been going well, but now I was brought to an abrupt halt by a set of papers that looked as though they had been tossed into the box in a hurry. They were covered in Julia Ward Howe’s spidery handwriting, and they were in no particular order. I scanned each page, hoping to pick up a feel for the organization, but there was nothing I could grasp right away. The pages were full of idiosyncratic punctuation, spelling, and abbreviations. Some pages were apparently missing; other pages bore what seemed to be duplicate numbers. Worse, there seemed to be no readily identifiable thread to the narrative. I had the feeling that it was meant to be a story—or perhaps part of a play—but it was hard to hold on to the plot. It was full of what seemed to
be rather random characters that made an appearance and then disappeared as though the author had forgotten them. All this gave the writing a slightly dream-like quality, vague and inexplicable, as though Julia (as I thought of her) had been trying out one thing and then trying another. Nor was I particularly happy to see the characters Eva and Rafael making an appearance again. I had met them before in another box of Julia’s writing, and I felt as though Julia was dancing around some issues of sexuality without giving me enough to write about with confidence. All this vague writing annoyed me, frankly. I wanted to shout, “Julia, get on with it!”

I quit staring at the papers in the afternoon, thinking that the whole thing might make more sense at the start of a new day. It did not. The simple truth is that I had very few ideas about what to do with this manuscript. As an historian, I was both impatient and mystified. I was impatient because it was going to take hours of precious research time to try to make sense of this wandering document when I had so little babysitting time available in which to work. A scholar’s tools were somewhat limited at that time, as well. I had no computer to help me organize and cross-reference notes, and no laptop to save on the labor of hand-copying many items that could not be photocopied. Instead, I had microfilm made and took reams of notes on 5 x 8 cards. I recently came across them, written in blue ink. I reserved blue ink for recording Julia’s words and wrote my own marginalia in green.

I was mystified because I had, in fact, very few analytical tools to help me ask questions of what we now know to be a very interesting text. There was no queer theory at that time, and while historians like Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Blanche Cook were exploring the meaning of same-sex friendships in the nineteenth century, gay and lesbian history was in its infancy. I had little advanced training in the close reading of literary texts. In fact, with my historian’s training, I was looking at this strange set of papers not as a text, per se, but as a document. I was not ready to accept it on its own terms, but anxious to extract from it what I could learn about the internal life and perspective of a particular nineteenth-century woman.

What I did have, however, was the new field of women’s history. I had begun exploring women’s history while an undergraduate at Smith College. As a senior, I presented a paper on the negative impact of the American Revolution on women’s lives to a small group of senior majors and professors who were interested in the (then) newly expanding field of social history. The professors all dismissed my conclusions because they did not fit well with the dominant view of the Revolution as a progressive phenomenon. As I entered
graduate school in 1971, I was determined to find someone to help me continue to explore and publish the data I found.

At The George Washington University, I encountered Linda Grant De Pauw (no relation), Lois Schwoerer, Letitia Brown, and Robert Kenny, all of whom were interested in social history and supportive of my interest in women's history. In a seminar with De Pauw, I began to study the women who clustered around Margaret Fuller. Their ideas interested me, but their meetings interested me more. Fuller drew around herself a circle of women who apparently informed and encouraged one another. Most of them would become active in the abolitionist and/or the woman's movement of the nineteenth century. How had they used their experience in Fuller's salon to go on to challenge mid-century strictures about the proper “sphere” for women? And I wondered how one woman in particular, Julia Ward Howe, had transformed herself from a rich man's pampered daughter to an abolitionist and persistent advocate of women's rights.

I was suddenly in the midst of a dynamic and vital stream of new work. My fellow graduate students and I realized that we were facing an opportunity to create a feminist, or woman-based, analysis of women's lives. This was an enormously exciting, energizing time. Women historians, whether feminist or not, were working in every field—political movements, labor history, intellectual history, material culture, immigration, slavery, and even military history, where De Pauw, soon to be my dissertation director, was a ground-breaking leader. We all felt the passion, the elation of discovery. We had a sense that we were creating something new—a viewpoint, a body of evidence—where nothing (or very little) had been before.

These were the days when women were a small minority of tenure-track historians at major universities. The women scholars of the 1920s and 1930s had retired, and most of their work fell into obscurity. Women like myself were adjunct professors or part-time teachers. We found and devoured Mary Beard on our own and practically memorized Eleanor Flexner's *Century of Struggle*. I was fortunate to be an early member of The Chesapeake Area Group of Women Historians. We met on Saturdays and read each other's work, commenting, encouraging, and perhaps redirecting one another's research as appropriate. We rapidly incorporated each other's insights, building on one another's work with energy and hope. We practiced giving our papers in front of one another, the more experienced scholars coaching the younger. And, because in the earliest years the OAH and the AHA were a little slow on the uptake, we gave talks wherever we could get in. I recently found some sketchy notes from a lecture I presented to a local DAR chapter, cover-
ing, at their request, the “History of Women in the United States from the Revolution to the Present” in half an hour.

In these days, for Americanists, Gerda Lerner was the giant. At the newly revived Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, we jammed the rooms where she was giving her papers. Many of the historians there had moved, like Lerner, away from documenting the lives of “great women” to the exploration of social movements and to more rigorous analysis of women’s daily lives. Guided by Joan Hoff Wilson’s fundamental question, “Where are the women?” women historians were ferreting out new data about women’s place in everything from farming to conspicuous consumption.

At the same time, many of us continued our explorations into the lives of individual women. We were not doing this because we were believers in a “great man” or “great woman” theory of history. It was plain enough that “great women” had not had much opportunity to touch the levers of social, economic, or political power. (What became clear rather quickly, in fact, was the opposite. Women who wanted to have an impact on the society around them preferred not to work alone, but to organize other women, leveraging their skills and abilities and narrow opportunities through joint action.) We were excited to find women who defied convention, and we knew there was value in searching—and researching—their lives.

I should mention here a question that was asked of me in the early days of my research: “Are you writing a psychohistory?” This approach to the study of “great men” had a brief vogue in the late 1960s and 1970s. Because I was interested in the impact of conversion experiences, some scholars thought that psychohistory might be helpful to me. I did not find it so. In fact, with its homage to Freudian and Eriksonian models, it felt tremendously male-oriented and barely relevant to the experience of women. Moreover, psychohistory rested fundamentally on issues of neurosis and the ways in which it dictated—even constricted—action and experience. I was far more interested in the conversion experiences described by William James, which seemed to liberate and empower nineteenth-century individuals, particularly women. The psychohistory approach, however, did hold one distinct advantage for me. Because it validated a search for causation that had nothing to do with politics and economics, this kind of history paved the way for me to bypass the “life and times” narrative model. I was free to locate the sources of Julia’s emergence into public life within herself as well as within the culture around her.

While I was pursuing my research at the Houghton, I met Deborah Pickman Clifford, another Howe scholar. She was enormously encouraging and, among other things, pointed me to additional materials in the Schlesinger
Library. Her excellent book on Julia Ward Howe, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, appeared in 1979. Clifford went on to write biographies of Lydia Maria Child and studies of several Vermont women whose contributions had been ignored in the writing of state history. We, like other biographers of women, hoped that by unearthing more information and by accumulating greater insights into individual women's lives, we could do two fundamental things. First, we would enable future historians to write better, more accurate, history. Second—and this is what interested me—through our endeavors, we hoped to create a body of evidence that would help us understand how women confronted the constraints of popular culture, how they manipulated them, and how they were able (or not) to shake off these restraints and effect change. We hoped to learn how women relocated power in themselves, how they developed a voice in their families and communities, how they created a world of responsibility, and, as agents of change, how they acted with authority.

Part of that picture came alive through Julia Ward Howe. In her, I found an extraordinary private voice, an elastic intellect, and a woman capable of such passionate response to the written word and to music that she alarmed some of her family and friends. She was also cramped by convention, profoundly alone at times, and worn down in her thirties and forties by domestic cares in which she had no interest. (And no wonder. Imagine living in Julia's first home, which smelled of sewer gas!) For me, the question was not so much “what did she do?” but “how did she bring herself to do anything at all?”

Julia did manage to vest herself with social power and to act as an agent of change. Despite the unremitting efforts of her husband to re-create Julia in his own image, Julia found power within herself. She developed her own public voice, which she cultivated internally by writing and externally by lecturing. In her organizational efforts on behalf of women—and then, later, all sorts of progressive causes—she shaped a world of responsibility and authority for herself. She was an agent for her own change, and an enormous part of this change process was her writing, both public and private.

By 1982, my dissertation was done, defended, microfilmed, and stored in the University of Michigan archive. I was handed my Ph.D. in a spring ceremony, with my husband and two children watching. My daughter, who at age four had asked plaintively, “Mom, when I grow up, do I have to write a dissertation?” was now six and proud. “That’s my Mom!” she shouted when I walked across the stage.

I was proud, too, but I had no thoughts of publishing the dissertation at the time. My career had taken an unexpected direction, and I was busy teaching high school girls at The National Cathedral School. I had begun teach-
ing there in 1975 when my colleague, Elisabeth Griffith, an Elizabeth Cady Stanton scholar, had called me to ask if I would teach her course in Women’s Studies for a year. She had launched that course two years earlier—one of the first to be offered at the high school level. “If you don’t teach it, Mary, it will disappear,” she warned. I knew she was right. Although the department chair (Anne Macdonald, herself a contributor to women’s history through her book on women and knitting, *No Idle Hands*) was an advocate, many historians deemed women’s history an unnecessary distraction. Those of us in the field were determined to create and offer courses that would earn a lasting place in academe.

I loved the teaching. Although I saw myself as professorial material and had enjoyed considerable success teaching undergraduates in United States and women’s history, I had never imagined that teaching could be like this. For example, when I wrote, “Please see me” on a student’s paper, she actually did! The ethic of independent schools, which challenged teachers to work directly with students both in and out of the classroom, delighted me. Here I could help young women work on their writing and public speaking—on finding their own voices—in ways that were out of my reach on the university campus.

In 1984, my family made a move to Philadelphia, a city where we had only a couple of friends and no family. I decided to stop working for a year to help my children settle into a new neighborhood and adjust to new schools. At first, I was downright miserable. I found myself one morning clipping an article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* for my class. “Class? Class? What class?” I asked myself—and burst into tears. While I had resisted comparisons between my life and Julia’s in the past, I could not help but think of her now, of her desperate need for “some little work of my own,” and my similar need. Fortunately, Springside School, a 100-year-old independent school for girls, was just down the street. I interviewed for a substitute position and soon found myself back in the classroom, back among scholars and feminists, back doing the work that I now had to admit was my true vocation—the education of girls and young women.

The microfilm version of my dissertation sat undisturbed for a while until Gerda Lerner, who was collecting manuscripts for a series of books from Carlson Press in women’s history, identified it as a useful work to include. In the late spring of 1991, I was contacted by Ralph Carlson and asked if I would be interested in doing a few revisions, most of which involved the deletion of “scholarly apparatus” that burdened the work. I was delighted to do it, but in truth, my energies were split. I had just been named Director of the Upper School at Springside, and I had my hands full preparing for that post.
In 1994, when the book came out, the reviews varied. One lukewarm review particularly bothered me, and I remember thinking to myself, “Well, that’s that. This is going nowhere.” I had no idea that the next generation of scholars was beginning to look at Julia’s writings in fresh ways, or that the work that I had done would help jumpstart exciting new literary analysis.

As a young scholar, I found most of Julia’s published writing to be derivative in form and content. Thirty-three years later, I still think so. That said, what Julia was experiencing in writing *The Hermaphrodite* was certainly fresh, original, and exciting to her. That is what matters. For her, this manuscript, like her poetry and lectures, gave her freedom and, within that freedom, an extraordinary amount of power. The manuscript gave her the opportunity, through a variety of different characters, to encounter different worlds of experience. She was able to imagine and participate, almost to inhabit, different possibilities. In *The Hermaphrodite* Julia “made” a world in which the writer, as well as the reader, is allowed to wander through relationships turned upside down. Julia knew that she was giving herself permission to be transgressive—and yet, behind the pen, she was safe. The writing also gave Julia an opportunity to express pain and disappointment in a private world, apart from prying eyes, until it felt manageable, shareable. Additionally, the manuscript gave Julia a venue to try actions and observe consequences; she found a place to explore “bad” behavior and guilty feelings. She experimented with shaking off conventional restraints—even the voices telling her what she was allowed to feel sexually—and survived the experiment. Were I writing my dissertation now, I would extend far more credit to this work than I did before, recognizing its power to explode the limits that were binding Julia. Her family credited “Battle Hymn”; I credited Lucy Stone; we can all join in crediting *The Hermaphrodite*.

In 2002, after serving as Head of the Upper School and then Assistant Head at Springside School, I moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to lead The Ellis School, another independent school for girls, as its Head of School. (My husband, remembering my sacrifice when we moved to Philadelphia, went with me, although at considerable inconvenience to his work.) Now, having recently retired, I am enjoying reflecting on a long career in education for girls and young women. I see the ways in which women’s history, women’s education, and women’s opportunities have supported and extended each other, and I am hopeful for the future.

And I am grateful to Gary Williams for working to find me, for encouraging me to call him, and for asking me to remember those early days of research on Julia Ward Howe. I am overjoyed that a new group of scholars is searching for meaning through her work. As every reader brings a different
world of experience to a text, so every researcher brings a world of training and insight. I once again feel that tickle of excitement that comes from being in the company of bold spirits who are exploring something of enduring meaning. I wish all scholars well on their respective journeys of research, writing, and teaching.
Written around 1847 and published for the first time in 2004, Julia Ward Howe’s novel *The Hermaphrodite* only existed, until Gary Williams’s careful work of resurrection, as three stacks of loose manuscript sheets, fragmented anduntitled. Donated to the Houghton Library in 1951 amidst a mass of Howe family papers, these pages were stored together with other of Julia Ward Howe’s prose manuscripts. Most of the other papers in this archival box contain speeches and essays that Howe delivered or published shortly after composition. Howe often worked on loose sheets in this way, leaving a few play manuscripts in a similar state, but most of her poetry and much of her essayistic and travel writing is preserved in clearer order in cheaply bound paper notebooks. For example, on the stationer’s generic label “technology notebook” of one such volume from this period Howe wrote “Poems of Julia Ward Howe published in Griswold’s Collection year 1849.” Some fragments associated with this novel are pasted into a similar notebook dated 1843 and titled more enigmatically with the little rhyme “life is strange and full of change.” Howe’s only known work of extended narrative fiction, this novel is thus anomalous among Howe’s writings not only in genre and subject matter but also in provenance and material form.
During this period all sorts of Americans tried on the role of author and produced homemade books they never intended for publication. These mid-nineteenth-century American manuscript-books can be viewed as a paean to print and a sign of literature’s swiftly expanding and increasingly intimate place in daily life. The story of ambiguous gender and fluid desire that Howe inscribes on these loose papers expands the canon of legible bodies and longings in antebellum America, but it does so by making public writing that appears not to have been intended—at least in any straightforward way—for public eyes. Thus it offers a strong instance of the transformation of the literary landscape achieved by including unpublished texts in the conception of mid-nineteenth-century American literature.

Howe’s manuscript simultaneously offers, moreover, something quite different: a complex, sustained, and provocative meditation on the significance of material form. In this manuscript Howe seeks a model of identity freed from gendered flesh and a model of writing loosed from the public expectations of print. She suggests layered connections between the indeterminacy of sex and of texts. In this essay I want to follow her lead in thinking about manuscript form not simply as archival fact, but also as a trope, a figure that confronts some of the most fundamental questions about what literature is and what it does. As Andrew Parker and Meredith McGill astutely point out, literary history and media history have always been entwined, even if we have rarely acknowledged the connections between them. A peculiarly “sacred product,” books engage us not only as linguistic and imaginative projections, but also as physical objects loaded with production and market constraints. In this essay I want to see what happens if I treat the “textual condition” of Howe’s novel, its manuscript status, as constitutive rather than accidental to its content, if I view this bit of media history as integral to Howe’s narrative of ambiguous bodies and shifting, thwarted desires.

The allure of the manuscript harbors contradictions. The most fragile and ephemeral of literary formats, it is also oddly the most substantial, preserving the material trace of the act of composition. These sheets of paper were present when these words were written—they smack, as Jacques Derrida notes of the archive more generally, of the impossible promise of origins. Poised before the mechanical and market interventions of the press, the manuscript precludes the agency of many textual intermediaries—editor, publisher, typesetter, printer, distributor, bookseller, buyer, and most radically, sometimes even of reader. In lieu of the multiplicity promised by print, manuscripts signal singularity, intimacy and authenticity. Literature itself often seeks to harness this effect—think, for example, of the “small roll of dingy paper” that purportedly “authorized and authenticated” The Scarlet
Letter (Hawthorne 32). Yet as textual scholars have long known, actual manuscripts rarely offer the kinds of textual stability and originary certainty this mythology would suggest; in practice manuscripts are full of gaps, discontinuities, and the equally baffling overlapping multiplicity of variant readings, or alternative development. Jerome McGann’s compelling argument for a “socialized concept of authorship and textual authority” strives to understand the act of composition and all the various institutions of reproduction and distribution as conjoined, so that “the history of the text” merges with “the related histories of its production, reproduction, and reception” (McGann 8, 122). Such terms, and especially “reproduction,” provide clear instances of how the problems posed by the body of Howe’s text and the bodies in her text intertwine.

The initial paragraph of The Hermaphrodite, as it has been published by the University of Nebraska Press, is surely not how Julia Ward Howe began her novel. The manuscript starts on a page bearing the number two, and not merely in medias res, but in mid word:

[. . .] ration on the part of my parents, it was resolved to invest me with the dignity and insignia of manhood, which would at least permit me to choose my own terms in associating with the world, and secure to me an independence of position most desirable for one who could never hope to become half of another. I was baptized therefore by a masculine name, destined to a masculine profession, and sent to a boarding school for boys, that I might become robust and manly, and haply learn to seem that which I could never be. (Howe, H 3)

It is easy to fetishize manuscripts. In the literary world of representations, manuscripts seem to provide the potent real thing that preserves the trace of a hand behind all the imaginings. The questions of being and seeming—of the real and its approximation—that characterize the imposition of “gender” in this passage reverberate with the physical condition of the passage itself: the fragmented, unfinished state in which Howe left this story. This manuscript page flaunts its partial status, a beginning lopped off: “deliberation?” “declaration?” “narration?” “aberration?” “generation?” (but surely not “admiration”) lost with that missing first page. Yet it is clear that what should have been there already told something of Laurence’s physical form, enough at least to explain this parental prerogative of selecting not just this baby’s name but its gender. Thus for us—late, unexpected readers of this dismembered text, not until now completed by print or reading—the pattern of unfulfillable desire for that other “half” that characterizes Laurence’s life, and indeed all
the unconsummated love stories that swirl through this novel, opens with the first severed word.

This initial paragraph with its account of the pragmatic reasons behind the imposition of a male identity for Laurence emphasizes both the arbitrariness of that decision and the rigidity of the system of gendered power into which this new ambiguous body must be placed. Masculinity may be no more than a thing of signs and names and boarding school socialization, but the attribution of manhood will allow Laurence “to choose my own terms” and will “secure to me an independence of position.” Female limitations in education, property rights, or political participation were becoming increasingly salient sites of debate and activism in the 1840s. Beginning to write this novel, Howe would have been sharply aware of the general obstacles to any such easy capacity to “choose her own terms.” Publishing women could not assume such autonomy. Manuscript production may permit greater independence, and hence the capacity to tell a story of sexual aberration, but only at the price of no longer “associating with the world.”

Howe’s own previous experiences with authorship and publication, like her later fame as author of “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” surely America’s most public poem, somewhat complicate this projection of begrudgingly reclusive female authorship. Her first literary forays may have been largely enabled by the many influential men in her life, most especially by her brother Samuel Ward, but they were nevertheless very empowered and flattering experiences. When she was only seventeen, Julia Ward published an anonymous review of Alphonse de Lamartine’s long poem Jocelyn in The Literary and Theological Review; “it is not so much the beautiful dress of his sentiments that we admire, as the idea of moral excellence which they convey to us,” she notes (Howe, “Jocelyn” 560). Her plot summary of Jocelyn highlights the gender mobility of sexual attraction in a way that clearly echoes through The Hermaphrodite:

At last Jocelyn is forced to awake from his blissful dream; the veil is torn from his eyes; Laurence the youth who he had so fondly loved, is a beautiful maiden, and instead of his adopted brother, becomes the object of his adoration. The sudden and strange transition from one state of feeling to another overwhelmed him, and he sinks beneath the despair occasioned by this terrible change. (Howe, “Jocelyn” 569)

Julia Ward “did not neglect to profit,” as Howe puts it in her Reminiscences, from the extensive library of Continental literature that her brother Samuel accumulated during his four year sojourn in Europe: “I lived, indeed, much in
my books. . . . Like a young damsel of olden time, shut up within an enchanted castle" (Howe, Rem 46, 49). Williams describes how her particular readings in Lamartine and other French authors, especially George Sand, would have provided her with “certain specifics—a character’s name, a narrative circumstance, a theme” (Williams, “Speaking” xx). Such literary influences epitomize the remarkable volatility of literary texts; to the extent that The Hermaphrodite reimagines Jocelyn the transformations entailed disregarding the borders of language, nationality, and genre in order to work “a strange transition” or a “terrible change” of their own.

In 1839 Julia Ward published another review, this one of John Dwight’s translations of Goethe and Schiller. Both these youthful publications are remarkable for their confident tone of assessment and their willingness to make large claims about the nature of poetry and the comparative poetic resources of the German, French, and English language. The unusual breadth of her literary preparation and the assured authorial “we” with which this young woman voices her judgments occlude the bodily particularities of age, gender, and nationality. “Closer acquaintance with the two greatest bards of Germany, could not fail to influence most favorably the literature, and especially the poetry of the day,” she avers (Howe, “Goethe” 394). The transatlantic reach of Julia Ward’s reading belittles more nationalist conceptions of American literary production and registers, as Wai Chee Dimock puts it, how “[w]hat we call ‘American’ literature, is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relationships” (Dimock, Continents 3). The dual nature of the literary artifact, as text and thing, is crucial to the temporal and geographical tangle Dimock describes; and Howe’s “enchanted castle” of books attests at once to the magical capacity of reading to move across time and space and to the material conditions that enabled her banker father “to build a study, whose walls were entirely occupied by my brother’s books” (Howe, Rem 46).

A further marker of the institutional networks that gird the literary, Julia Ward’s early reviews were themselves reviewed. The lauds make it clear that, despite her anonymous masquerade in print, many in New York’s literary circles recognized the young female author of these publications: “It is,” The New Yorker noted of her review of the Dwight anthology, “a piece that would be highly becoming and creditable to the talents of an elegantly educated and highly accomplished woman” (April 1839). In 1839 the memorial poem that she wrote at the death of her music teacher, the pianist Daniel Schlesinger, was sung at his burial and printed in two New York papers. Gender is certainly at play in her modest recourse to anonymity and the press’s somewhat patronizing terms of praise for her work, but a sense of capacity and access
predomina\textit{tes}. Howe's retrospective portrait of her young self wryly empha-
sizes such ambition and possibility: “Through all these years there went with
me the vision of some great work or works which I myself should give to the
world. I should write the novel or play of the age. This, I need not say, I never
did” (Howe, \textit{Rem} 59).

By the time she began work on \textit{The Hermaphrodite}, her assured sense
of “associating with the world” through publication had become far more
fraught as the result of her marriage with Samuel Gridley Howe in April
1843. Eighteen years her senior, Samuel Howe was a controversial and cel-
ebrated public figure with a hand in a wide array of social issues from the
Greek War of Independence to prison and educational reforms. By the time
Julia met him he had become director of the Perkins Institution for the Blind,
where he had famously taught the use of language to the blind and deaf Laura
Bridgman. There were literary aspects to Samuel Howe's celebrity: he had not
only written influentially about the Greek cause but returned from the war
with a helmet and sword that had belonged to Lord Byron, and his work with
Laura Bridgman was the subject of much admiration and speculation among
literary figures of the period. Indeed, Julia Ward became acquainted with
Samuel Howe largely through his close friendship with Henry Wadsworth
Longfellow. Throughout his adult life Samuel Howe’s most intimate social tie
remained the punningly titled “Five of Clubs,” a group that gathered to dis-
cuss literature and politics in Longfellow’s Harvard suites, and that in addi-
tion to Howe and Longfellow also included Charles Sumner, George Hillard,
and the classicist Cornelius Felton. As recent biographers have detailed, the
Howes’ marriage was never easily harmonious, and Julia’s accounts of their
conflict often center on Samuel’s failure to value her literary aspirations and
his opposition to her publishing her writings (and later to her public lec-
tures). On the evening of their anniversary Julia bitterly noted in her diary:

\begin{quote}
I have been married twenty two years today. In the course of that time
I have never known my husband to approve of any act of mine which I
myself value. Books—poems—plays—everything has been contemptible or
contraband in his eyes[.]
\end{quote}

Even in the early years of their marriage, when she was more hopeful that
they could find mutuality, Julia describes their differences in terms of a strug-
gle between her aesthetic/emotional/spiritual commitments and his material
“world of actualities”:

\begin{quote}
I have to come to him, have left my poetry, my music, my religion, have
walked with him in his cold world of actualities. There I have learned much,
but there I can do nothing. He must come to me, must have ears for my music, must have a soul for my faith. My nature is to sing, to pray, to feel. His is to fight, to teach, to reason. But love and patience may bring us much nearer together than we are.8

Despair over the obstacles of becoming “half” of another, critiques of the stultifying constraints of gender norms—these have biographical grounds for Howe. Most of the scant scholarship that addresses The Hermaphrodite reads it in relation to the Howes’ difficult marriage and Julia Ward Howe’s own fraught sense of gendered self-division. I find this work interesting and largely convincing as biography, but while the questions I am asking about the relations between material form and literary meaning are entwined with these concerns, they are also somewhat different. Still, it seems important to note that the problems of material form at stake in this text undoubtedly have biographical determinants, and much of their sense of obsessive repetition and fraught urgency reflects the ways in which these are alive and crucial problems for Howe, questions she is wrestling with as she writes, not answers she has found.9

A letter that Julia Ward Howe wrote to her sister Louisa on May 15, 1847, provides the only evidence Williams has identified that dates Howe’s work on this manuscript. In it the problems of material form for the human body and for the literary text juxtapose. In earlier portions of the letter that Williams does not quote, Howe vividly describes her sense of the poor fit between her skills and her domestic responsibilities:

I have spoiled a good student to make a most indifferent wife. . . . The longer I live, the more do I feel my utter childlike helplessness about all practical affairs. Certainly a creature with such asleep hands was never before seen. . . . For everything that is not soul, I am an ass, that I am. (Howe, Papers MS Am 2119)

The Howes’ first daughter had been born at the Palazzetto Torlonia in Rome in March of 1844 near the end of the couple’s lengthy wedding trip. Those fifteen months in Europe were Julia Ward Howe’s first physical encounter with the places she had so avidly occupied in her reading. Their second daughter was born back in Boston, at the Perkins Institution, in August 1845. At the time she wrote this letter Julia was pregnant with their third child. The letter expresses her humorous but adamant sense of collision between the realms of “soul,” the linguistic gifts of that “good student,” and the intensely physical requirements of marriage and motherhood. She rues her unskilled hands, but in the midst of her third pregnancy in four years she feels herself
caught up in the “creature” pressures of the body. In this same letter Julia sends her sister a poem entitled “Eva and Rafael,” characters whose love story is narrated in the final section of _The Hermaphrodite_. She remarks in a divergence from her girlhood patterns of literary dissemination, “I have made quite a little romance about them, but have kept it for my own amusement, the cold praise and ardent criticism of the club not being at all to my taste, and the comparison with Longodingdongo utterly insufferable.” “Longo” and “Longodongo” were the Five of Clubs’s favored nicknames for the short-statured Longfellow, making it clear that Julia was less anxious about publicity in general than about the approbation of her husband’s “club,” and most particularly the comparison between her project and aesthetics and that of Longfellow. The Harvard professor had read the manuscript of his epic poem _Evangeline_ aloud to the Five of Clubs during much of the previous winter, and the poem would be published to great acclaim later that year. Samuel Howe would enthusiastically congratulate his friend on producing with _Evangeline_ “A book! A book that pleases and instructs and improves people, what a gift it is to the world!” The heroine of Howe’s romance has a name that echoes that of Longfellow’s, and both poetic narratives center on the extraordinary constancy of the love of their Evas, similarities that make all the more apparent the difference between the mystical, allegorical setting of Howe’s text and Longfellow’s insistently historical and American “Tale of Acadie.” In these echoes and differences Howe seems to be quite self-consciously placing her work outside the instructive, public, and national literary project that Longfellow represents. Instead, writing primarily for her “own amusement,” without the clear goal of publication so evident in much of her other work or the improving qualities her husband values in Longfellow’s, the peculiar advantages and uncertainties of manuscript transmission become part of the story of “equivocal form” (Howe, H 19) and the inevitably unfulfilled desires that she seeks to tell.

The only other shard of evidence about Howe’s production of _The Hermaphrodite_ manuscript is one undated passage pasted into the “life is strange” notebook. The passage suggests both her awareness of this story’s failure to conform to genre expectations for published novels and the hope that it might be read by some trusted eyes:

Yet my pen has been unusually busy during the last year—it has brought me some happy inspirations, and though the golden tide is now at its ebb, I live in the hope that it may rise again in time to float off the stranded wreck of a novel, or rather story, in which I have been deeply engaged for three months past. It is not, understand me, a moral and fashionable work, des-
tined to be published in three volumes, but the history of a strange being, written as truly as I know how to write it. Whether it will ever be published, I cannot tell, but I should like to have you read it, and to talk with you about it. (Quoted in Williams, HH 81)

There is no evidence that Howe made any other attempts to publish this text. Her praise for Jocelyn sees no conflict between the androgynous figure of Lamartine's Laurence and the “moral excellence” of that poem, but this note suggests not only that her manuscript fails to conform to the “fashionable” standards she generally disdained, but also that it chafes against her conception of the moral, or at least of what the novel-buying public would consider moral.11 This sense of her present project as unlikely to be published appears however within a complex mesh of evidence of her pleasure in the process of composition and her desire for at least this one unknown reader’s response. At various moments in writing this manuscript Howe does turn, parenthetically, to address an imagined reader, calling attention to the mechanics of narration “(Kind reader, weary not of our endless conversations—must we not introduce you to them also?)” as well as to its vulnerabilities “—kind reader, be not too severe upon this last doubtful sentence—” (Howe H 136, 155). Thus even as Howe makes no recorded effort to publish this text, to enlist it in the material processes of the literary marketplace and its circuits of production and reception, the mere fact of address conjures a scene of reading.

Along with the hope and happiness of the “golden tide” of literary inspiration, Howe’s note registers the structural problems of this text, the extent to which for all her pleasures in it she recognizes it as something of a “stranded wreck.” These few sentences refer to her manuscript as “novel,” “story” and “history”; her letter to Louisa denotes the “Eva and Rafael” strand as “a romance.” If the physical and psychic indeterminacies of gender are what make Howe’s “strange being” strange, that strangeness seems also to suffuse the narrative determinants of genre. “It was difficult to determine your sex with precision, it was in fact impossible,” Laurence’s father explains (Howe, H 29), and this sense of the impossibility of finding stable categories and precise meanings, even where one would most expect them, permeates the novel as a problem not only of sex but also of text.

Even as he embodies indeterminacy, however, the “strange being” of Laurence unites the fragmented pieces of this text; it is the presence of this character in all the variously numbered and materially different segments of this manuscript (even if his name is rendered as “Laurent” in one of them) that convinced Gary Williams that these various stacks of pages could be read as a
single literary object. Since Laurence serves as narrator, moreover, the novel, if it is a novel, speaks through him. But if Laurence holds this text together, what kind of glue can “he” provide, since even that pronoun is clearly marked from the first sentences we have as an essentially arbitrary attribution. The life story Laurence tells is insistently un-unified: gender, sexual desire, geography, age, pedagogical status, sanity, and even the boundary between life and death all shift for Laurence from one segment of the text to the next with dizzying rapidity. Such radical instability raises haunting questions, often fraught with desperation and loneliness, and yet as they persist and multiply throughout the text’s chaotic layers of plot and relationships, they pose the possibility that, after all, such instability might prove more interesting, even more satisfying, than any more singular perspective could. Or, as Berto puts it with his characteristic acerbity: “Know that I abhor onesidedness, fixed idea, and all the insanities of the learned. For them, the earth should stand still, for me, it turns round, and shews me a new face every day” (Howe, H 95). “The semantic flexibility of queer—its weird ability to touch almost everything—is one of the most exciting things about it,” Heather Love explains and then worries “whether queer actually becomes more effective as it surveys more territory”; it is precisely that sort of weird flexibility and territorial reach that makes this fragmented manuscript text so queer, so exciting, and also so constantly at risk of disintegration (Love, “Queers” 182–83).

Heather Love’s concern is the tension between minoritizing and universalizing strategies for queer politics. If her sentences so richly describe the dynamics of Howe’s text, it is because the stakes of identity and the obstacles to coalition at the center of her argument are also crucial for Laurence. The difficulties of maintaining narrative unity that beset this novel appear to Laurence as the impossibility of making meaningful connection at all: “a human soul simply as such and not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender, has but a lame and unsatisfactory part to play in this world,” he complains (Howe, H 5). It is easy for us as twenty-first-century readers to recognize the rigid absolute poles of “entire possession or entire surrender” as decidedly more problematic than the kind of rotating flexibility that Berto espouses. But it seems clear that for Howe the appeal of putting this ambiguously sexed figure at the center of her project derives both from such a strange being’s “weird ability to touch almost everything” and from his/her incapacity to fully grasp anyone. What this manuscript inscribes over and over again, in endlessly shifting configurations, are stories of what the characters experience as impossible loves.12

I find The Hermaphrodite a useful site for thinking about manuscript form because its own production history as an unpublished text is reiterated
within it, not only by the patterns of instability and unfulfilled desire I have described above, but also by repeated scenes in which manuscripts play a significant role. In fact, manuscript transmission figures importantly in most of the impossible love stories that Howe inscribes in this text. Simultaneously form and theme, Howe’s depiction of manuscripts presents literary production itself as desire. For the remainder of this essay I will look in detail at these scenes of manuscript transmission.

In the first of the novel’s love stories, Laurence is challenged to prove a worthy courtier for the lovely Emma by writing poetry: “I hastily improvised some verses, and wrote them in pencil, the crown of my hat serving me for a desk” (Howe, H 8). This sense of Laurence’s writing as slight, lacking any of the instruments of serious effort and lasting production—no time, no plans, no desk, no ink—continues to characterize his poetic endeavors. But Howe makes it clear that such hasty improvisation is in fact the mark not of the superficial, but of the true: “I had written my poem without labour, almost without any fixed design, it was but a piece of my everyday thought . . . the poem has written itself” (Howe, H 10). Laurence throws these assertions of a poetry without craft against the jibes of his highly stylized fellow students, competitors for the poetry prize that Emma will bestow. When they demand his topic all he can say is that his is a poem “to nothing and nobody” (Howe, H 10). This account of the truly poetic as ultimately divorced from all of the contingencies of material form, scholarly preparation, and even subject matter identifies what is literary about literature in an ideal of unanchored language and thought.

As the contest approaches, this dematerialization of the literary really happens to Laurence’s poem. Wilhelm, a rival for Emma’s affection, asks to buy Laurence’s poem and so exclude him from the competition:

“Name your price, and sell me your poem.”
“I am no Judas to sell my soul for thirty pieces of silver.”
“It shall be no mean price, my patrimony is large, ask whatever you will.”
“If I should sell it thrice over I could not make it yours,” said I, with some haughtiness. “Children will claim their own parents.”
“Then thus do I commit your first born to the flames.” (Howe, H 11)

It is easy to understand that the traditional (male) trope of textual production as childbirth may have had little appeal for Howe as she juggled writ-
ing and babies. Such scorn for the literary marketplace, for the selling of poems and the reproduction of print, similarly endorses the unsold status of this manuscript novel (no “fashionable work . . . in three volumes”). The particular rhetoric of this passage with its stress on “patrimony” and poetic “children” evokes both questions of textual reproduction and the issues of inheritance and of Laurence’s physical incapacity to produce heirs that will provoke moments of crises in the novel’s plot. Thus it is significant that ultimately the novel dismisses these potential reproductive traumas as irrelevant; Laurence’s scorn at his father’s decision to disown him, for instance, exceeds even his haughtiness here. Likewise, the burning of the manuscript proves no loss as Laurence, who, “with a voice of silvery sweetness, and in a measure peculiarly my own,” recites his poem from memory to win the crown (Howe, H 14). The silver Laurence would not accept for his poetry becomes part of its utterance, as does all that is unique and peculiar about his being. The judges select Laurence’s poem on the tautological grounds that it is “beautifully poetical,” and throughout this segment Howe emphasizes the immaterial quality of literary excellence. Laurence’s poem, to the extent that it has a subject, tells of such release from bodily form: “I closed with some thrilling numbers descriptive of the noble scorn with which the pure spirit refused to bear the unworthy burthen of the flesh” (Howe, H 14). Thus the apparent fragility of the material manuscript merely masks its immaterial literary power: the paper may burn but the poem, like that disembodied pure spirit, seems indestructible.

As an articulation of desire, however, Laurence’s poem proves deeply destructive. Yearning to determine that Laurence “is not one of those unsexed souls” his poem celebrates (Howe, H 15), Emma offers him her body with extraordinary explicitness: “‘look you, I am here alone, in your room, in your power, at dead of night—you cannot misinterpret this’” (Howe, H 18). Her insistence on immediate physical presence (“look,” “here”) strives to foreclose any need for representation or interpretation. Laurence attempts to keep their relationship within the disembodied, ideal sphere he had expressed in his poem, evoking “relations independent of sex, relations of pure spirit, of heavenly sympathy, of immaterial and undying affinities” (Howe, H 18). But Emma is here, in his room, at dead of night, and while Laurence voices this bland idealizing language of immateriality, she does “look” with detailed particularity:

She surveyed me from head to foot, the disordered habiliments revealing to her every outline of the equivocal form before her. She saw the bearded lip and earnest brow, but she saw also the falling shoulders, slender neck, and
rounded bosom—then with a look like that of the Medusa, and a hoarse utterance, she murmured: “monster!”

“I am as God made me, Emma.”

A shriek, fearful to hear, and thrice fearful to give, followed by another and another, and a maniac lay foaming and writhing on the floor at my feet. (Howe, H 19)

The act of surveying Laurence’s body changes Emma’s appearance as well: the verb “to look” transmutes into a noun, “a look,” just as her act of calling Laurence “monster” seems to transform her into one. The enumeration of Laurence’s physical features utterly dissolves Emma’s mind, voice, and body. Laurence’s uncharacteristically simple sentence of self-acceptance would be deeply moving anywhere else in this novel, but here his capacity to say “I am” contrasts painfully with the dissolution of Emma into indefinite articles “a shriek,” “a maniac.” With her madness and death, the poetic ideal of “pure spirit” disentangled from “the unworthy burthen of the flesh” appears at best a profoundly destructive delusion.

Medusa, of course, turns to stone those she looks upon. Emma had earlier complained that Laurence was like marble (Howe, H 12). The word “hermaphrodite” is used in the novel only in reference to a statue as observers shock Laurence by comparing him to “the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Howe, H 16). The portion of the manuscript that focuses on Laurence’s relationship with Ronald also contains a scene of manuscript transmission that repeats and inverts aspects of the scene with Emma. In this segment it is Ronald who writes the poem, and it is Laurence who stands over Ronald’s bed. Ronald composes his poem not for a university competition but in lieu of an academic assignment; it is about falling in love with a statue.

. . . he placed the paper in my hands. It was indeed no thesis, no boyish composition, but a poetical version of a popular legend, right gracefully rendered. The verses have long since escaped from my memory, but I can well recall the meaning of the story. It was that of a pilgrim who had long worshipped the marble image of a saint, so long, that it was become to him the truest of realities. At length, in the madness of his passionate longing, he impiously prayed God that it might become human for his sake. The prayer was heard, the miracle was granted. The beautiful saint breathed, smiled, spake, and descended from her marble pedestal—the lover opened his arms to clasp her to his heart, but lo! at the first touch, it had ceased to beat—the cold embrace was death. (Howe, H 74–75)
The language of this poem has “escaped” Laurence’s memory, unlike his own school poem that he so easily recited after the paper was gone. Laurence’s poem celebrates escape from the bonds of flesh; Ronald’s poem yearns for embodiment. “Long . . . long . . . long . . . longing . . . lo!”: this poem has been lost to memory, transmuted into prose, but its refrain of desire remains.

The androgynous confusions associated with Laurence’s “equivocal form” permeate and shape the whole of Laurence’s relationship with Ronald. Gender appears fluid and flexible between them, as they both in turn play masculine and feminine roles. In this relationship the thing that seems most troubling about Laurence is not the ambiguities of gender in his body or his behavior, but rather the equivocal status of his desire itself. Ronald, like the pilgrim of his poem, is tenacious in his passion, while Laurence dodges and evades. In this scene he is pedantically defensive, describing the legend as “oft-told” and “sufficiently commonplace” but praising the “harmonious klang of the versification” and using his role as teacher to press for interpretation: “but what may be the intended moral of it?” he asks (Howe, H 75). Standing by Laurence’s bed, Emma had insisted: “you cannot misinterpret this.” Ronald’s desire is similarly legible, but faced with desire, Laurence seems set on misreading, not just Ronald’s longings but also his own. Just before showing this poem to Laurence, Ronald had described a “glorious dream” of Laurence as a woman “young and beautiful as the Hebe of the Gods” (Howe, H 74). After their discussion of the poem, Ronald goes to bed “little dreaming,” explains Laurence, who has planned his departure without telling the boy, “that he should wake in the morning and find me gone” (Howe, H 76). But with the “postillion” already at the door Laurence “lingers” to watch Ronald sleep:

Scarce knowing what I did, I stooped to print the lightest, faintest kiss upon his forehead; but as I did so, his red lips parted, and he murmured: “Laurence!” I shrank back into myself. I turned away, lest a tear should fall upon his face. (Howe, H 76)

As his bodily fluid threatens to fall near Ronald’s parted red lips, in the erotics of this scene Laurence plays not the beautiful young woman but the man’s part. He refrains, however: “shrank back into myself”; if in Howe’s telling poetic manuscripts somehow serve to bring the lover to the beloved’s bedside, they nevertheless fail to achieve consummation. No “print” occurs. After this night Ronald rejects text as a medium for expressing desire: “Do not write to me any more of your affection for me—if you love me, come to me, and prove it” (Howe, H 77).
The literary mode that produces their most intense sexual encounter is the embodied medium of theatrical performance. Enlisted to play Juliet in a student theatrical, Laurence describes with the “surrender” of the passive voice how in that performative crossing of nation, gender, and age, “I found myself giving a fervent expression to the glowing words of the Italian woman-child” (Howe, H 81). This scene can be seen to epitomize the temporal and geographical mobility of literature (a sixteenth-century English author writing words for a fourteenth-century “Italian woman-child” to be performed by a group of students at a nineteenth-century German university, the whole imagined scene created by a woman in Boston). However, instead of insisting that the power of poetry results from its capacity to escape material form, to approximate “pure spirit,” Laurence experiences the performance of Shakespeare’s poetry as a profoundly embodied physical transformation. For Ronald the effect of watching Laurence play Juliet has an even more momentous bodily impact:

“You can change my torments to raptures of heaven. You shall be a man to all the world, if you will, but a woman, a sweet, warm, living woman to me—you must love me, Laurence.”

[. . . ]
Still, other words of terrible import, half heard and dimly comprehended; still that terrible grasp, straining me closer and closer to the heart which, once pure and peaceful, was now in its hour of volcanic might and ruin. On my part, a faint but rigid struggle, a sob, a mute and agonized appeal to heaven—that appeal was not answered. Suddenly, I felt Ronald shiver and tremble—gaining courage, I raised my eyes to his face, and saw the burning flush pass, in an instant, from his cheek—exhaustion was already subduing the fever of his wound, maddened by wine—a certain confusion of thought was visible in his countenance. This was the moment—by the mercy of God, I took advantage of it. (Howe, H 86–88)

I think it undecidable whether this scene should be read as rape or as mutually satisfying sex, as consummation achieved or averted.16 But even with such obfuscations there is no question that this encounter explodes the bounds of moral or fashionable publication in mid-nineteenth-century America. Almost a decade after Howe wrote these lines, Walt Whitman would assign his deictic “I” to the bodies of both male and female lovers. In the 1860s Emily Dickinson would leave among her unpublished manuscripts the same love poem addressed to “him” and to “her.” But I cannot think of any American prose narrative of this period that describes sex with this level of physi-
cal explicitness or this kind of gender fluidity—never mind both. Melville’s portrait of the “cosy, loving pair” of Ishmael chatting in bed with “Queequeg now and then affectionately throwing his brown tattooed legs over mine” is, as Ishmael himself explains, remarkable not for its physical intensity, but because the two are “so entirely sociable and free and easy” (Melville 55). Gary Williams is right to suggest that the contours of literary possibility were different in Europe. But this is precisely an example of how media history and literary history diverge. Literature can cross national, linguistic, and period borders in reading: Julia Ward in her New York library could revel in the novels of George Sand, but the processes of print production remain more rigidly local, constrained by the morals and fashion of particular national and temporal markets. These scenes of intensely physical, multivalent, queer desire prompted within the narrative by the national mobility and public performance of Shakespeare’s “glowing words” are precisely what consign Howe’s story to the privacy of this manuscript page.

The manuscripts in these scenes of manuscript transmission are poetry. Thus along with the issues of materiality and desire enacted by these scenes is the question of genre. What is the relationship between the manuscript novel that holds them and the manuscript poems that circulate inside it? Wai Chee Dimock proposes genre as an alternative to nationality or period as a means of mapping literature. Her account of genre recognizes it “less as a law, a rigid taxonomic landscape, and more as a self-obsolating system” and remarks in terms that evoke the volatile bodies of this text that “bending and pulling and stretching are unavoidable, for what genre is dealing with is a volatile body of material, still developing, still in transit, and always on the verge of taking flight in some unknown and unpredictable direction” (Dimock, Continents 73–74). In the two scenes of manuscript transmission that appear in the first segment of Howe’s novel, the poetic manuscripts that characters produce are summarized—that is, transmuted into prose, “self-obsolating” indeed. In the Italian segments of Howe’s text, the literary manuscripts that characters share are not new productions of the moment, as they were in the first part, and they are rendered whole inside Howe’s text. The first is a poem that Berto had written in a fruitless effort to convince Eleonora (who had pledged herself to a convent) to choose instead life and its truths:

“Read these foolish jingles,” he said abruptly. “I once could rhyme.”

The verse ran thus:

What seek’st thou in the Convent aisle,
The gloomy Convent aisle, ladye?
Thou'rt full of young and lovely life,
So is the world God made for thee. (Howe, H 99)

Berto calls his poems “desperate expedients” and admits that on hearing them Eleonora seeks to convert him, murmuring, “there is little hope, but I will pray the Virgin for you” (Howe, H 100–101). Both the poem and the story of Eleonora as a whole are essentially tangential. Berto could have told this story unchanged without producing the poem, and while the inclusion of the history of Eleonora gives Howe an opportunity to voice anti-Catholic sentiments, and it certainly reiterates her material/spiritual themes and provides the enigmatic Berto with a bit of backstory, the elision of Eleonora’s story would have no significant effect on any of the other plots. But if the inclusion of this poem inside this novel has little impact on plot, it does raise interesting questions about genre. Berto presents poetry as a genre of the past (“I once could rhyme”), and his poem is gaudily archaic in its diction. Media history reveals quite different trajectories for lyric poetry and fictional prose. The lyric had what Arthur Marotti calls “an extended life in manuscript transmission” with poems continuing to circulate in manuscript form long into the era of print dominance. Berto’s archaic diction might call attention to the history of poetic manuscripts, the cache of coterie circulation, but in nineteenth-century America the manuscript circulation of poetry was far from an anachronistic practice. Indeed, in autograph books, friendship albums, and personal miscellanies, the composition and manuscript circulation of lyric poems flourished, employed in a wide array of settings to elaborate social bonds and attest to personal cultivation. The novel, in contrast, has generally been recognized as a genre of the press, its “rise” deeply implicated in the “printing revolution.” Thus the play of genres in Howe’s text can be understood as an expression of the varied stakes of print and manuscript form.

The final segment of Howe’s manuscript novel largely focuses on the reading of a manuscript, and interestingly one of unusually mixed genre. The prose narrative “little romance” of Eva and Rafael contains poetic sequences of Eva’s prayerful songs and a “funeral chorus—sung by the dead, when Eva buried Rafael,” as well as scenes in which Eva’s conversations with the spirits and angels are rendered like a theatrical script (Howe, H 181). In addition to its conflation of genres, the manuscript also bridges two major strands of Howe’s meandering plot, since Laurence identifies the text as “the legacy, possibly the composition of the dead uncle whose posthumous hospitality had given me shelter in my evil days” (Howe, H 163). This manuscript serves as a link between the German/Swiss hermitage where Laurence and Ronald
first met and Laurence’s present situation, disguised as “Cecilia” and living in Rome with Count Berto’s sisters. The sisters remark that the manuscript must be read slowly because they are “not yet strong either in the German tongue, or in German mysticism” (Howe, H 166). Thus in a wide range of ways, Howe presents this last and most elaborate scene of manuscript transmission as an effort to unify much of what is most chaotic and fragmentary about her “stranded wreck” of a text.20

Laurence recalls the existence of this manuscript during a bout of loneliness, as two of Berto’s sisters, Briseida and Gigia, sit in the palazzo garden with their lovers:

It was obviously a matter of astonishment to every animate and inanimate thing there, that I durst venture into a lover’s paradise, myself unloving and unloved. I was ashamed to be there, ashamed to display my loneliness before their eyes. (Howe, H 164)

Laurence seeks out this manuscript as a solace to shame. “If . . . the lowering of the eyelids, the lowering of the eyes, the hanging of the head is the attitude of shame, it may also be that of reading,” Eve Sedgwick muses ("Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" 114). Her meditations on Silvan Tomkins’s theories of affect recognize that “shame is itself a form of communication,” “the place where the question of identity arises most originarily and most relationally,” or as Howe puts it here, “loneliness before their eyes” (“James,” 36–37). Briseida insists that the reading of this manuscript must be public, not private: “‘You must not take it to your room,’” she decrees, suggesting instead that the manuscript be read aloud to the pairs of lovers. Reading serves to bridge what is broken in relationship, and it is itself relational. The love story told in this manuscript is the only portion of this text that we have clear evidence Howe actually permitted someone to read; as we have seen, Howe enclosed a poem she identifies as “Eva to Raphael” in her May 15, 1847, letter to her sister Louisa. There she describes it as “a scrap from an imaginary heroine to her imaginary love” and marks her willingness to share more of what she had composed of the lovers’ “correspondence.” Laurence’s shameful sense of radical aloneness on display is mirrored in this passage by a similarly paradoxical doubling between the animate and the inanimate. “It was obviously a matter of astonishment to every animate and inanimate thing,” Laurence claims, oblivious in his hyperbole of shame to how in feeling astonishment an “inanimate thing” becomes animate. The difficulty of reconciling animate desire with inanimate flesh is a crucial dilemma for Eva and Rafael, lovers separated by death. Moreover, it is a striking expression of the simultaneo-
ously literary and material nature of books: a book is, after all, the perfect animate inanimate thing.

Laurence’s description of this manuscript emphasizes its material features. A treasured heirloom, this text is no unprotected scrap quickly burnt:

The costly case enclosing the sacred relic was now produced—it was of precious wood, richly carved, and inlaid with gold and precious stones. On the first leaf of the parchment within were written these words:

Ashes of an angel’s heart

The kindness of Berto enables me to subjoin an entire copy of what I then read. (Howe, H 166)

The final line of this passage is quite uncharacteristic for Howe’s novel. I can think of no other portion of the text in which Laurence so explicitly gestures toward the act of writing that would have produced the story we read. Thus there is unusual self-consciousness in this manuscript’s account of how it has come to include this other manuscript within it. Furthermore, this final section proves the most fragmented portion of the novel, the one place in which Williams had to construct a single narrative out of overlapping partial sources. Howe has written out multiple versions of the scenes in which Berto’s sisters and their lovers respond to hearing this text. This scene is drafted not only on the large blank sheets that Howe uses to write everything else that remains of this manuscript, but other smaller sheets as well (onion skin stationery, large folded folio pages, a small heavy blue bit of writing paper written on both sides). These different drafts record slightly variant reactions, suggesting that there is something about this act of reception that Howe finds difficult to compose. The hand (manus), scripting for no reader, multiplies accounts of narrative reception. Laurence himself seems to have a similar sense of conflicting narrative claims, explaining in two slightly differing versions that “the conversation dropped into a couple of tête à tête murmurs, both of which I was skillful enough to overhear” (Howe, H 165, composed from fragments reprinted on pp. 205 and 206). Virginia Jackson (2005) raises related issues about Emily Dickinson’s poetry, asking whether we should think of them as lyrics in the traditional sense or rather, in their author’s clear refusal of public utterance, whether it isn’t necessary to acknowledge the eavesdropper’s impudence of our readings and approach these poems not as words spoken to us but as words overheard. This sense of a composition that arises out of piecing together the “overheard,” characterizes even the story told in “Ashes of an angel’s heart” where Eva’s songs of loyalty for her dead partner are overheard by others who seek to offer her
their earthly love instead. There are ironies certainly in a composition and transmission history that has left in shreds the story of a manuscript guarded as sacred relic and of a love adamant in its indestructible singularity. Unlike all the other love stories in this book, the story of Eva and Rafael ends in perfect union—“two forms locked in one fervent embrace”—a heavenly reward earned, Rafael explains, because Eva’s “eye was single” (Howe, H 181, 180). In a novel in which sexual identity and sexual desires are so fluid and multiple, this manuscript’s stress on singularity can seem an immensely conservative imposition. The patched, overheard nature of this text and the fluctuating genres of its telling hint, however, at the precarious status of such claims. The title of this manuscript, after all, is “Ashes.” Most important, for all its unitary rhetoric, the actual effect of this manuscript within the novel is very strange indeed.

The reading of the manuscript casts a “spell” (Howe, H 182) on its hearers, most powerfully on the youngest sister Nina, whose trance-like loyalty to her lover, exiled to America, imitates Eva’s dedication and enables her to follow Gaetano’s journey in her imagination. Possessed by the story in the manuscript Nina truly becomes an “imaginary heroine” of an “imaginary love.” Nina’s “clairvoyant” travels in America to accompany her exiled lover—planting corn, fighting grizzly bears, looking on Niagara—are the only instances when this American novel engages with the American continent. The America of Nina’s imaginary journey is an emphatically mythic space of “wilderness” (Howe, H 159), not a bit like the New York and Boston settings of Howe’s experience. In that sense America is just as fully a figment of the literary imagination as Howe’s many highly romantic European castles and hermitages, counts and barons. Nina is explicit that her imaginary travels occur through books:

“Gaetano, I shall follow you every step of the way—” “how so?” he asked, and she led him to her little boudoir, and showed him spread upon the table a provision of maps, charts, and books of travel. “These will be my guides,” she said. (Howe, H 137)

The “provision” books make available to her is immensely powerful. Eva and Rafael, Nina and Gaetano are the only love stories in this text that can claim any sort of sustained mutuality. But in both cases the unions they provide come at the cost of embodiment. These are in fact the relations of “pure spirit” Laurence sang of, and the “woe” of their physical inadequacy is poignant and palpable: Nina “held up her arms, ‘somehow they are always empty’” (Howe, H 142, see also 139).
Literature, as Elaine Scarry reminds us, is an experience of empty arms, one “almost bereft of any sensuous content”:

Its visual features, as has often been observed, consist of monotonous small black marks on a white page. It has no acoustical features. Its tactile features are limited to the weight of its pages, their smooth surfaces, and their exquisitely thin edges. The attributes it has that are directly apprehensible by perception are, then, meager in number. More important, these attributes are utterly irrelevant, sometimes even antagonistic, to the mental images that a poem or novel seeks to produce (steam rising across a windowpane, the sound of a stone dropped in a pool, the feel of dry August grass underfoot). (Scarry 5)

Scarry’s description is wonderful for the ways it produces the very mimetic literary effects that are her topic, conjuring the exquisitely thin pages of a book and the sound of a dropping stone. The mysteries of mimesis have been a preoccupation of literary analysis since at least the time of Aristotle. The relationship between the material and the immaterial—how language can conjure a world, how an inanimate book can animate the imagination—has long been a core issue of literary understanding. The would-be lovers of Howe’s novel do indeed “dream by the book” and so testify to the power but also the limitations of literary making.

When he first took refuge in the hermitage, accepting the Count’s “posthumous hospitality,” Laurence had been much struck by the diverse range of the Count’s reading: “I mused upon their mutual differences and excommunications, I imagined that the Count had spoken thus with himself ‘God hath sent them all into the world, why should I not receive them into my library?’” (Howe, H 39). Thus the library in which “Ashes” purports to have been composed exemplifies the multi-vocality of the literary. The Count’s library seems at first an ideal figuration of what literature is and does. The books on the shelves, Laurence thinks, “had each a voice . . . and spake to me, and all invited me to come and dwell there, and be acquainted with them, and all promised me that I should find peace and comfort in so doing” (Howe, H 40). In the hermitage Laurence has a glorious apotheosis of the book, a dream of “a mighty volume” in which he “wished I might read and read forever” (Howe, H 49). But Howe is ultimately very clear that the temptation of this literary/spiritual realm of luminous imaginings must not be severed from the material. Laurence ultimately calls his time in the Count’s hermitage “my evil days” (Howe, H 163) because there “in my zeal for the entire subjugation of the body, I studiously neglected every necessity of phys-
ical life” (Howe, H 45), and when Ronald enters the hermitage and finds him there, Laurence is nearly dead. Throughout the novel, Laurence repeatedly declares that he is “nothing,” but Howe never lets him so escape the body. Much of the most remarkable language in this novel comes in the evocations of Laurence’s troubling flesh, Ronald’s urgently physical desire, or the corporeal imprisonment offered by women’s corsets. Near the end of the manuscript a doctor gravely remarks, “I cannot pronounce Laurent either man or woman . . . but I shall speak more justly if I say that he is rather both than neither” (Howe, H 195).

In this essay I have argued that such unsettling “bothness” is a crucial aspect of literary production itself, the reciprocity and contradictions between the imaginative mobility of texts—those voices in the library of the mind that cross space, time, genre, and all the constraints of any particular authorial body or situation—and the material conditions of books. In the last pages of Howe’s manuscript, Laurence in some feverish trance fears that he is about to be buried while still alive. It is a classic gothic anxiety, a favorite of Poe and Lippard, and also a vivid instance of the asymmetrical relations between body and soul. Laurence’s condition—hovering near death, but not inanimate—is undoubtedly part of what “strands” this text, Howe’s strategic problem of producing an ending. Laurence is her narrator; how he can die and yet tell us this story? The conventional solution of course, as in Poe’s “Manuscript Found in a Bottle,” is the manuscript, those scraps of paper that can carry words beyond death. But let me end with a final irony, and note how my discussion of the ways that The Hermaphrodite illuminates the dual nature of all literary artifacts, as at once text and thing, depends upon this manuscript having at last become a published book.

Notes

1. The Julia Ward Howe Papers are in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. For the central manuscript texts for The Hermaphrodite, see the prose compositions collected in MS Am 2214 (320 box 4) and the scrapbook (321 box 3). Howe’s letter to Louisa Ward on May 15, 1847, is item 537 and Howe’s diary from the 1860s is item 814 in collection MS Am 2119.

2. Howe uses the rhyme as the first line of the cheerful opening stanza to the poem “Mortal and Immortal”:

Oh! Life is strange, and full of change,
But it brings me little sorrow,
For I came to the world but yesterday
And I shall go hence to-morrow. (PF 176)

3. See Miller 19.
4. There is no information beyond the manuscript itself to explain its condition. It seems generally to be the case that first pages, the most exposed part of any manuscript text, are the most often lost. In his introduction and textual notes Williams provides a helpful description both of the condition in which he found this manuscript and of his practices in sequencing the pieces to form a plausible narrative line.

5. See “Original Memoir: Daniel Schlesinger, the Pianist,” The New-York Mirror, September 7, 1839, and “The Burial of Schlesinger,” The Musical Magazine, November 23, 1839. Howe’s poem ends with a contrast between the ephemeral and bodily aspects of musical performance and the capacity of other arts, including poetry, to construct more lasting monuments—a set of concerns closely related to the ones I discuss in this essay:

    The sculptor in his chiseled stone,
    The painter in his colors blent,
    The bard in numbers all his own,
    Raises himself his monument:
    But he, whose every touch could wake
    A passion and a thought control,
    He who, to bless the ear, did make
    Music of his very soul;
    Who bound for us, in golden chains,
    The golden links of harmony—
    Naught is left us of his strains,
    Naught but their fleeting memory:
    Then while a trace of him remains, Shall we not cherish it tenderly?

6. For a contemporary report on Samuel Howe’s fund-raising tour for the Greek cause that emphasizes the Byron connection, see “Greece,” Connecticut Courant (Hartford, CT, February 18, 1828). Charles Dickens included a lengthy and highly celebratory account of Samuel Howe’s work with Laura Bridgman in his American Notes (42–59). For Julia’s perspective on her husband’s celebrity with literary figures in Britain, see Reminiscences 88, 96.

7. Diary, April 23, 1865; see Williams, HH 212, 232, and Ziegler 105.

8. Letter to Louisa Ward Crawford, February 15, 1846; see Williams, HH 77, and Ziegler 42.

9. For a fuller account of the pulls of the material and the spiritual in the Howes’ marital relations, see Marianne Noble’s essay in the current volume.

10. Longfellow finished Evangeline on February 27, 1847, and it was published on October 30; see the letter from Samuel G. Howe to Henry W. Longfellow dated November 8, 1847, in the Samuel Gridley Howe Papers. I am grateful to James W. Trent for calling my attention to this letter. For a fine chronology of Longfellow’s life, including the founding of the Five of Clubs and these composition and publication dates, see Irmscher.

11. Howe often uses “fashionable” derisively. For examples, see Howe, Rem 49 and 409. As Nina Baym demonstrates in Novels, Readers, and Reviewers, the major criteria for literary reviews of these decades were neither aesthetic nor entertaining but moral.

12. An understanding of sexual relation as more crucially constituted by dissatisfaction, failure, and loss than by fulfillment has motivated much important work in queer theory in a way Howe’s novel can be seen as anticipating. See, for example, Bersani, Homos, and Heather Love, Feeling Backward.
13. My reading of Howe has been much influenced by Dana Luciano’s discussion of the ways *The Hermaphrodite* imagines desires that evade and exceed heterosexual-reproductive accounts of family and lineage. See “Unrealized: The Queer Time of *The Hermaphrodite*” in this volume.

14. For an account of the way “marble” replaces “flesh” in this novel and the many actual sculptures that inform Howe’s trope, see Bergland, “Cold Stone: Sex and Sculpture in *The Hermaphrodite*,” in this volume.

15. Interestingly, Howe’s poem “To a Beautiful Statue” begins with the speaker’s desire to animate a stone figure. This subject, so close to the topic of Ronald’s composition, seems to have been composed during the years of her work on this manuscript. It is one of Howe’s pieces included in Griswold’s *Female Poets of America* (1849) on p. 323.

16. The ambiguity of this scene was first pointed out to me by Bethany Schneider during a meeting of the Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers Study Group focused on this novel that Elizabeth Young and I hosted at Amherst College in 2005. Schneider has now elaborated her insight elsewhere in this volume.

17. See Williams’s essay in this volume “‘The Cruelest Enemy of Beauty’: Sand’s Gabriel, Howe’s Laurence.”

18. For the social utility of manuscript form into the seventeenth century, see also Harold Love.

19. The classic studies, of course, are by Ian Watt (1957), Michael McKeon (1987), and Elizabeth L. Eisenstein (1980). Margaret Doody’s work not only expands Watt and McKeon’s origin story for the novel geographically and temporally, but in doing so also complicates its relation to print; still, Doody concurs that the appetite for fictional narrative was “at once stimulated and gratified by the new invention: the printing press” (214).

20. The text of “Ashes of an angel’s heart” is sixteen pages long in the University of Nebraska Press edition of *The Hermaphrodite* and over thirty in Howe’s handwritten pages.

21. Longfellow’s Evangeline follows her Gabriel across the American landscape through scenes that are often quite similar to those Nina imagines. In clear distinction to Nina’s visionary travel with her lover, however, Longfellow’s stress is on the failure of Evangeline’s actual journey to ever quite close the physical gap that divides the maiden from her betrothed:

> Into this wonderful land, at the base of the Ozark Mountains, Gabriel far had entered, with hunters and trappers behind him. Day after day, with their Indian guides, the maiden and Basil Followed his flying steps, and thought each day to o’ertake him. Sometimes they saw, or thought they saw, the smoke of his camp-fire Rise in the morning air from the distant plain; but at nightfall, When they had reached the place, they found only embers and ashes.

(Longfellow 126)

22. Luciano presents this scene in just such idealized terms as an instance of the “queer time” of this literary text and our own twenty-first-century encounter with it; see “Unrealized.”
From Self-Erasure to Self-Possession

The Development of Julia Ward Howe’s Feminist Consciousness

MARIANNE NOBLE

In Woman in the Nineteenth Century, Margaret Fuller argues that thought governed by gender binarism should be replaced by a kind of gender hermaphrodisim. Fuller writes, “There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.” Male and female “are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid” (Fuller, Woman 310). Fuller acclaims such hermaphrodisim as the true nature of both women and men, a truth that she believed would be realized in the future. However, in order for women to be able to claim the full extent of their multiple natures, she said, they must embrace a temporary separatism, for married women “belong to the man, instead of forming a whole with him.” They are “absorbed” into the beings of their husbands, and consequently too often lack self-knowledge (347). Fuller indicates that the self-cultivation that Transcendentalism idealizes is both more urgent and more problematic for women. They need self-awareness even more than their husbands do, but the conditions of their lives militate more strongly against it. After all, husbands can pursue self-reliant knowledge because their thoughts are not dictated by those of their wives; the same is not true for wives. Fuller therefore claims that women must eschew marriage and sexuality for a while, until they know themselves well enough to come together in a union of equals. Therefore, she closes Woman in the
Nineteenth Century celebrating an empowered, proud, and self-contained virginity for women.

The Hermaphrodite and other early writings of Julia Ward Howe meditate upon the emotional consequences of this kind of self-reliant feminism. Echoing Fuller, Howe uses the idea of hermaphroditism to represent her belief that she herself comprises traits of both genders. However, unlike Fuller, Howe does not celebrate hermaphroditism. The trope of the hermaphrodite may well represent some kind of angelic superiority, some utopian future of gender equality, but in the present it is an intolerable state. The isolation that Fuller represents as empowering, Howe finds lonely, freakish and eccentric. Throughout her writings, we find a longing for love and self-acceptance. Like Fuller, Howe idealizes a relationship in which these are compatible, but her writing probes the many reasons why they are not. Thus, her early writings afford powerful testimonial to the ways that an ideal of self-reliance was emotionally threatening for women.

As I consider Julia Ward Howe's trope of the hermaphrodite, I am not especially struck by the possibility that she is queering notions of gender. Rather, The Hermaphrodite speaks to me as a recognizably feminist text. Indeed, as I have studied The Hermaphrodite, terms that now seem quaint, like “patriarchal ideology,” “male-identified,” and “consciousness raising” continually come to mind. And I have found particularly useful Elaine Showalter’s twenty-year-old tripartite division of women’s literature: the feminine phase (1840–80), in which women valued male standards and accepted male assumptions about female nature; the feminist phase (1880–1920), in which women protested male values and demanded female autonomy; and the female phase (1920–), in which women use their own experiences to create an autonomous art. In my interpretation, The Hermaphrodite represents a pivotal transitional experiment in which Howe confronts the constraints of her own immersion in the “feminine” phase and starts to move toward the “feminist” phase of protest, which she achieves in her subsequent book, Passion-Flowers, her most significant literary accomplishment. The process of writing The Hermaphrodite moves Howe toward self-acceptance, toward an ability to agree with her character Laurence, who says, “I am as God made me” (Howe, H 19). We see in it the development of Howe’s feminist consciousness.

One of the values of creative writing is that it enables an author to work on ideas obliquely and to work on several competing ideas at the same time. Art is not polemic; the figure—the trope—occupies the author’s imagination, and ideas circulate through it in multiple ways. I agree with Gary Williams that the figure of the hermaphrodite functions in part to enable Howe’s expression of an otherwise inarticulable and even inconceivable recognition of homo-
sexual desire on the part of her husband. And it supports other readings as well. I do not claim mine as an exclusive interpretation. As A. J. L. Busst has shown, the trope of the hermaphrodite was a Romantic commonplace that fascinated many and has been used to express many ideas in differing time periods (Busst 1). Howe most likely read several of the most influential Romantic representations of hermaphrodites, certainly Lamartine’s Jocelyn and possibly Balzac’s Séraphîta and Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin. Certainly, she was inspired by the life and works of George Sand, renowned for her cross-dressing and sexual liberation. Influenced by these many developments of the myth of a person with traits of both genders, Howe develops her own narrative of a hermaphrodite to work through multiple issues pertaining to gender and nature at the same time. In this essay, I trace through one of these lines of thought.

This essay demonstrates how over the course of the first ten years of her writing career, Howe grew to repudiate an other-oriented state of womanly existence such as her friend and mentor Fuller had deplored. Her early writings, such as the poem “Woman” and The Hermaphrodite, reveal an effort to articulate a woman-centered consciousness such as would be typical of the “female” phase of women’s literary development. However, her immersion in patriarchal constructions of female nature—typical of the “feminine” phase—cut her off from the clearest self-understanding that she gains later in life. In these early texts, Howe does not challenge these constructions so much as she mourns her own unnaturalness and consequent isolation within her culture. In particular, she explores the loneliness of a person who does not conform to gender norms and therefore cannot have sex, posing an implicit challenge to works like Fuller’s. In this respect, The Hermaphrodite remains timely, illuminating the demands for connection, intimacy, and sexual pleasure that have encouraged and continue to encourage many women to repress their autonomy and individuality and reiterate the truth of repressive gender constructs. While The Hermaphrodite in part laments the inevitability of such a situation, it also begins to develop the “feminist” protest that flowered in the frank polemics of her 1854 volume Passion-Flowers, above all in the angry poem “Mind Versus Mill-Stream.”

Six weeks after her marriage on April 23, 1843, in a poem about her relationship with her new husband, Julia Ward Howe imagines God telling her, “ye are not akin, / Your union was a sin; / Your natures meet and jar, / And thus, the order of Creation mar.” Clearly, Howe fears that she has made a disastrous marriage. She does see a bit of hope, though. The poem in which
This dictum from God appears is titled “The Dawning of Light.” The meaning of this propitious title becomes clear in the penultimate stanza:

When once I know my sphere,
Life shall no more be drear,
I will be all thou wilt;
To cross thy least desire shall be guilt. (quoted in Williams, HH 63–64)

At this point in her life, Howe fears that their failure to constitute a good union originates in herself, her failure to conform to her husband’s expectations. Before the marriage, she had promised to change herself and become what he wanted, and evidently she is finding that self-transformation difficult. Nonetheless, she still commits herself to the project. Once she manages to efface her own will and become thoroughly submerged in his, she imagines, their lives will improve. In stating that marital happiness is contingent upon the erasure of her independent female will, this poem exemplifies Howe’s immersion in the “feminine” phase of a writer’s development.

Prenuptial letters make explicit Howe’s understanding that wives are to erase their individuality. In a letter to her brother announcing their engagement, twenty-three-year-old Julia said that her future husband had “won me from the world, and from myself,” adding “I am perfectly satisfied to sacrifice to one so noble and earnest the day dreams of my youth” (quoted in Williams, HH 35). She characterizes their union not as a pleasure but as martyrdom, sacrifice of her self, her dreams, and the entire world. Thus, when she and Chev disagreed over the length of the engagement, he won because, as Julia put it, he seemed “determined to have things his own way” and because “the Chevalier’s way will be a very charming way, and is, henceforth, to be mine.” However, Chev evidently suspected that Julia would not successfully sacrifice her own “way,” and he said as much in a letter to her brother, Sam Ward. Though we have only Sam’s letter in return, we can deduce what Chev wrote. Sam insists to Chev that Julia’s character really has changed and that Chev’s fears to the contrary are groundless. Sam also urges Chev to soften his will and permit Julia to continue to write poetry:

There is a spirit of rebellion in human nature which is equally aroused by suspicion or over exaction—Love has given you authority, let its influence work invisibly—and do not strive to accelerate the approach of the not far distant day, when every thought & desire will be stamped by your wishes, by insisting upon a formal renunciation of tastes & impulses which so far
from being rivals will one day become your cherished friends. (quoted in Williams, HH 36)

Chev evidently wants Julia to stop writing, and Sam is advocating for Julia’s right to write. Even in this plea, though, he agrees that a wife allows her thoughts to be stamped by her husband’s wishes. This is what Fuller meant when she wrote about a wife’s absorption in her husband.

Julia associated her desire to write poetry with her spiritual inclinations, and her husband was overtly hostile to both, seeing in them a commitment to something other than himself. In place, he idealized for her an entirely material existence focused upon his needs, their shared physical pleasures. Before their marriage, he wrote her:

I give you fair warning; I shall not help you out of the cocoon state at all; you are a sweet, pretty, little mortal, & shall not be immortal if I can help it, this many a long year.

I suppose you think you would look very beautifully emerging from the chrysalis state, & I should be proud to see a pair of wings sprouting out from your white shoulders . . . but no such thing, & I advise you not to show even a . . . feather, for I shall unmercifully cut them off, to keep you prisoner in my arms, my own dear earthly wife, who is to go forth with me through this pleasant world, until my wings grow also, where we shall fly away together. (quoted in Ziegler 29)

Chev is trying to write sexual banter, promising to love Julia physically and encouraging her to be more carnal, but there is a significant threat in this letter: he is saying that he will cut off her wings if she cannot commit herself exclusively to his pleasant, earthly life. In other words, he will force her to stop writing poetry and make her commit herself to an entirely material existence adjunctive to his.

In keeping with dominant ideologies of the day, Chev endorsed a philosophy of female nature that relegated women to this merely material existence. Two weeks after the birth of his second child, he was thrilled at what Gary Williams calls “evidence that the birth of their daughter had changed his wife irrevocably”:

How beautiful—how wonderful is nature! Only a year ago Julia was a New York belle—apparently an artificial, possibly to some a heartless one; now she is a wife who lives only for her husband, & a mother who would melt
her very heart, were it needed, to give a drop more nourishment to her child. To see her watching with eager anxious eyes every movement of her offspring; to witness her entire self-forgetfulness & the total absorption of her nature in this new object of love, is to have a fresh revelation of the strength & beauty of woman’s character, & new proof of their superiority over us in what most ennobles humanity—love for others. (quoted in Williams, *HH* 67)

Women are superior for their natural self-sacrifice—an imprisoning pedestal for sure. A few things are striking about this letter. First off, Chev’s opening portrait of Julia as an artificial, heartless belle is surprising, given that he had characterized her as altogether too religious and spiritual in their courtship correspondence. The point is that she had been committed to the life of her own mind and spirit, and Chev resorts to the cultural cliché of the artificial belle to condemn that state. Whether former belle or bluestocking, the contrast once she has children is striking, he says. Finally, she lives only for others; she would dissolve herself if need be for her children. Chev crafts a definition of “nature” that is oppressive: “the self-forgetfulness & total absorption of her nature.” It is simply natural, he effuses, for a woman to allow herself to be absorbed in the selves of her husband and children.

As her biographers make clear, Julia did not share these beliefs about her own character. For example, three years later, Julia wrote in a letter to her sister, Louisa:

> It is a blessed thing to be a mother, but there are bounds to all things, and no woman is under any obligation to sacrifice the whole of her existence to the mere act of bringing children into the world. I cannot help considering the excess of this as materializing and degrading to a woman whose spiritual nature has any strength. (quoted in Williams, *HH* 68)

Chev may have believed that Julia had finally dissolved herself into the materialism of maternity, but he was clearly self-deluded. Despite her desire to be what Chev wanted, she could not help retaining an interest in her own spiritual and intellectual cultivation, could not sacrifice the whole of her existence to birthing and raising children.

The law of coverture rendered the absorption of a woman’s being into that of her husband a legal fact, but the early courtship letters and poetry show that it was also an emotional and practical ethos that governed Julia’s ideas about her life. Like many young women, she entered into marriage embracing the ideology of the *femme couverte*, the romantic sublimity of self-dissolution
and transport into something larger and more significant than a woman’s unique self. As Julia put it, “I am perfectly satisfied to sacrifice to one so noble and earnest.” Her husband, a famous, decorated, and handsome benefactor of all humanity, was surely a significant being in whom and through whom she could find meaning. The discovery that that dissolution was not an ennobling, spiritual existence but rather a mundane round of activities devoted entirely to the material concerns of husband and children, hostile to her spiritual development, came as a shock. Howe’s growth into feminist consciousness did not occur all at once, though. First, she wrestled with ways that self-erasure and an associated devotion to the material realm might be a spiritually ennobling existence. Her writings of this period suggest she saw a philosophical issue at stake in this mental effort: our destinies are immortal, but our lives are mortal, and the human condition involves finding a compromise between these competing claims. Howe tries to find such a compromise for a woman within the terms dictated by the dominant ideologies of the day, arguing that women materialize spiritual values, not merely their husbands’ children.

Howe’s poem “Woman,” printed in Rufus Wilmot Griswold’s *The Female Poets of America*, romanticizes a wife’s self-erasure and her subsequent devotion to the material concerns of her husband. Though this basic theme harmonizes with dominant ideologies about female nature, the poem locates space within those ideologies for an ennobling spiritual cultivation on the part of the woman.

**WOMAN**

A vestal priestess, proudly pure,
    But of a meek and quiet spirit;
With soul all dauntless to endure,
    And mood so calm that naught can stir it,
Save when a thought most deeply thrilling
Her eyes with gentlest tears is filling,
Which seem with her true words to start
From the deep fountain at her heart.

A mien that neither seeks nor shuns
    The homage scattered in her way;
A love that hath few favored ones,
    And yet for all can work and pray;
A smile wherein each mortal reads
The very sympathy he needs;
An eye like to a mystic book
   Of lays that bard or prophet sings,
Which keepeth for the holiest look
   Of holiest love its deepest things.
A form to which a king had bent,
The fireside's dearest ornament—
Known in the dwellings of the poor
Better than at the rich man's door;
A life that ever onward goes,
Yet in itself has deep repose.

A vestal priestess, maid, or wife—
   Vestal, and vowed to offer up
The innocence of a holy life
   To Him who gives the mingled cup;
With man its bitter sweets to share,
To live and love, to do and dare;
His prayer to breathe, his tears to shed,
Breaking to him the heavenly bread
Of hopes which, all too high for earth,
Have yet in her a mortal birth.

This is the woman I have dreamed,
And to my childish thought she seemed
The woman I myself should be:
Alas! I would that I were she. (Griswold 322)

A woman's nature is meek, quiet, gentle, calm, loving, sympathetic, deep, beautiful, charitable, holy, and innocent. These adjectives can be best summed up as a spirituality of loving self-sacrifice. Woman is indifferent to praise, avoids self-assertion, and cares more for the poor than for herself. The woman who renounces her own desires possesses knowledge of “deepest things,” which she shares only with one who looks upon her with “the holiest look / Of holiest love.”

Most casual readings would see in this poem only its conventional message of self-erasure. However, the poem attempts the delicate operation of finding a spiritual value within a material existence for women; as we have seen, doing so is risky because it could easily reify the patriarchal norms of mere materiality and female self-erasure. The penultimate stanza makes a
subtle distinction: a woman “offer[s] up / The innocence of a holy life” to God by agreeing to share the “bitter sweets” of life with a man. In other words, she gives herself to God; she shares her life with a man. This is an important distinction, preserving a degree of separate subjectivity for a wife and a spiritual orientation within a material existence. The line “His prayer to breathe, his tears to shed” perfectly treads this fine line between total absorption by her husband and preservation of some female agency. It can be read both as “whatever prayers and sorrows he has will also be hers” or less conservatively as “she expresses for her man the prayers he cannot express and feels for him the feelings he cannot feel.” The latter reading ascribes more agency to woman; her role in marriage is to bring into conscious awareness the deepest thoughts and feelings that men cannot acknowledge. This is a spiritualized materiality. Such a reading is encouraged because it harmonizes with the last line of the stanza, which says that the woman will function as the priestess to her husband, presenting “to him” the Eucharistic bread of holy ideals in a material form: “hopes which, all too high for earth, / Have yet in her a mortal birth.” Woman’s sacred function is to give material existence to holy aspirations, perhaps by inspiring a quest for an immortal existence, or perhaps by speaking and feeling spiritual thoughts for both, or perhaps by expressing Godly love through the sacredness of their loving union. In this way she is herself the bridge between the material and the spiritual. Walking an even finer line, the poem also attempts to find a spiritualized materiality within marital sexuality. The bittersweet self-renunciation of marriage bestows upon woman a mystical chastity; whether “maid or wife,” such a woman is a “vestal,” a word referring to the ancient Roman priestesses of the goddess Vesta who swore a vow of chastity. A wife will have sex, but it will be a sacred sexuality that will preserve the wife’s spiritual purity because it is offered up to God, not necessarily to her husband. Marriage is not a carnal existence of sexual submission and infantile nurture, but a physical and emotional union that expresses a lofty spirituality. Chev had wanted to clip her spiritual wings in order to enjoy an erotic union, but Howe is trying to express her own sexual ideal, which is of a loving and sacred sexual union that is itself holy. Such a sacred, sexual union was contingent upon the other looking at her with holiest love, a look Howe did not often feel she saw in her husband’s eyes. The despair of the final stanza may not only indicate that she is not capable of the self-erasure of a “woman” but that the mysticism of a spiritual materiality, a virginal sexuality, remained elusive. The stanza does make clear, though, that she still locates in herself the blame for her failure to achieve it.

At the age of eighty, Howe explicitly renounced these male-centered
beliefs of her youth, having learned to value her own experiences above ideology. In her 1899 autobiography, *Reminiscences*, she wrote:

I sometimes feel as if words could not express the comfort and instruction which have come to me in the later years of my life from two sources. One of these has been the better acquaintance with my own sex; the other, the experience of the power resulting from associated action in behalf of worthy objects.

During the first two thirds of my life I looked to the masculine ideal of character as the only true one. I sought its inspiration, and referred my merits and demerits to its judicial verdict. In an unexpected hour a new light came to me, showing me a world of thought and of character quite beyond the limits within which I had hitherto been content to abide. The new domain now made clear to me was that of true womanhood,—woman no longer in her ancillary relation to her opposite, man, but in her direct relation to the divine plan and purpose, as a free agent, fully sharing with man every human right and every human responsibility. This discovery was like the addition of a new continent to the map of the world, or of a new testament to the old ordinances.

“Oh, had I earlier known the power, the nobility, the intelligence which lie within the range of true womanhood, I had surely lived more wisely and to better purpose.” Such were my reflections. . . . (Howe, *Rem* 372–73)

By “true womanhood,” Howe indicates that she means a woman as a full subject. She repudiates the notion that women find true meaning only through an existence ancillary to that of men, lacking the rights and responsibilities of free agents. In this respect, in her maturity she rejects the central message of “Woman,” which squarely locates female essence in an ancillary role. She came to understand that women are powerful and intelligent in themselves, facts she had not been able to embrace when she was still under the sway of the “masculine ideal of character.” It is striking that in this passage, Howe characterizes the notion that women’s values were as fully part of “the divine plan and purpose” as those of men as an overwhelming mental transformation for her. She uses the metaphors of “a new continent” and a whole “new testament” to suggest how deeply immersed she had been in male-centered thought and how revolutionary was the notion that women were equally valuable and insightful members of society.

Published in 1848, Howe’s “Woman” is part of the male centrism of her early life. It consolidates the conventional definitions of female nature, and it also asserts Howe’s own exception to a rule that is lofty and desirable. Howe-
ever, that said, the poem can also be read as casting doubt upon the patriarchal social construct that dictates what a “woman” is, since the last stanza characterizes the rest of the poem as “childish” and observes that the female speaker is not herself a “woman.” In that stanza, we seem to hear the author striving to come to terms with gender by affirming her own sense of herself but also seeking a place for herself within the dominant value system.

A similarly ambivalent acquiescence and resistance to patriarchal ideology characterizes *The Hermaphrodite*, which she worked on from the winter of 1846 to the winter of 1848, three to five years after the year of her marriage. Its unresolved tensions reveal Howe striving to achieve the “new continent” of a wholly new understanding of gender but only partly succeeding. The first section of *The Hermaphrodite* explores the anguish of an “unnatural” person who does not conform to gender expectations; the second section tries to come to terms with that anguish by exploring the possibility that “nature” might be a male-scripted ideology. In this novel, Howe moves toward the new continent that she later discovered, but she has not yet found it; indeed, she portrays women as less interesting than men, though she does suggest that female inferiority stems from education rather than nature. In *Reminiscences*, Howe observes that before understanding that such an attitude was part of a patriarchal mentality, she suffered from “a sense of isolation and eccentricity,” believing herself to be the only woman who did not embrace self-erasure (Howe, *Rem* 376). We can see those feelings of isolation in the novel.

The central trope of the manuscript—the hermaphrodite—explores the feelings of anxiety and alienation that result from possessing both a female body and a supposedly masculine commitment to one’s own subjectivity. Howe felt herself to be a freakish exception to a meek and mild-mannered rule of “woman,” an unnatural person, possessing a man’s intellect, a man’s commitment to his own independent self, and a woman’s loving spirit—all within a woman’s body. On the very first page of the book, Laurence muses, “a human soul, simply as such, and not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender, has but a lame and unsatisfactory part to play in this world” (Howe, *H* 5). A person who does not entirely conform to one gender or the other can play only “a lame and unsatisfactory part” in this world. Chev had sought Julia’s “entire surrender,” and she suggests here that such a capacity would promote her—and his—happiness. Lacking this capacity dooms one to a lame part. Not surprisingly, those who seek a better “part” in life often try to suppress or hide all of their hermaphroditic traits and be seen as conventionally gendered people. On the eve of her marriage, Julia wrote, “The thought of what I have undertaken weighs upon me . . . but
the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb, and the Chevalier is an angel of light—so all will be well” (quoted in Williams, *HH* 39). She is visibly trying to convince herself that the terms of this marriage—her own status as sacrificial lamb—are in fact her desire.

One of the ways the lives of sexually unconventional people are “lame and unsatisfactory” is an inability to have intimate relationships. About eleven pages into the novel, Laurence describes a poem he has composed about an unusual character exiled from heaven:

I sang the sufferings of a soul exiled from heaven, and sent into this world invested with the semblance, but not the attributes of humanity. I told of its solitary wanderings on earth, how it could nothing make, nothing possess—how its abstract orphanhood could establish no relationship, and extort no sympathy from the souls of men, veiled in a flesh of whose wants and powers it knew nothing. (Howe, *H* 14)

Theoretically, Laurence uses these words to describe his prize-winning graduation poem, but they constitute a thinly veiled description of his own sense of himself. Indeed, these two sentences encapsulate the manuscript as a whole, in that, while Laurence’s acquaintances acknowledge him as a superior being, he never enjoys close relationships grounded in sympathy. Because Laurence is a hermaphrodite, a person who does not conform to gender binarism, he feels himself to be an exile on the earth, invested with the semblance but not the attributes of humanity. Even though we might say that he has—if anything—too many sexual attributes, Laurence represents his own generous sexual endowment as a lack. But the only thing he truly lacks is the insufficiency of gender binarism and the drives that typically go along with gender binarism. Because he lacks these, he feels that he can establish no close relationships. Why? One readily imagines that a hermaphrodite might feel lonely, isolated, a freakish whole in a world of halves. But Laurence does not attribute his loneliness to his uniqueness. He suggests that the problem is his lack of sexual longings—his soul is veiled in a flesh that knows no desire, and a person without sexual desire is doomed to be an “abstract orphan.” Why?

The reason why sexual desire is necessary to tie us to others has to do with the necessary materialization of all relationships on earth. This is a material world, Howe says, and therefore even spirituality must be made material. *The Hermaphrodite* broaches non-physical intimacy, but it always fails because Laurence’s intimates always try to force sex upon him. Emma says to Laurence, “Oh, Laurence, your flight is lofty, and the heaven you dwell in is beautiful, but why do you take no one with you? . . . I hope that you are not one of
those unsexed souls” (Howe, H 15). Laurence admits he is. He tells Emma, “there are between human beings relations independent of sex, relations of pure spirit, of heavenly sympathy, of immaterial and undying affinities—such are the only relations that can exist between us, dearest Emma” (Howe, H 18). Laurence promotes “heavenly sympathy,” intimacy without a material connection. But Emma says that such relations are insufficient, demanding that he materialize their love:

“I am here alone, in your room, in your power, at dead of night—you cannot misinterpret this, it must convince you that I love you better than life, better than honour, better than my own soul and God. Give me but this one night, but this one hour—do you ask where I shall be tomorrow? I can die tomorrow. . . .” (Howe, H 18)

When Laurence persists, Emma becomes a violent “impersonation of scorn and fury. Lightnings flashed from her eyes. . . .” When Emma finally realizes that Laurence cannot materialize their intimacy, she faints, a “foaming” “maniac,” and within hours, dies (Howe, H 19). The sexual drive toward physical expression of intimacy is that imperative. The spiritual affinities that Laurence idealizes are not what people want in The Hermaphrodite. They are driven by a carnal, unholy lust governed by what seem to be the natural laws of gender binarism. It seems plausible to speculate that Howe tied her own sexual disappointments to her non-conformity, but she too is unsatisfied with merely “heavenly sympathy.” She seeks a sexuality that is erotically engaging and non-possessive.

As this episode suggests, the drive toward the materialization of relationships is characterized by an intolerable possessiveness, the kind of total absorption of one by the other that we saw in Chev’s designs upon Julia. This problem is more explicit in the episodes featuring Ronald. At the crisis of their relationship, Ronald insists to Laurence, “I bear in my bosom a wondrous fire, a strange alchemy, that can turn marble itself to molten flame. You are mine by fate, mine by the power of my will, and my first crime is also yours, for it is born of the union of your soul and of mine” (Howe, H 87). Ronald wants to possess Laurence, using the word “mine” three times. He cannot tolerate Laurence’s inability to be possessed, his otherness, and he insists that his inner fire will change Laurence into what he wants Laurence to be. Next, Laurence describes,

[still, other words of terrible import, half heard, and dimly comprehended; still that terrible grasp, straining me closer and closer to the heart which,
once pure and peaceful, was now in its hour of volcanic might and ruin. On my part, a faint but rigid struggle, a sob, a mute and agonized appeal to heaven—that appeal was not answered. Suddenly, I felt Ronald shiver and tremble—gaining courage, I raised my eyes to his face, and saw the burning flush pass, in an instant, from his cheek—exhaustion was already subduing the fever. . . .” (Howe, H 87)

Visually, the scene depicts homosexual rape, two men in each other’s arms, one forcing sex upon the other, but the metaphors are heterosexual. Ronald is described in terms suggesting male orgasm: he strains with a terrible grasp, climaxes with volcanic power, then shivers and trembles, and the burning flush in his cheek passes. Laurence is described in terms of female sex: he gives “a faint but rigid struggle,” a “sob,” and a “mute and agonized appeal to heaven.” These images are conventions of a sexually dominated female who is weak, pleading, sobbing, capable of rescue only from heaven. Both with Ronald and with Emma, Laurence finds that if non-sexual relationships become increasingly intense, they are destined to end in a lustful drive for possessive sex. The culture may promulgate an ideal of “heavenly sympathy,” but people are dissatisfied with it and when push comes to shove seek to possess the other on their own terms. Ronald’s “alchemy” is particularly disturbing, suggesting an insidious instinct to transform the other into what he wants him to be so that he can possess him. It is much like Chev’s desire to clip Julia’s wings rather than let her be other than what he wanted her to be. Howe’s focus upon sexual possessiveness expresses the difficulty of simply letting others be who they are.

The problem with possessiveness is that it makes the dissolution of a woman’s independent subjectivity the price to pay for the blessings of intimacy. It would seem that nature imposes an either/or: one must choose between either self-possession or close attachments. Laurence lacks a possessive drive because he is “a heavenly superhuman mystery, one undivided, integral soul, needing not to seek on earth its other moiety, needing only to adore the God above it, and to labour for brethren around it” (Howe, H 195–96). Complete in himself, he cannot seek lost parts of himself in others because there are no lost parts. Consequently, he cannot have the attachments that accompany having found one’s lost moiety nor even the attachments that are felt as one casts about for one’s lost moiety. Laurence wants relationships, but he wants non-possessive, non-sexual ones, and this desire is impossible. Hence he is doomed to “abstract orphanhood.” At this point in her life, Howe fears that all intimate relationships are by nature possessive and necessarily destructive of female subjectivity.
The ideal Howe seems to be trying to articulate is the kind of relationship that contemporary psychoanalytic theorist Jessica Benjamin calls “intersubjectivity.” By this term Benjamin means “the meeting of two subjects,” as opposed to “the meeting of a subject and an object.” She defines intersubjectivity as “the field of intersection between two subjectivities, the interplay between two different subjective worlds” (Benjamin, Like Subjects 29). The roots of the term—intersubjectivity—suggest that two people are intertwined but nonetheless respectful of the different subjectivity of the other. Recognizing the subjectivity of the other means recognizing that the other is a person with values, aspirations, relationships, and experiences as important to her as one’s own are to oneself. It is not necessarily that one respects her, but that one recognizes her right to a full range of being with herself at the center. One does not force her to be what one wants, nor absorb her into one’s own constructs. She is who she is—other. Benjamin also argues that intersubjectivity is neither harmonious nor easy; the self is necessarily changed by its contact with the other because the other’s perspective always challenges the self’s assumptions. Thus, intersubjectivity is a source of “productive irritation” (Benjamin, Shadow of the Other 85). However, though it may be irritating to confront the unassimilable difference of the other, that irritation is an essential part of an ethical stance. Non-absorptive respect for the other’s difference is the foundation of human rights and toleration in society, Benjamin says. “Any subject’s primary responsibility to the other subject is to be her intervening or surviving other” (Benjamin, Like Subjects 99; emphasis in original). There is an ethical imperative to respect the subjectivity of the other by challenging her delusions of omnipotence when necessary and refusing to instrumentalize or be instrumentalized by her.

For Howe, in 1847, the laws of nature appear antithetical to intersubjective sexual relationships; absorption of one subjectivity is “natural.” Laurence can neither absorb nor be absorbed. Inspired by this “curse of [his] existence, the cruel injustice of nature,” Laurence seeks a spiritual experience independent of the body and the cruelties its laws impose upon him. He tries to experience a spirituality that transcends the material by fasting. Resisting his own carnality challenges not only the laws of gender, but more broadly and philosophically the laws of materiality altogether:

This feeble stomach, why should it command the brain whose thrall and servant it was born to be? This brain, why should it heavily adapt itself to the lower impulses and necessities of life when it may be developed and perfected into a tool fit for the noblest uses of God himself? . . . I am choked with the solid, asphyxiating gases of your materiality—give me the pure
One can hear Howe in angry dialogue with her husband here. Whereas he insisted that woman’s nature manifested itself in the total commitment of the female mind to the stomachs of her family, Howe fights such materialism. However, Laurence discovers that resisting the laws of materiality is futile. One cannot shed the iron rules of the body and remain alive; one cannot have purely spiritual being; one cannot escape the laws of gender. “Clearly, it is God’s will that you carry this poor mortality with you as far as you are able. Your mother nature is not to be turned off with a pension,” Laurence thinks (Howe, H 47). The sad consequence is that we cannot escape the laws of nature and live.

Laurence next tests whether Transcendental idealism might avail a way out. His failure to escape nature inspires an epiphanic reversal—a quest for a spirituality of the material realm. Having failed to escape the iron laws of natural existence, Laurence says,

> To that earth I now returned with a terrible & exaggerated fondness. As wildly my imagination had spread its wings and soared in pursuit of the highest Ideal, so now I stretched out my hands to grasp the real, the tangible, the mathematically demonstrable. . . . I still sought for God everywhere and in all things, but me thought I would now learn of Him in the records of the world He had made. I was fain to lose sight of my own soul, with its narrow powers and destinies, and to think of the Infinite in His relations with the Universe. It was time that I should give myself up to the teachings of Nature, to the study of its old testament, graven on tables of stone, and its ever new testament of organic life. (Howe, H 65–67)

This Transcendentalist development in Laurence’s spiritual journey mirrors Howe’s own turn from the intense Calvinist piety of her youth (with its dramatic opposition of the carnal and the spiritual) to a daring and exhilarating involvement with the Transcendentalist circle of Boston. Emerson’s influence is unmistakable in this quotation, with its idea that we can find in natural facts the answers to our spiritual questions, the unities that underlie the appearance of difference. Laurence begins—following his Emersonian path—to seek truth about God’s divine purpose through examining the created world. He takes up natural science with his new friend and would-be lover Ronald.
However, Transcendentalism cannot resolve the gender problems that are at issue in this book. Locating answers to metaphysical questions in nature leaves unresolved the problem of a person who does not conform to social expectations of “nature.” The essentialism of Transcendentalist thought would only reinforce Laurence’s deviant nature. As Jamie S. Crouse writes, “The Transcendentalists, despite radical theological revisions, were surprisingly traditional in their acceptance of essential gender differences of women” (Crouse 262). The essay *Nature* is a thoroughly essentialist text:

> Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. . . . An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. (Emerson, *Nature* 18)

And this broad essentialism applies to gender. Crouse shows that in his speech at the women’s rights convention in Boston in 1855, Emerson posits essential natures for men and women, reiterating that women have a more material existence and destiny than men. They are, Emerson says, “more vulnerable, more infirm, more mortal than men” (Crouse 265). Evidently, women are more subject to nature than men, whose prerogative it is to escape the bonds of the body in thought and act. This might seem cruel to us, but to Emerson it is simply nature. Emerson continues, saying “[that] women have their own strength; that women are strong by sentiment; that the same mental height which their husbands attain by toil, they attain by sympathy with their husbands. Man is the will, and Woman the sentiment” (quoted in Crouse 265). But whether or not women can think along with men, they do not need to, since their nature suits women for “their organic office in the world,” which is the “care of young and the tuition of older children” (Crouse 265). Transcendentalism may promote greater social freedoms, but it hews closely to what it sees as the laws of nature because such laws are the heart of its metaphysics. The terms of its analysis solidify cultural definitions and fail to challenge the possessiveness of heterosexual relationships and their confinement of women to a merely material existence.

The Transcendentalist analysis of nature in the novel leads to a dead end for the purposes of exploring female sexual nature, and Section One ends at this dead end. Section Two turns toward sociological exploration of women’s lives in society, showing in a variety of episodes women’s loving natures denied and destroyed by male social practices. This anger at masculinist abuses of women moves the narrative toward the “feminist” stage of
development. Howe insists that love is perhaps a woman’s greatest gift to the world, but it is ignored or destroyed by self-absorbed men who cannot even see what they are missing. As Howe’s re-valuing of women’s essences in Section Two suggests, she does not challenge gender essentialism; instead, she foregrounds one conventional aspect—love—and promotes its value.

Howe believes love is one of the highest spiritual values we can practice on earth. As she writes to her friend Horace Binney Wallace in 1853, “Love is the Religion of Life” (quoted in Williams, HH 120). To love is a religious act, the essential spiritual act of our material existence, and women are by nature the priestesses of this religion. Berto’s sister, the mystically crazy Nina, fleshes out what Howe might have meant in her letter to Wallace. Nina says, “‘the man that, loving, is beloved of a woman stands in the garden of God, and is watered by dews of Paradise, but he who loves not and is not loved wanders in an arid desert, and the blessings of heaven know no road to his heart’” (Howe, H 159).¹ Women bring a spiritual blessing to men, a love that is like the “dews of Paradise.” But if men cannot bring themselves to love, then their lives are arid and they are deprived of the incarnation of the spiritual that women can be for them and bring to them. This is the materializing role that Howe idealizes for women in the second half of The Hermaphrodite.

Berto turns Laurence’s attention to sociology. They discover together the various ways that men fail to avail themselves of this spiritual blessing and destroy the lives and loves of the women they meet. Section Two begins with the story of Eleonora, who receives no training in reason and is therefore blind to her own psychological manipulation. Incapable of resisting Catholic ideologies of virginity, she proudly defies Berto’s appeals that she cultivate woman’s true calling, which is marital love; she instead embraces life in a tomb-like convent and a sterile virginity. Eleanora has been brainwashed to find a quasi-feminist defiance in repudiating female sexuality in the interests of spirituality. In this story, Howe indicts the failure to cultivate reason in women; it transforms one of woman’s greatest gifts—her spirituality—into a weapon of her oppression. Continuing with her emphasis on male co-optation of women’s sexuality, Howe moves from ideological coercion to concrete physical coercion. If women are not brought to embrace their own oppression, then they will simply be forced to submit. Röśli is a pure Swiss ballerina who must ward off the predatory advances of an aristocratic libertine. Laurence describes her as “a doomed victim at the altar of the world’s pleasures . . . [p]ure, lovely, and defenseless as a newly opened flower.” And he asks, “how long would it be before some rude or cunning hand should pierce the gentle defences of Nature, and ravish from her breast the dear treasure of her innocence?” (Howe, H 115). As these paired stories of nuns and rape
victims suggest, female sexuality is a terrain that men try to control. Doing so is part of their efforts to absorb women’s subjectivities into their own.

The stories of Berto’s sisters Briseida and Gigia build on this discussion of sexuality, exploring women’s hunger for an intersubjective sexual relationship. As he introduces the sisters, Laurence observes that they both have physical relationships: Nina “was the only one whose solitude was unconsoled by the bodily presence of a lover” (Howe, H 150). Neither nuns nor victims, Briseida and Gigia are trying to have an erotic life, but the institution of marriage as practiced thwarts their attainment of their desire, and they are thus painfully lonely. Briseida points out the limits of marriage upon women. As she puts it, “A woman simply of intelligence and education, who [is] neither young, rich, nor handsome,” cannot get a decent marriage because men seek money, beauty and wealth in a wife (Howe, H 153–54). As practiced, marriage serves only a man’s needs and denies a woman’s subjectivity. A woman who chooses not to be instrumentalized, or whose circumstances do not make her a valuable commodity in such a market, is subject to a soul-crushing loneliness, either as a single person, as a nun, or as a wife in a deplorable marriage. Briseida temporarily enjoys physical contact and intersubjectivity reading with a lovely young student, but he is slated to marry for money, and she will be abandoned. Self-reliant isolation may be her only option, but this option is heart-rending, excruciating for a creature so eager to love.

Gigia is a clichéd, contemptible society woman, trying to trick her lover into marriage in order to share his fortune. Once again, marriage is a business transaction that instrumentalizes its participants, thereby corroding the true religion of life. But Laurence believes that even Gigia’s cold heart “cherish[es] the thought of inspiring in another a truer, purer affection than itself could feel, in the sad, faint hope of catching the good by contagion, and of being redeemed from its abasement by that ardent and disinterested affection, which is, as it were, the very lifeblood shed for another” (Howe, H 157). Even the most self-serving people at heart crave the purity of a true, selfless love. Once again, Howe emphasizes a woman’s doomed quest for a non-instrumental, intersubjective relationship: “ardent and disinterested affection.” But it is now less nature than it is masculinist social practices that thwart this love.

In 1853, Howe no longer represented sexual possessiveness as the sad fact of nature, and she derided male ideology for saying so. With the vantage of hindsight, it is tempting to posit that the effort to deconstruct “female nature” in Part Two of The Hermaphrodite was a stage in her thought helping her move from the “feminine” phase of authorship to the “feminist” phase.
An important poem written either during or after 1850, the year she spent in Rome apart from her husband, is “Mind Versus Mill-Stream,” which angrily challenges the idea that women naturally submit to erotic possession. Where Howe had once idealized female self-erasure and saw it as the prerequisite for sexual pleasure, she now idealizes female self-possession, seeing it as the true prerequisite for sexual pleasure. The belief that sexual pleasure is contingent upon “complete surrender or complete submission” is entirely behind her.

A Miller wanted a mill-stream,
A mild, efficient brook
To help him to his living, in
Some snug and shady nook.

But our Miller had a brilliant taste,
A love of flash and spray,
And so, the stream that charmed him most
Was that of brightest play.

It wore a quiet look, at times,
And steady seemed, and still,
But when its quicker depths were stirred,
Wow! But it wrought its will.

And men had tried to bridle it
By artifice, and force,
But madness from its rising grew,
And all along its course.

'T was on a sultry summer’s day,
The Miller chanced to stop
Where invited to 'look in
And take a friendly drop.'

Coiffed with long wreaths of crimson weed,
Veiled by a passing cloud,
It looked a novice of the woods
That dares not speak aloud.

Said he: 'I never met a stream
More beautiful and bland,
'T will gain my bread, and bless it too,  
So here my mill shall stand.'

And ere the summer's glow had passed,  
Or crimson flowers did fade,  
The Miller measured out his ground,  
And his foundation laid.

The Miller toiled with might and main,  
Buidled with thought and care;  
And when the Spring broke up the ice  
The water-wheel stood there.

Like a frolic maiden come from school,  
The stream looked out, anew;  
And the happy Miller bowing, said  
'Now turn my mill-wheel, do!'

'Your mill-wheel?' cried the naughty Nymph,  
'That would, indeed, be fine!  
You have your business, I suppose,  
Learn too that I have mine.'

'What better business can you have,  
Than turn this wheel for me?'  
Leaping and laughing, the wild thing cried,  
'Follow, and you may see.'

The Miller trudged with measured pace,  
As Reason follows Rhyme,  
And saw his mill-stream run to waste,  
In the very teeth of time.

'Fore heaven!' he swore, 'since thou'rt perverse,  
I've hit upon a plan;  
A dam shall stay thine outward course,  
And then, break out who can.'

So he built a dam of wood and stone,  
Not sparing in the cost,
'For,' thought our friend, 'this water-power
'Must not be lightly lost.'

'What? Will you force me?' said the sprite;
'You shall not find it gain,'
So, with a flash, a dash, a crash,
She made her way amain.

Then, freeing all her pent-up soul,
She rushed, in frantic race
And fragments of the Miller's work
Threw in the Miller's face.

The good man built his dam again,
More stoutly than before;
He flung no challenge to the foe,
But an oath he inly swore:

'Thou seest resistance is in vain,
So yield with better grace.'
And the water sluices turned the stream
To its appointed place.

'Aha! I've conquered now!' quoth he,
For the water-fury bold
Was still an instant, ere she rose
In wrath and power fourfold.

With roar and rush, and massive sweep
She cleared the shameful bound,
And flung to utterness of waste
The Miller, and his mound.

MORAL
If you would marry happily
On the shady side of life
Choose out some quietly-disposed
And placid tempered wife;

To share the length of sober days,
And dimly slumberous nights,
But well beware those fitful souls
Fate wings for wilder flights!

For men will woo the tempest
And wed it, to their cost,
Then swear they took it for summer dew,
And ah! their peace is lost! (Howe, PF 80–85)

Only five years separate this poem from “Woman,” but the transformation is remarkable. “Mind Versus Mill-Stream” presents a vision of a female eroticism that is both erotic and firmly noncompliant. This passionate female finds herself in an escalating battle of wills with a rational, utilitarian business-like Miller. The Miller wants “a mild, efficient brook / To help him to his living.” He instrumentalizes her, thinking only of his own business. He “toils with might and main” to subject the stream to his will: “‘What better business can you have, / than turn this wheel for me?’” he asks her, dully presuming that she will be satisfied with his goal of “placid sober days, / And dimly slumberous nights.” But she has “wilder flights” in mind for her nights than dim slumber. This stream is a red-head (“Coiffed with long wreaths of crimson weed”)—like Howe; she is sultry and intoxicating, and she desires passion and vitality, not a “snug and shady nook.” When the Miller first happens by, she invites him to “‘look in / and take a friendly drop.’” She seems spiritual and innocent: “Veiled by a passing cloud,” she resembles “a novice of the woods / that dares not speak aloud.” The Miller entirely misinterprets her silence, believing it betokens submission, thoughtlessness and pliability: “‘I never met a stream / More beautiful and bland, / ’Twill gain my bread, and bless it too.’” What is striking is that he immediately thinks of what use she can be to his material schemes: the young nun’s energy and spirituality will be put to the service of his “bread.” He is entirely self-absorbed, never wondering about the life and thoughts of the stream independent of his designs upon her, never speculating that she might have gifts to offer, unaware as he is of any limits in his own nature.

The Miller is presented as the cliché of an older, stolid husband who does not understand his passionate wife. She is characterized as much younger, a “naughty Nymph,” a “sprite,” or a “frolic maiden come from school” who enjoys the “brightest play.” She is also poetic, associated with “Rhyme,” while he “trudge[s] with [the] measured pace” of “Reason.” The Miller expects her to conform her will to his, and she resists. As their relationship becomes more heated, she is described as a “wild thing” engaged in a “frantic race,” a “water-fury,” a “fitful soul,” and ultimately, a “tempest.” What the Mill-Stream most wants is the recognition of her own will, the legitimacy of her being, her
right to her own playful, erotic, poetic nature. And she becomes increasingly frenetic in her need to have this basic acknowledgment. However, the Miller sees all of her self-directed activities as “waste,” and he dams her up, saying “this water-power / Must not be lightly lost.”

The Mill-Stream rejects the notion that activities that fail to advance the Miller’s goals, and more broadly do not produce tangible material goods, are wasted. “What? Will you force me?’ said the sprite.” And “freeing all her pent-up soul, / She rushed, in frantic race / And fragments of the Miller’s work / threw in the Miller’s face.” Like Bartleby, this female spirit resists being subjected to “the Miller’s work.” But the Miller dams her up again, saying, “‘Thou seest resistance is in vain, / so yield with better grace.’” And sure enough, “the water sluices turned the stream / to its appointed place,” which place is that of serving a husband’s needs and goals. This line also has erotic overtones: the phrase “resistance is in vain, so yield” is often used to characterize a threatened rape. It implies, “I will force you to submit to my will, so why not be nice about it and don’t force me to force you.” However, the stream is infuriated by his humiliating efforts to deny her and sexually control her. The final image of a stream temporarily dammed up and flowing in “its appointed place” until her pond has risen sufficiently to entirely overrun and destroy the mill offers a visual representation of the fury Howe sees rising in women who are told to keep their appointed places. They may be calm on the surface, but destructive turbulence is rising beneath. With “wrath and power,” they “roar and rush,” and with “a massive sweep” flow over the dams that are “shameful bound[s].” It may not be true of all woman, but this woman at least will not allow her spiritual, poetic, erotic nature to be channeled to meet someone else’s aims, especially when those aims are purely utilitarian. She might have enjoyed an intersubjective passion, though; it was she who initiated the relationship on that sultry summer day. But she wants it on terms that do not absorb and instrumentalize her.

The erotic fulfillment sought in this poem is an effort to reclaim materialism without submitting to utilitarianism. Thus, Howe now represents the materiality of existence as not necessarily tragic. Howe’s later-in-life woman’s rights activism was another form of material, concrete action that she found rewarding. But early in her marriage, she found the philosophical notion that spiritual ideals must be materially expressed to be frustratingly intertwined with the social construction of gender. It took thought, time, and above all experience with both women and men for Howe to disentangle the broadest facts of human existence from masculinist interpretations of those facts. *The Hermaphrodite*, from our vantage point, appears to have been part of the process of that disentangling. Caught up in those masculinist ideologies, the
novel at first laments the unnaturalness of a woman committed to her own subjectivity, but it then goes on to explore the ideological origins of the ideal of female erasure. Another casualty of this entanglement is female sexuality. The beginning of the novel suggests that it is female nature to welcome erotic submission and possession, but the second half of the novel explores the destructiveness to women’s lives of that particular construction of nature. Women’s true nature, Howe suggests, is to love, but it is a love that is inter-subjective, an emotional and physical intertwining of two equal subjectivities, not a love that absorbs one of the two into the other. However, as the novel shows, it takes an uncommonly perceptive woman to look beyond “the masculine ideal of character as the only true one.” Many women become victims who strive to conform and insist upon conventional norms of “nature” because they hunger for physical and emotional intimacy, and men seem to desire women who are “invested with the capacity of . . . entire surrender.” It took an unusually bold—and angry—woman to embrace hermaphrodisim as simply human nature.

Note

1. A possible source for the Nina material in The Hermaphrodite is the story of Sir John Franklin, an explorer who headed a crew of 129 men on a three-year effort to locate the Northwest Passage. They set sail from Greenhithe, England, on May 19, 1845, and were never heard from again. According to Alison Winter, there were widespread efforts to contact Franklin via mesmerism during the 1840s. “One subject described her mind moving toward his over ‘icy mountains and the polar seas.’ So popular was this experiment that before she could reach him she claimed to have met ‘the spirits of two clairvoyants’ who had been sent, one from England, and the other from some distant country,’ to check on him. They were returning from their visit and could report that he was ‘safe and well,’ and would return in five months” (122). Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins collaborated on what became a popular play about this episode, attesting to its cultural significance. Winter cites another mesmerism enthusiast who was convinced of the “evangelical utility” of mesmerism: “the ‘revelations’ of ‘this unlettered maiden’ were at least as persuasive regarding the ‘immortality of the soul,’ he argued, ‘as the thoughts of the most learned men’” (Winter 372 n. 62).
When asked to judge Laurence’s sex, the physician who attends him/ her in the final pages of *The Hermaphrodite* declares, “I cannot pronounce Laurence either man or woman . . . but I shall speak most justly if I say that he is rather both than neither” (Howe, *H* 195). This essay argues that in representing Laurence as “rather both than neither,” Julia Ward Howe draws on one of the most powerful paradigms in early nineteenth-century science for understanding sex. As Gary Williams reminds us in the book’s introduction, Howe had encountered many literary examples of hermaphrodism around the time she composed her Laurence manuscript in 1847. At that time, however, medical science had less to say about hermaphrodites than did literary texts. Scientific work such as that by Havelock Ellis, who was among the first to categorize and analyze homosexuals and intersexed individuals, would not be written for about fifty years after the doctor in *The Hermaphrodite* declared Laurence to be “rather both than neither.” Ellis’s controversial theories were simply not available to Howe for her portrayal of Laurence. Nor were the psychological models of the subject upon which Ellis’s and later Freud’s work were grounded. In *The Hermaphrodite*, Howe employs an earlier scientific theory of sex—a theory drawn from Romantic
physical science rather than medical science—to represent her highly unconventional subject.

To understand Laurence’s hermaphroditism, I read the novel alongside Howe’s writings on polarity, a concept that was at the heart of almost every scientific theory of the early nineteenth century. Polarity was identified in magnets as early as the thirteenth century, when the opposing forces of a magnet’s positive and negative poles were first noted. By the nineteenth century, scientists extended the concept of polarity to include the centrifugal and centripetal forces of gravity, the forces of attraction and repulsion in chemical affinity, positive and negative electrical currents, and the behavior of light at the ultra-red and ultraviolet ends of the spectrum. Many scientists believed that all physical phenomena would ultimately be explained as the outcome of the interaction of polar forces.

In addition to physical phenomena, social and psychological relationships were understood through the lens of polarity by a host of Romantic philosophical writers in Germany, England, and America. Polarity was central to the thought of Kant, Schelling, Goethe, and many others. Emerson, immersed in Coleridge’s theories of polarity, based his doctrine of compensation on the notion (Walls 127–65). Opposites such as subject and object, man and woman, were considered to be polar. Yet as suggested by the example of a magnet, polarities are different from simple opposites. A magnet’s two poles are undeniably opposing, yet they cannot be pried apart from each other. They are part of the same whole or continuum, so that the presence of one always implies the presence of the other. Using the magnet as a model, nineteenth-century writers believed that each pole of such opposing pairs as subject and object, masculinity and femininity must be understood as distinct, while at the same time indivisible from each other, for one implies and engenders the other.

I argue that as “rather both than neither,” Laurence embodies a polar philosophy of gender in which masculine and feminine traits are present in all humans in different balances and syntheses. I begin by placing Howe within the context of other Romantic thinkers on polarity in order to demonstrate Howe’s particular emphasis on the connection between polarity and sex, and then read *The Hermaphrodite* in light of that connection. *The Hermaphrodite* is deeply infused with a polar logic, from its narrative structure to its characterizations. The manuscript’s plot takes Laurence on polar alternations from passionate engagement with the world—including his love affairs with Emma and Ronald—to retreat into seclusion or study. He alternates between female and male lovers as his own identity swings back and forth from masculine
to feminine. In particular, the metaphor of magnetism is repeatedly invoked in the manuscript’s investigations of different forms of attraction. By placing polarity at the center of *The Hermaphrodite*, I suggest, we can better understand the nature of attraction as it is depicted in the novel. Laurence’s gender and his desire are shaped not by his subject position or any other psychological structure but are formed relationally, through his interactions with other (necessarily polar) beings. Moreover, like so much of the philosophy on which *The Hermaphrodite* draws, the manuscript insists that ideal attraction is based not on the transcendence of the body but on the polar synthesis of sex (the body) and gender (identity). In advancing this ideal of a polar synthesis, both within Laurence and in his relationships with others, the novel seeks to reconcile the idea that all individuals are to some extent “rather both than neither” with a question posed early in the narrative: “‘what is it to be a woman?’” (Howe, *H* 15).

**Howe** is most well known for her lyrics to “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which she wrote in 1861, and for her post–Civil War work for the cause of women’s equality. Here, however, I want to emphasize her connection to the Romantic culture of the early nineteenth century. Howe was born in 1819, and her mother died when she was five. Her father, the wealthy New York banker Samuel Ward, believed in educating his daughters as he would his sons. In her girlhood, Howe’s course of studies included chemistry, moral philosophy, history, and geometry, subjects not usually taught to females. As an adult, she read widely among the texts that were important to Romantic thought, including philosophers from Plato to Jacob Boehme and Emmanuel Swedenborg, from Kant to Spinoza. She became fluent in German in her late teens, and as an adult she read Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Hegel, Schleiermacher, and Fichte, many in the original (Williams, *HH*; Grant 115–28). Through her friend Mary Ward (who was no relation), she met Emerson and Fuller and became acquainted with Transcendental and Unitarian thought. Howe was a participant in Fuller’s “conversations” and eventually she wrote a biography of Fuller in 1883. During the mid-1860s, Howe lectured at the Concord School of Philosophy and contributed pieces on Goethe and Emerson to its publications. In other words, Howe was steeped in Romantic and Transcendental texts at the time she wrote *The Hermaphrodite*, and her engagement with those texts deepened over the following twenty years.

At the time she was lecturing at the Concord School of Philosophy, Howe wrote two essays on polarity. She would have encountered the concept in any number of the German philosophers she studied, and throughout Emer-
son's work, about which Howe was also writing. As Laura Walls has shown, Emerson had likewise discovered the idea of polarity in his reading of the German philosophers, as well as in Coleridge's works, and it was Coleridge's version of polarity that especially influenced Emerson. Coleridge, like Kant and Schelling, conceived of the universe not as single and static but as structured by dual opposing forces—polar forces. The antagonism between these forces is the originary and ongoing source of the vitality of creation. The paradox of such a dynamic, evolving cosmos is that out of its essential duality is forged unity, for opposing powers will (like magnets) always attract, always tend to synthesize into one. As Coleridge writes in *The Friend*, “Every Power in Nature . . . must evolve an opposite, as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: and all opposition is a tendency to Reunion. This is the universal Law of Polarity or essential Dualism” (Coleridge 94). Forces must enter into relationships of “essential Dualism,” or polarity because, circularly, these relationships are the “sole means and condition” of a force's existence. In *The Theory of Life* (1816), Coleridge elaborates his conception of the “universal Law of Polarity” into a complete cosmology based on the evolving syntheses of polar categories. Beginning with space and time, Coleridge explains how the combination of these polar categories yields a new force, which then recombines with existing forces, and so on. Each new combination generates an increasingly complex product, so that out of the primal opposition of time and space are evolved the entities of heat, light, electricity, gravity, matter, and plant and animal life, all of which are themselves polar in nature.

For Coleridge, then, polarity does not describe a simple bifurcation of nature. It is a productive, generative principle, and this principle is highly appealing to Emerson, who turns to polarity throughout his writing. In “Compensation” (1841), Emerson relies heavily on an analogy between the polarity of physical forces and social interactions. He writes:

Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals; in the equation of quantity and quality in the fluids of the animal body; in the systole and diastole of the heart; in the undulations of fluids and of sound; in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity; in electricity, galvanism, and chemical affinity. Superinduce magnetism at one end of the needle, the opposite magnetism takes place at the other end. If the south attracts, the north repels. Too empty here, you must condense there. An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it
Like Coleridge, Emerson sees an essential dualism underlying every part of nature. But while in The Theory of Life Coleridge focuses on the role of this dualism in the origin of the cosmos, Emerson in “Compensation” is more concerned with its consequences for human behavior. He emphasizes that “Whilst the world is thus dual, so is every one of its parts” (Emerson, “Compensation” 57), and these parts include, in particular, human beings. Thus “every occupation, trade, art, transaction, is a compend of the world and correlative of every other” (59); and every human action has its moral reward or punishment: “Thou shalt be paid exactly for what thou has done, no more, no less . . . If you put a chain around the neck of a slave, the other end fastens itself around your own” (64).

Yet for all of Emerson’s attention to polarity as a metaphor through which to understand human conduct, he is not especially interested in the implications of that metaphor for the relations between the sexes. As demonstrated by the long passage above, sex is just one manifestation of polarity, and not the most compelling one to Emerson. Though he elsewhere emphasizes the potential androgyny of human beings, made up as they are of both feminine and masculine qualities, he does not offer any explanation of the mechanism by which the principle of polarity operates in the constitution of sexed individuals.

Howe, on the contrary, sees in polarity the key to understanding the relationship between the sexes and the ways that education and convention have distorted that relationship. In “Polarity II,” Howe explains:

I began this essay with the intention of writing directly upon the subject of sex, which, like all fundamental facts of nature, is an idea with a history. In the pursuit of this idea and its history, I encountered the master agency of Polarity, and found myself forced to derive sex from this, and to make the one my primary, the other, my secondary subject. Of all the manifestations of Polarity therefore, I am likely to dwell longest on that of sex, and to give it the most special treatment. (Howe, “Polarity II” 9–10)

Before proposing her polar notion of gender, Howe, like Coleridge, describes how all of matter, including spheres, crystals, vegetable life, the animal body, is derived from polar oppositions. These in turn generate “the circles and spheres of sensibility, individuality, and thought,” from which “the progress of polarity gives us the division of sex” (Howe, “Polarity II” 8).
Howe’s notion of polarity clearly parallels that of Emerson and Coleridge, though, as Mary H. Grant argues, her view of polarity also owes a debt to Hegel’s concept of dialectics and Spinoza’s idea that there is a theoretical continuum from active to passive. In Howe’s view, the passive (feminine) pole of the continuum is the Idea—the thoughts of God—from which all material manifestations flow. At the other active (masculine) pole are phenomena, or what Howe terms “extension.” Like the positive and negative poles of a magnet, the passive and active poles of this continuum are inherently different, yet also inherently joined. Unlike simple opposites, which negate each other, each pole is required by the other, and cannot be pried apart from it. Thus, the thoughts of God—“Divine and absolute” (Howe, “Polarity II” 41)—are manifested in all material phenomena, just as all of material creation exhibits the order and harmony of God’s mind.

For Howe, the best metaphor for the polar relationship between the sexes is the mathematical figure of the circle. Howe asks her readers to envision a circle comprised of two points: a stationary center point, and a second “circumferential” point that revolves around the center. The point at the center stands for the idea—the feminine, passive, intensive, and divine forces—and the point on the circumference stands for motion—the masculine, active, extensive, and material forces. The distance between these two points must always be the same, otherwise the circle collapses or flies apart. Each point requires the other, just as the integrity of the circle requires a constant, unrelied tension between the two points. Marriage, ideally, is the moral and economic unit that forms as a result of the attraction between center and circumference, centripetal and centrifugal force. In her assignment of passivity to the feminine and activity to the masculine, Howe upholds conventional gender distinctions between men and women. She further asserts the necessity of these distinctions, writing that “[m]an and woman differ as much in their intellectual and moral, as in their material aspects” (Howe, “Polarity II” 11).

At the same time, however, Howe argues that beneath these differences lies a fundamental equality. Male and female, Howe reminds her readers, are opposite poles of a single divine idea. “In such a division,” she writes, “no inequality can be supposed possible, since one part of what is divine cannot be more or less divine than the other” (Howe “Polarity II” 15). The problem that Howe seeks to redress is that, because of the historical progression of the relations between the sexes, their underlying equality has been obscured. “The equality” of men and women, she notes, “is a latent one; but their unlikeness is patent” (22). Howe therefore insists that men and women are “endowed in the same degree with sensibility, intelligence, and energy.
They have equal average capacity for the sum of those operations which constitute life, and are equally capable of culture, material, moral, and mental” (21). Both sexes have the same capacity for thought and spirituality, though in any given individual, these capacities are more or less dormant or activated; from the beginning, Howe defines polarity as a “tendency” rather than an absolute (1). Howe notes, “a soulful sympathetic man has the woman in him, a reasoning, energetic woman has the man in her” (27). And most people, Howe observes, embody a mixture of masculine and feminine traits: “in all good human lives, the active and passive are mixed. A nature of any grasp, in either sex, has in it the elements of both. . . . Each has an active half and a passive half, like the sun and shadow sides of a planet” (27–28).

To demonstrate the essential twoness—the polarity—of any individual’s sex, Howe turns to the figure of the ray of light. She observes that when light passes through a crystal, it is divided into two rays, which are called the ordinary and extraordinary rays. Howe posits that “the ray of being” is likewise “polarized into male and female” (Howe, “Polarity II” 45), at least for the duration of an individual’s earthly existence, that is, for the time he or she dwells in “the refracting medium of actual life” (43). Just as “when the ray of light emerges from the crystal, it regains its unity and simplicity” (43), so too are the male and female poles of an individual rejoined in the afterlife.

Howe wrote her two essays on polarity—“Polarity” and “Polarity II”—in 1864 and 1865, respectively, almost twenty years after she wrote *The Hermaphrodite*. Yet *The Hermaphrodite* is full of suggestions that Howe was already thinking of gender in polar terms when she was working on her manuscript. As a hermaphrodite, Laurence is the very embodiment of a polar philosophy of gender, in which the human being who combines both masculine and feminine qualities is ideal. Increasingly emphasizing the desirability of Laurence’s polar nature, the narrative replaces his lover Emma’s early negative characterization of him as a monster with the vision of his Swedenborg-reading friend Briseida, who pronounces Laurence “a heavenly superhuman mystery, one undivided, integral soul” (Howe, H 195). Likewise, though the narrative begins with Laurence’s assertion that “I am no man, no woman, nothing” (Howe, H 22), it works to dispute this notion by ending with the doctor’s assertion that he is both. The overall trajectory of the plot thus charts a kind of learning curve for both readers and Laurence, in which together they come to accept Laurence’s hermaphroditism. Because Laurence presents himself to the world as a man, to accept his hermaphroditism is to recognize and value that which is feminine in him. Consequently, while early in the narrative Emma is driven to madness by the feminine attributes of Laurence’s body, later Ronald’s conception of Laurence is as fundamentally and desirably
feminine—Ronald dreams of Laurence as a woman, and at the novel’s conclusion refers to Laurence as “she” (Howe, H 196). I will not argue that Laurence is a woman, but that “his” identity is fundamentally polar and therefore able to migrate from masculine to feminine, for by polar logic, each contains and engenders the other. The narrative thus tells a dual history about Laurence’s sex, in which we come to accept his hermaphrodism even as “he” comes to occupy a feminine position.

Though to most of the world Laurence appears to be male, he is figured from the start of the novel as a polar being. As Laurence puts it in the first few pages, “I know not how an impartial judge would have decided the doubtful question of my being—my powers of intellect had shot beyond those of my comppeers, while yet my form threatened to take a strongly feminine development” (Howe, H 4). Laurence describes himself as possessing a masculine intellect within a feminine body. As Williams points out in the introduction to The Hermaphrodite, this same gendering of intellect and embodiment would have applied to any mid-century woman whose intellectual ambitions might, “according to the logic of American domestic ideology,” raise doubts about her ability to be a wife and mother (Williams, “Speaking” xxvii). Yet the text works to complicate this conventionally gendered mind/body dualism in its representation of Laurence, for we quickly learn that both his mind and body are each also characterized by twoness. Just as for Coleridge and Emerson, every building block of the universe is polar, so too writes Howe in “Polarity II” that body and mind are each polar. She describes this phenomenon as “the double polarity of our being,” and she ascribes it to “the twofold natures that give us birth” (Howe, “Polarity II” 29). Made from both man and woman, and made of both mind and body, all individuals are doubly polar.

Intellectually, Laurence is described in both conventionally masculine and feminine terms that anticipate Howe’s description in “Polarity” of the “soulful sympathetic man” who “has the woman in him” and the “reasoning, energetic woman [who] has the man in her.” Laurence’s friend Berto, arguing that Laurence’s nature is masculine, gives this explanation: “He reasons severely and logically, even as a man—he has moreover stern notions of duty which bend and fashion his life, instead of living fashioned by it, as is the case with women” (Howe, H 194). Berto’s sister Briseida, on the other hand, argues for Laurence’s essential femininity both by disputing Berto’s assertion that woman are incapable of a sense of duty and by offering the following: “it is true that she can reason better than most women, yet is she most herself when she feels, when she follows that instinctive, undoubting sense of inner truths which is only given to women and angels.” Therefore, says Briseida, “in the name of the female sex, I claim her as one of us. Her modesty, her
purity, her tenderness of heart belong only to woman” (Howe, H 195). As in her essay “Polarity II,” Howe does not directly dispute masculine and feminine stereotypes, but instead offers Laurence as an ideal synthesis of them, for he possesses the best attributes of both sexes.

Physically, of course, Laurence embodies both masculine and feminine traits. Emma falls in love with Laurence, believing, as does the rest of the world, that he is a man; she loses her mind when she discovers that which is “equivocal” in his “form”: she sees “the bearded lip and earnest brow, but she [sees] also the falling shoulders, slender neck, and rounded bosom” (Howe, H 19). Conversely, when Ronald mistakes Laurence for a woman, he falls in love with Laurence on first sight. Ronald hands Laurence a mirror, and even Laurence is forced to admit that “in my long robe de chamber, and with the wild profusion of my locks, I looked a woman” (Howe, H 51). This image persists in shaping Ronald's conception of Laurence, so that he thinks of Laurence as a woman at various points in the narrative. For instance, after waking from a dream, he tells Laurence, “my dream was all of you. Only imagine it, I thought you were a woman” (Howe, H 74). In an attempt to dispel this notion, Laurence takes pains to impress Ronald with his physical strength: “Ronald, in boyish fashion, seized a stone of some size, and hurled it at a rude target that stood near the house. I took up one of a double size, and hurled it to a double distance. ‘That's no woman's throw,' I said, and Ronald could not contradict me” (Howe, H 61). But by the polar logic that informs the narrative, Laurence's feminine looks and masculine strength do not undermine each other; they entail one another. Even before the doctor's pronouncement, then, Laurence is clearly “both.”

One proof that Laurence's masculine and feminine qualities are not simply self-contradictory is that their combination results in exquisite physical beauty. Emma, notably, is the only character in the novel to be repulsed by him. Recoiling in horror from him, Emma calls Laurence a “monster” (Howe, H 19). “I am as God made me, Emma,” he responds to her outburst. In making Laurence as he is, God makes a creature who is mysteriously alluring to men and women alike. Though few who meet Laurence are certain how to characterize his beauty—as one observer notes, “his beauty is of a vague and undecided character” (Howe, H 16)—all are struck by it. “Strange to say,” Laurence relates, “nature had endowed me with rare beauty . . . women often gave me proofs of a stronger interest than any inspired by mere benevolence, while the eyes of men so scrutinized me that I was fain to hide myself from them with a perturbation for which I could scarce account to myself” (Howe, H 4). At a deeper level, Laurence's physical beauty mirrors an ideal spiritual makeup. As the doctor says, “never before
have I seen one [a case like Laurence’s] presenting a beautiful physical development, and combining in the spiritual nature all that is most attractive in either sex’” (Howe, H 194).

Laurence’s attractiveness is explicitly formulated in terms of polar metaphors, that is, in terms of the forces in nature—magnetism and electricity—that best exhibit polar behavior. When Berto leaves Laurence in the care of his sisters, he assures Laurence that they will leave him in peace until “‘your force of attraction becomes irresistible, and you draw them toward you as the lodestone attracts iron’” (Howe, H 146). Berto describes Laurence’s allure as having the force of a lodestone—a magnetic force. Likewise, Emma’s repulsion of Laurence is directly preceded by a shock to Laurence’s system in which his electrical energies become disordered. Having overheard a remark that he looks like the statue of a hermaphrodite in the Villa Borghese, Laurence becomes subject to “a sort of galvanic agony” that “had taken possession of my body, and forces foreign to itself were playing wildly with it” (Howe, H 17). Laurence’s polar makeup is disturbed, and disaster in the form of Emma’s mania results.

The polar nature of Laurence’s ability to attract and repulse is intimately tied to deeper aspects of his polar make-up. At one level, Laurence’s entire physical constitution is polar, so that he continually alternates between sickness and health: “At long intervals, my usually robust health was interrupted by fits of indisposition, each of which seemed a sort of crisis, a struggle between life and death” (Howe, H 4). Coleridge might argue that this struggle between life and death is the very condition of existence; so would Howe. In “Polarity II,” she writes that “without opposing forces we could have no nature at all” (Howe, “Polarity II” 44). All of matter and all of life are premised on such oppositions and on their cyclical development. Emma gives her own condensed version of this philosophy when she notes, “‘Sadness and mirth are ever as near to each other as life and death . . . and there is always something of the one in the other’” (Howe, H 12).

Likewise, when Laurence comes under Berto’s supervision, he participates in an educational program that reflects Berto’s philosophical commitment to the necessity of polar alternations. Berto’s plan calls for a different course of study for each month, including modern and ancient languages, theology, mathematics, political economy, and “‘men and manners.’” These subjects are arranged in a sequence of polar alternations in order to keep his level of engagement at its peak: “‘the greater the change of occupation, the greater the relief,’” he explains to Laurence (Howe, H 95). This educational scheme reflects Berto’s overall philosophy, which is to conceive of the world in polar, relational terms, rather than in absolutes. When he returns to Rome
after a month’s sojourn, he comes disguised as a beggar, and explains the sign-
nificance of his filthy appearance:

“There is no such thing as cleanliness, I will demonstrate it. Is not cold a
negative quality? cold is, philosophically speaking, nothing but the absence
of heat—cleanliness, philosophically speaking, nothing but the absence of
dirt. There is no such thing as cold, say the naturalists, there is no such
thing as cleanliness, says Berto. Dirt is the law of nature, cleanliness of
civilization. I have now made acquaintance with dirt, and esteem it highly
conducive to health.” (Howe, H 186–87)

Living in dirt, Berto has achieved a swing from the pole of civilization to that
of nature, and has found it salutary.

Perhaps the most important lesson in polar living comes not from Berto
but from Laurence’s own experiences of mystical transcendence in the her-
mitage. Having reduced Emma to madness by the paradox of his embodi-
ment, Laurence rejects all that is physical and material. Laurence expresses his
desire for self-mortification in terms of a set of familiar Romantic conceits:

To him [man] it is allowed to choose whether he will be a simply sentient
or material creature, or the brief embodiment of a spiritual essence. Shall
the Godlike look toward the dust, or towards heaven? Shall it crumble and
decay, like the plant, or shall it soar upwards like the golden angel of the
chrysalis? What obligation binds me to languish in patient subjection to the
gross laws of animal being? This blood which should glow with high ethe-
real electricity, why should it be degraded to meaner offices, and checked
in its upward course to aid in the assimilation of superfluous food? . . . This
brain, why should it heavily adapt itself to the lower impulses and neces-
sities of life when it may be developed and perfected into a tool fit for the
noblest uses of God himself? (Howe, H 46–47)

Implicitly, Laurence’s answers to these questions are clear. He will eschew all
the requirements of his body, devote himself to a “frantic pursuit of the soul
of the Universe,” and “demand to be released” from the “jurisdiction” of “this
poor, feeble, hysterical nurse of ours, called Nature” (Howe, H 47).

But in his flirtation with total disembodiment, Laurence learns a lesson
about his own polar nature and the polar nature of the universe as well. He
comes to see the opposition of body and spirit that he initially embraced as
false. Laurence discovers that God speaks “through the double medium of
soul and of sense.” To neglect the latter and indulge the former is to turn
from the light—the “heavenly comfort [that] streamed in upon my soul with the morning ray” (Howe, H 56)—and remain in darkness. Likewise, common sense tells him that to reject nature and the material world is to court death, not enlightenment: “‘Your mother Nature is not to be turned off with a pension. . . . Otherwise, when you deem her slain, she may rise up against you with horrible energy, and avenge to the death the wrong you have done her’” (Howe, H 47–48). As Howe would put it twenty years later, to favor one pole at the expense of the other—whether mind or body—is to sever the center from the circumference of a circle, and therefore destroy the circle; it is to keep the ordinary and extraordinary rays of being forever divided from themselves. In Laurence’s case, his spiritual wanderings so unbalance him that to achieve the correct synthesis of body and spirit necessary to return from the brink of death, he requires contact with the most creaturely of beings, the dog of Ronald’s servant Rudolf. The dog, relates Laurence, “seemed to be endowed in some sort with a healthy magnetism which exercised over me a soothing power” (Howe, H 55). It is “the vigour and fullness of animal life” that restores Laurence to health, and to the man who would become his lover, Ronald.

How, then, does this deeply polar being help answer the question, “what is it to be a woman?” Partly, as suggested above, the combination of Laurence’s masculine intellect and feminine body exemplifies the plight of many mid-nineteenth-century women, including Howe, whose intellectual ambitions might have made them seem unfeminine and therefore worked to exclude them from conventional heterosexual marriages. Yet the polar nature of Laurence’s hermaphroditism suggests another way to look at the question because it enables him to study what is it to be a woman from at least two vantage points: from his point of view as a man, in his relationship with a woman, Emma; and from his point of view as a woman, in his relationship with Ronald. Recalling Howe’s metaphor of the circle, we can say that Laurence’s hermaphroditism allows him variously to inhabit both the center and circumference—both of the points whose dynamic tension with the other makes the existence of the circle possible.

The question “what is it to be a woman?” is first planted in Laurence’s mind by Emma during a conversation in which he seeks to speak with her about “‘the relations of pure spirit.’” In response, she accuses him of being “one of those unsexed souls,” declaring that she has not been such “‘since I learned what it is to be a woman.’” Laurence repeats her words: they “made a strong impression on me—‘what is it to be a woman?’ I asked myself: ‘It is obviously a matter of which I have small conception’” (Howe, H 15). Clearly, in this exchange, Emma thinks she knows what it is to be a woman, but Lau-
rence does not; it is Laurence, then, who is destined to learn. Before exploring how he does this, I want to think about the way the polar philosophy embraced by the novel problematizes the very question, “what is it to be a woman,” by making a hermaphrodite the governing consciousness or narrative vehicle of the exploration. In his introduction to *Herculeine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite*, Michel Foucault asks, “Do we truly need a true sex?” (Foucault, “Introduction” vii). Foucault notes that “with a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative” (vii). At the same time, he points to an era before the eighteenth century when intersexed individuals were more or less free to choose their sex. Not until the eighteenth century, Foucault argues, did doctors begin to seek the “true” sex of hermaphrodites by “deciphering” what was “hidden beneath ambiguous appearances” (viii)—by attempting to categorize all individuals as “truly” male or female. Notably, the doctor in *The Hermaphrodite* abandons all such attempts at categorization; Laurence, perhaps anachronistically, is free to be either a man or woman, or, in the doctor’s analysis, both. So although Laurence claims to have no idea of the answer to the question of what a woman is, he might need only look within himself—as “both,” he is as much woman as man. For Laurence to ask “what is woman,” then, is partly a matter of asking, “what am I?” Indeed, only through Laurence’s first-person narration—only, that is, by being the subject of his own story—do readers receive an answer, however ambiguous it might be. Yet by necessity, the hermaphroditic Laurence, and readers with him, occupy a place that is simultaneously inside and outside the category being investigated, “woman.” Laurence’s dual nature thus has the potential to undermine the stability of the very category he sets out to understand. Although the doubleness or polarity of Laurence’s sex is extreme, it is in no way unique. Recalling that “a soulful sympathetic man has the woman in him, [and] a reasoning, energetic woman has the man in her”—that in a polar philosophy, men and women are admixtures of masculine and feminine—we might say that there is no such stable category as “woman” in this novel.

Nevertheless, *The Hermaphrodite* contains a number of conventionally gendered female characters, and what is notable about them is the extent to which their femininity is tied to the imbalances in their polar natures. Most obvious are Emma, so confident of her status as a woman but ultimately felled by it, and Berto’s sister Nina, who lives in a state of suspended animation so that she might commune spiritually with her betrothed. Equally important is Laurence, who becomes a woman in his engagements with Ronald. These characters are plagued by severe polar disharmony within themselves or in
their relationships with men. Each of these women is defined disproportionately by her sexuality and made vulnerable to it whether in its expression or repression.

Emma is the only woman in the novel to act on her sexual desires. Neither Briseida nor the Gigia (Berto's sisters) consummate their relationships with Pepino or Count Flavio, and Nina is totally disembodied. Even Eleanora and the Rösli, whose stories bridge the first and second halves of the novel, join a convent or fend off seducers, respectively. But Emma offers herself to Laurence, and for this she is punished. She tells him: “I am here, alone, in your room, in your power, at dead of night—you cannot misinterpret this, it must convince you that I love you better than life, better than honour, better than my own soul and God” (Howe, H 18). If one’s polar nature is constituted by both soul and sense, Emma’s renunciation of her soul must lead her to become severely unbalanced. In the same way that Laurence pays a price for neglecting one element of his polar nature—sense—when he abandons his own body in his “frantic pursuit of the soul of the universe,” so too is Emma punished for relinquishing her soul and her God in exchange for carnal pleasure. When under such conditions she attempts to give herself to Laurence, it is she who becomes a monster, not Laurence. She is transformed from a beautiful and graceful woman into a “maniac” who “lay foaming and writhing on the floor” at Laurence’s feet (Howe, H 19). She wears “a look like that of Medusa” (Howe, H 19), capable, it would seem, given Laurence’s subsequent torment, of inflicting as much punishment on him as the secret of his identity has inflicted on her. In Emma’s case, to be a woman is to upset the polar balance between body and soul by swinging too far toward embodiment.

Nina represents the opposite swing, and her case, understood through a polar model of identity, helps illuminate the disconcerting suggestion that death or disembodiment constitutes an ideal state for her, and more generally, for women. Nina is the youngest of Berto’s three sisters and, we are told, the most womanly among them. Laurence is fascinated by Nina and admits that she is his “favorite study” (Howe, H 158). Briseida considers Nina to be magnetic, believing that her condition is “sublime” (Howe, H 164) because it illustrates Nina’s constancy: “for every soul there is one pole-star” (Howe, H 165). Having found her pole-star in Gaetano, Nina remains true to him. Rather than live without her beloved Gaetano, who has been exiled to America, she enters a catatonic state in which she maintains spiritual communion with him. This is a deathlike state, in which Nina appears “strangely inanimate” (Howe, H 138), unable to speak (except about Gaetano) or perceive external things. Her “marble cheek” (Howe, H 141), observes Laurence, is like a death mask. Like Laurence himself, she embodies a condition that is
beyond the scope of normal medical science, for no doctor is able to diagnose Nina’s state. Laurence acquires “the magnetic command over her” (Howe, H 159), the very task that others had failed to achieve, and thereby incidentally confirms his own magnetic power. While magnetizing her, Laurence attempts to communicate with Nina about “the mysteries of the unseen world . . . the nature of God, the inner laws of being, the condition and relations of disembodied spirits, and other themes comprehended within the wide scope of the mystic-magnetic philosophy” (Howe, H 159). But Nina insists that she knows nothing about such things, for she follows Gaetano on earth and is therefore unable to look into heaven. Nina’s loss of an actual, embodied earthly existence is not compensated by access to these mysteries, as polar philosophy (Emerson’s version in particular) predicts it should be.

This failure of compensation suggests that Nina’s condition is not sublime but unnatural, even pathological. As the narrator—Laurence—tells us, “to bear lifelong in one’s bosom a wild deep longing of Nature ungratified, that is perilous. For then the infinite towards which we tend casts its shadow all too darkly upon us” (Howe, H 142). Whether the result is melancholy, inspiration, or madness, unfulfilled desire is fatal, “and its revelations will be as unlike to truth, as is the shedding of blood to the flowing of water” (Howe, H 142). In polar terms, Nina is unbalanced, just as was Laurence during his stay in the hermitage. Indeed, the parallels between Nina and Laurence are marked: their magnetic strength and communion; their status as medical paradoxes; and their desire to escape the strictures and limitations of their bodily existence.

Laurence’s moment of greatest polar imbalance is during his confrontation with Ronald, which echoes and inverts his horrific encounter with Emma. This time, Laurence plays the role of the woman, so if with Emma he was assailed by a woman, he is now assailed as a woman. As with Emma, Laurence finds himself again in a university setting with Ronald, and against this backdrop of study and reason, passions are powerfully ignited. Seeing the dangers of their increasing intimacy, Laurence holds himself apart from Ronald as much as he is able, but rather than stabilizing their relationship, this distance only increases Ronald’s frustration. Having dueled to defend Laurence’s manhood, Ronald bitterly proclaims that manhood to be a lie, for he knows the secret of Laurence’s identity. He adds that “‘you shall be a man to all the world, if you will, but a woman, a sweet, warm, living woman to me—you must love me Laurence’” (Howe, H 86). Ronald’s knowledge of Laurence’s femininity throws him into a frenzy of passion and he becomes “a demonized youth” made “strong with the strength of madness” (Howe, H 87). For a second time in the novel, then, Laurence’s assailant is made monstrous.
But unlike Emma, whose uncontrolled passions culminate in her collapse and death, Ronald draws strength from his fury and attempts to rape Laurence. Laurence feels “that terrible grasp, straining me closer and closer to the heart which, once so pure and peaceful, was now in its hour of volcanic might and ruin. On my part, a faint but rigid struggle, a sob, a mute and agonized appeal to heaven” (Howe, H 87).

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of The Hermaphrodite is that in Laurence’s experience, this near-rape seems to represent the clearest answer to the question of what it is to be a woman. In retrospect, when he is disguised as Cecilia, Laurence remembers the encounter as almost solidifying his female identity. At the end of his first day masquerading as Cecilia, he asks himself, “I, a woman?” and then promptly counters his own implicitly negative response by dreaming of Ronald: “oh! I dreamed of one who had once almost made a woman of me” (Howe, H 147). Yet to read Laurence’s encounters with Emma and Ronald as fixing the parameters of female sexuality at two unappealing extremes—punishment, in the form of madness, for the expression of sexual desire, or punishment, in the form of rape, for withholding intimacy—would be a mistake. None of these women—Emma, Nina, or Laurence—exists in a state of polar health or harmony; their stories serve as cautionary tales, not defining examples.

Indeed, the woman who comes closest to living in polar harmony with herself and her companion is Berto’s sister, Briseida. Briseida’s femininity is not in question, yet she lives out her polar destiny in her relationship with her soul mate, Pepino, in what would conventionally be understood as a masculine role. Between them, we are told, is the natural polar attraction of age and youth: “Briseida, being the elder [of Berto’s sisters], naturally had for hers [her lover] a youth some nineteen years of age, a simple hearted and studious child, whom she admonished and be-Mentored in a manner truly edifying” (Howe, H 151). Briseida is a mentor, not a mother, to Pepino; he is first attracted to her “literary reputation” (Howe, H 152), and the two quickly fall in love. Their relationship mirrors that of Goethe’s with his protégé Bettina Brentano von Arnim, a relationship that was much discussed in Romantic circles after the publication of their letters in translation, Goethe’s Correspondence with a Child, in 1837. Not by coincidence, Briseida owns the only copy of Goethe’s Torquato Tasso in all of Rome, which she and Pepino “used to pore over . . . by the hour” (Howe, H 153), united by their mutual love of German and of each other. Significantly, however, Briseida takes the place of the man, Goethe, as the learned and more powerful guide of Pepino, who takes the place of the “child,” the young woman Bettina. Though the couple inverts the expected gendering of a mentor-protégé relationship—or
perhaps because they invert it—Briseida and Pepino embody the kind of balance in their interactions that is the result of a productive synthesis of polar oppositions.

Laurence does not fully approve of Briseida’s relationship with Pepino because Pepino has been pledged by his parents to marry another woman. Nevertheless, he admires her: “Briseida seemed to me one of the few who know their own minds. There was nothing paltry, or trivial, or ungenerous in her composition” (Howe, H 155). As a woman who knows her own mind, Briseida demonstrates two important points about the polar nature of women’s identity. First, she is true to herself, which entails acting sometimes in conventionally feminine and sometimes in conventionally masculine ways. For instance, Briseida lives in a domestic world accessible only to women. Laurence gains access to this world—access Berto never had—when he disguises himself as a woman, Cecilia. He is then “initiated” into the secrets of Berto’s sisters (Howe, H 150). Yet if Briseida lives and acts as a woman among the company of other women, this social identity is in many ways at odds with her scholarly pursuits and her masculine position in her relationship with Pepino. To be true to herself is to be part feminine and part masculine; by extension, to be a woman is not to be totally and essentially female, it is to be true to one’s incontestably polar nature. Second, Briseida fulfills her destiny as a polar woman by entering into a perfectly polar relationship with Pepino. In Howe’s model of the circle, Briseida and Pepino are inextricably linked as center and circumference; in Howe’s model of the ray of being, the union of Briseida and Pepino is like the joining of the ordinary and extraordinary rays. Recalling Laurence’s judgment of Nina—that unfulfilled desire is dangerous—the importance of finding one’s polar mate comes into focus. A circle requires two points; ordinary and extraordinary rays seek each other.

Briseida’s example helps answer the question “what is it to be a woman?” Though men and women are undeniably different, because of the polar constitution of all human beings and the polar attractions that follow from that make-up, being a woman and a man are functionally equivalent: in both cases, one must embrace polar ambiguity by being true to one’s feminine and masculine natures, and one must seek communion with one’s polar mate. In this novel, the real difference between men and women—and it is significant—is not one of intellect or subject position but of social strictures, for in nineteenth-century society, women are “golden treasures, too easily lost or stolen, and therefore . . . kept under lock and key, women . . . cannot stay at home without surveillance . . . [and] cannot walk abroad without being interrupted at every turn by the sentinel of public opinion” (Howe, H 131).
Briseida's example also helps illuminate the underlying meaning of the two paired scenes of violence between Laurence and Emma, on the one hand, and Laurence and Ronald on the other. Within the domestic sphere of her brother's household, Briseida acts like a woman among other women; in her relationship with Pepino, she acts the masculine part. Briseida's gender performance is thus to a large extent determined contextually, even as her identity remains stable. Just as Briseida's fundamental identity remains constant whether she acts according to feminine or masculine conventions, so too does Laurence's identity remain unchanged, even as his gender migrates from masculine to feminine. What is notable about the paired scenes with Emma and Ronald, then, is their contextual sameness and the sameness of Laurence as he experiences two extremely negative poles of female sexuality, whether as a man or woman. In both encounters, reason, embodied in the mise-en-scène of the university, is not a shield against passion and violence but their polar constituent. Laurence's attention to reason, first as a scholar and later as Ronald's mentor, seems to provoke the dangerous passions of his lovers. Even more important, Laurence remains fundamentally himself in these paired encounters, whether he interacts with or as a woman. The two confrontations bracket Section One of the novel, and they share with the rest of that section a consistent narrative voice as Laurence struggles to keep his equanimity and overcome his loneliness in the face of partners whose affections he feels he must hold at bay. By contrast, Laurence's voice changes significantly in Section Two, during his stay in Rome, when his tone is more cavalier, less pained, and at a greater distance from the action. In Section One, Laurence participates in the trials of womanhood; in Section Two, he observes them. But while Laurence remains more or less the same in his encounters with Emma and Ronald (though his desire for Ronald is far greater than his attraction to Emma)—while his subjectivity remains stable—his gender identity migrates from male to female.

“Woman,” in The Hermaphrodite, is not an essentializing category but a category that exists only in polar tension with its opposite, man. If, according to Freud, the project of psychoanalysis “does not try to describe what a woman is . . . but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition,” the theory of polarity might say that women never truly can or should depart entirely from that bisexual state (Freud, “Femininity” 76–77). Nor would subject formation or psychic structures enter into a polar definition of womanhood. In providing a lens onto nineteenth-century understandings of sex/gender generally, the philosophy of polarity describes womanhood as contextual and relational. To live as a woman is to live with certain social strictures, as both
Briseida and Laurence do—to accept the vagaries of a polar existence, and if possible, to capitalize on the condition embodied by Laurence as “rather both than neither.” Polarity as a philosophy of sex thus promotes the ideal that one is free to determine one’s gender and also to change it. Polarity—part of a romantic scientific discourse that takes both the material and social world as its subject—is therefore at odds with the nineteenth-century legal, medical, and institutional discursive practices named by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* as those that produce sex. Where these discourses create what Foucault calls “a centrifugal movement with respect to heterosexual monogamy,” polarity allows for much more fluidity in gender choice, and even in the choice of a sexual object—Laurence is equally a man and woman in his relationships with each of his lovers, Emma and Ronald (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 38).

In *The Hermaphrodite*, the real tragedy is to be alone, and this is the fate that confronts Laurence as “rather both than neither.” As a hermaphrodite, he encompasses both the center and the circumference of the circle; he embodies the union of the ordinary and extraordinary rays of being. This wholeness, according to the doctor, makes Laurence “more beautiful, though less human, than either man or woman.” To be fully human, the doctor continues, Laurence “cannot be an exact equation between the sexes, one or the other must predominate in his nature” (Howe, *H* 194). In other words, Laurence must move into a state of slight polar disequilibrium, not so great as to constitute ill health and invite destruction, but just enough to create a vital polar tension within himself and a generative polar tension with another. As long as Laurence remains an exact equation, he will remain as he began the narrative, condemned to solitude because he “could never hope to become the half of another” (Howe, *H* 3).

Even at the end of the manuscript, Laurence is alone, yet his polar constitution offers him an alternative to life without a woman or man by his side. He has a series of visions in which Emma and Ronald vie for possession of his body and soul, but neither wins. “He is mine,” shrieks Emma; “she is mine,” responds Ronald. Laurence turns from woman and man and appeals to God—“take me, for I am thine” (Howe, *H* 196)—and in doing so, makes faith the solution to his dilemma. Finding himself stretched on a cross, Laurence hears a voice say “a cross is not formed otherwise than of two loves or two desires which cross each other or conflict” (Howe, *H* 196–97). Torn by conflicting desires, Laurence receives a kind of polar absolution for enduring the pain of loneliness. He becomes like Christ, who, writes Howe in “Polarity II,” embodies “the undifferentiated Divine, showing in his nature all that is most ideal in man and woman, without the personal limitations of either”
(Howe, “Polarity II” 41). Though Laurence never quite achieves the status of “the undifferentiated Divine,” he has always approximated it by personifying the polar synthesis of all that is ideal in man and woman. By viewing the text through the philosophy of polarity, we can see Laurence’s sufferings as in some ways analogous to Christ’s: as a necessary complement of, rather than in simple opposition to, his status as ideal. The laws of polarity require, in Emerson’s words, a nay for every yea.

There is even a suggestion in the final paragraph of the manuscript that Laurence will ultimately be united with Ronald—that his sufferings as a perfectly polar being will be allayed. After his visionary state, Laurence falls into a deathlike stupor, and his body is prepared for the grave. In the final sentences of the manuscript, Laurence hears a “step”—presumably that of Ronald—which is “oh, how well known,” and then “the falling of one upon his knees beside me” (Howe, H 198). Though the manuscript breaks off at this point, the text suggests through a parallel between this scene and the frame-tale of Eva and Rafael that, Cinderella-like, Ronald will awaken Laurence with a kiss. Whether they will be joined in this or the spirit world is hard to predict. But because Ronald regards Laurence as a “she,” any future the two have together will entail that Laurence reconceive his gender identification from “he” to “she.” In other words, Laurence’s future depends on following the lead of his/her body—and the laws of polarity that his/her body obeys—by regarding gender the same way s/he regards sex: as a category with fluid and changing boundaries.

Notes

1. I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which funded the research on this essay.
2. On the importance of polarity to nineteenth-century science, see Walls and Wilson; on the polarity of light, see Jenkins; and on Coleridge, see Barfield.
3. In the 1840s, when Howe was writing her text, “natural philosophy” was synonymous with “science,” and indeed, there was a great deal of overlap between what are today the distinct disciplines of science and philosophy in the writings of most Romantic philosophers, including Goethe, Coleridge, Kant, Schelling, Schiller, Emerson, and others.
4. My understanding of polarity is deeply indebted to Barfield’s What Coleridge Thought.
5. See Dykeman.
6. See also Grant, who notes that “from 1842 on, [Howe’s] religious imagination bore the stamp of the Transcendentalists” (51).
7. According to Grant, these are “Polarity” (1864) and “Polarity II” (1865). I have not been able to locate “Polarity” in either the Library of Congress or the Houghton Library, but the passages that Grant quotes from it are also included in “Polarity II.” I therefore
speculate that “Polarity II” is a revision or expansion of the text of “Polarity.” In addition to these two essays, Howe wrote a number of other pieces on similar themes, including “Duality,” “The Halfness of Nature,” “Limitation,” “Moving Forces,” “Duality of Character,” “The Two Necessities,” and “Opposition.”

8. Howe likewise uses the metaphor of the circle in her poem “The Heart’s Astronomy,” in which she figures herself as “a comet dire and strange” traveling in circles around a fixed center constituted by her children and praying that “the laws of heavenly force” will guide her path. See Howe, PF 101–3. Thanks to Gary Williams for bringing my attention to this poem.

9. See, for instance, Margaret Fuller’s critique of that relationship in “Bettine Brentano and Her Friend Günderode.” See p. 442 n. 1 on the translation of the correspondence.
When Julia Ward Howe began to write the text we now call *The Hermaphrodite*, did she consult Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* for a definition? If she had, she would have found an unsurprising entry with an intriguing conclusion: “Hermaphrodite: An animal uniting two sexes. *Man and wife make but one right/Canonical hermaphrodite—Cleaveland*” (Johnson n.p.).

When young Julia Ward became curious about sex, did she sneak a peek, as so many of her contemporaries did, at *Aristotle’s Master-piece*, the illustrated German “medical” text that had become the “central document of vernacular sexual culture” in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America (Horowitz 25)? If she had happened to flip to the section titled “Of the secret Parts in Woman,” she would have read:

WOMAN, next to man, the noblest piece of this creation, is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, a sort of second self; and in a married state are accounted but one; As the poet says,

Man and wife are but one right
Canonical hermaphrodite. (“Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher” 14)
Where Johnson uses Cleveland's verse to define hermaphrodite, the *Masterpiece* uses the figure of the hermaphrodite to define marriage. In *The Hermaphrodite*, Howe would take this connection to the opposite extreme.

“Upon an Hermaphrodite” is a trifle, a minor poem published in 1640 by a minor poet, John Cleveland (so minor, in fact, that Johnson misspelled his name). The poem opens by presenting the familiar platonic conception of the hermaphrodite—two halves of one soul, reunited—as a trope for a married couple. But as it progresses, the poem becomes less a serious meditation on hermaphroditism than a “comical description of double-genderedness, including self-courtship” that was best known as a rousing drinking song (Peraino 207). Reveling in his/her hermaphroditic body, dancing and enjoying the “melting kisses,” it bestows upon itself, Cleveland’s hermaphrodite is a figure of libertine fun and sexual pleasure—certainly nothing to take too seriously. But as it repeatedly surfaces in reference texts, especially the numerous encyclopedias that reprinted Johnson’s definitions,¹ the couplet contributes to print culture’s connection between hermaphrodites and marriage.

While it’s unlikely that Howe read Cleveland’s poem in its entirety, Howe animates this trope in her novel so that *The Hermaphrodite* becomes, in part, a meditation on sexuality and/in marriage. From the beginning of the text, Howe connects her hermaphrodite, Laurence, to the platonic conception of marriage visible in Cleveland’s poem. Laurence can “never hope to become the half of another” in part because as a hermaphrodite he already embodies both halves of the platonic whole (Howe, H 3). But the pleasure that hermaphroditism offers to Cleveland’s figure is off limits in Howe’s text. Laurence takes little pleasure in his beautiful body. And while Cleveland uses the hermaphrodite to figure the married couple, in *The Hermaphrodite* marriage is impossible, not only for Laurence but for all of the characters in the text.

Though she was newly married when she wrote the text, and grappling with the meanings of that complicated and difficult relationship, Howe does not explore any extant marriages. While she valorizes, and in some cases sanctifies, her characters’ powerful feelings of passionate desire, the text denies them marriage at every turn by geography, politics, familial proscription, death, age, class status, and in the case of Laurence, by his body itself. Though desire is everywhere, and characters pursue pleasure in a variety of proscribed settings, no one in this text can become “the half of another.” As Laurence’s personal difficulty becomes a communal problem, the text deconstructs ideas about romantic marriage, and especially women’s roles in marriage, that were becoming the American norm by the time Howe married in 1843.
However minor, “Upon an Hermaphrodite” is part of an important pre-history for Howe’s text, one that reveals the dramatic shifts transforming American ideas about sexuality and marriage in the mid-nineteenth century. In this essay, I read The Hermaphrodite as Howe’s protest against the nineteenth-century solidification of an American conception of marriage far more restrictive than the ideas about marriage earlier generations of Americans shared. Historian Richard Godbeer notes that in the early nineteenth century, when expectations for morality in sexual relationships had begun to devolve upon women, solidifying gender roles, American “wives and mothers . . . [became] effectively prisoners in their own temples; those who forsook normative roles . . . would be branded as having failed in their mission as women” (Godbeer 338). In The Hermaphrodite Howe wrestles with this new reality. In the first half of The Hermaphrodite, Laurence struggles with the impossibility of his situation. But when Laurence journeys to Rome, Howe constructs a space marked by more flexible notions of love, pleasure, and gender roles. Howe’s decision to portray the text’s only marriage as existing within the imaginary world of a madwoman—and to set that illusory marriage in frontier America—reveals both Howe’s powerful belief in imagining one’s way to happiness and the crushing disappointment that deluded belief brings. If only secretly, in the pages of The Hermaphrodite Howe could critique American ideals of marriage without offering the reassuring closure of a happy ending.

Though They of Different Sexes Be

Written long before Howe married, Cleveland’s couplet and Aristotle’s Masterpiece parallel early American attitudes about marriage, gender, and sexuality, ideas that were changing just when Howe was growing up. As historians such as Nancy Cott, Richard Godbeer, John D’Emilio, and Estelle Freedman have shown, a massive shift transformed American ideas about sex—and especially women’s sexuality—during the first decades of the nineteenth century. A colonial culture that saw women as equally if not more sexually passionate than men began to value women’s “passionlessness” and demand that women control their sexual desires. “A new system of gender relations emerged in the nineteenth century in which women lost their association with lust and instead were invested with the quality of innate purity” (D’Emilio and Freedman 56). And while women gained some cultural power from this emphasis on their purity and superior self-restraint, “the apparent veneration of women as ethical exemplars created an insidious double standard. This com-
bined with an emerging belief that men and women had distinct personalities to create a gendered conception of moral order” (Godbeer 337). Over the course of the century, novels, marriage manuals, almanacs, tracts, and newspaper poetry helped teach readers that courtship, marriage, and sexual relations should be private; that the ideal marriage should be based on romantic love; and, though some couples tried to avoid pregnancy, that the goal of sex within marriage should be procreation, not pleasure (Godbeer chapter 9; D’Emilio and Freedman 75, 78, 55).

But print culture doesn’t change as quickly as this synopsis suggests; older books are reprinted and reread long after they are initially published, and a voracious reader like Julia Ward Howe would have gleaned ideas from old works and new, American and European. As Gary Williams has shown, Sam Ward offered his sister Julia access to reading material (like French novels) forbidden by her “jailer” father; Williams also suggests that the catalog of Sam’s library probably excludes “occasional or ephemeral reading, not appropriate” for a formally published document (Williams, “Speaking” xiii). If, as Williams has argued, Howe was reading fairly current novels, she was also reading much older texts, perhaps even a book as “not appropriate” as Aristotle’s Master-piece.

Aristotle’s Master-piece would never have appeared in Sam Ward’s published library catalog, but according to historian Helen Horowitz, this eclectic text had amazing staying power in the American colonies and the new republic. While “never considered part of official culture,” the ideas, language and images in the Master-piece’s many editions “continued to be received popular wisdom well into the nineteenth century” (Horowitz 26). And in a culture that was beginning to position women as fundamentally different from men, especially when it came to sex, the older ideas of the Master-piece, reprinted in countless editions through the nineteenth century, continued to present a more egalitarian view.

The Master-piece begins by classifying people into two categories, men and women, and describing in detail their sexual organs and their functions. As the book continues readers are taught that women’s organs are the perfect complement to men’s. They also correspond to men’s: what we call ovaries today are labeled “women’s testicles” in Aristotle’s Master-piece:

Thus the woman’s secrets I have survey’d
And let them see how curiously they’re made.
And that, though they of different sexes be,
Yet in the whole they are the same as we.
For those that have the strictest searchers been,
Find women are but men turn'd outside in:
   And men, if they but cast their eyes about,
   May find they're women with their inside out. (“Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher” 18)

Men are women; women are men: “In the whole they are the same as we.” Though this notion of sexual sameness was out of the mid-nineteenth-century American mainstream, it is easy to imagine that the idea would have had lasting appeal, especially to women like Howe who chafed at the thought that women were intellectually different from (and inferior to) men.

Are men and women different? Are they the same? These are the basic questions that emerge in nineteenth-century print culture around sexuality and marriage. The legal definition of marriage in the nineteenth-century United States both resolves and makes moot how Howe must have struggled to maintain a “masculine” intellect as she became a wife whose role by the mid-nineteenth century was to serve her husband as a passionless reproducer. Connecting American definitions of marriage to nascent republicanism, historian Nancy Cott argues that Americans in the late 1700s saw “the unity of husband and wife” as marriage’s fundamental principle (Cott 10). “Common law turned the married pair legally into one person—the husband. The husband was enlarged, so to speak, by marriage, while the wife’s giving up her name and being called by his symbolized her relinquishing her identity” (Cott 11). But in the Early Republic, female sexuality, usually called lust, was still recognized as a powerful force. By the time Julia Ward married in 1843, the idea of female passionlessness was beginning to hold sway, and Julia Ward was legally and sexually subsumed to Samuel Howe.

How Curiously They’re Made

The fundamental idea that American common law and Aristotle’s Masterpiece share—that through marriage two complementary (at least sexually) people might become one—is visible in the early portions of Howe’s text, where it clashes with nineteenth-century expectations for male/female difference and female sexual self-control. These increasingly restrictive notions of gender, sexuality, and marriage that Howe faced as a new wife are also clearly visible in the text. Although Laurence sees himself as a “whole” who can never find its platonic other half because his body has both male and female qualities, culture demands that he identify as one gender or the other. And in Laurence’s world, as in Howe’s, only one gender offers the opportunity
for independence, dignity, and freedom of choice. With the stakes of gender identity so high, one question that looms here is: how is sex determined?

Though the first page of Howe’s original manuscript is missing, the Nebraska edition of *The Hermaphrodite* begins by laying the category of sex completely open to question. As the novel opens, Laurence, the hermaphroditic protagonist and narrator, states: “A child has, properly speaking, no sex” (Howe, H 3). Sex, it seems, is acquired later—but how? Howe explores three possibilities laid out in *Aristotle’s Master-piece*: that gender may be determined randomly, that it may be assigned according to its practical benefits, or it may be determined through sex acts.

Largely concerned with sex between men and women, the *Master-piece* nevertheless devotes considerable attention to hermaphrodites, exploring this special category using a question-and-answer format unique to the book. When *Aristotle’s Master-piece* asks, “Should he [the hermaphrodite] be baptised in the name of a man or a woman?,” the answer is easy: “In the name of a man, because names are given *ad placitum*” (“Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher” 195). The Latin phrase *ad placitum* means arbitrarily—names can simply be assigned. Howe’s text echoes this convention. Laurence’s despised father, here called Paternus, explains, “‘You were born imperfect,’ related Paternus. ‘It was difficult to determine your sex with precision, it was in fact impossible. No time was to be lost, however, and the exigency of the case decided for us. Under the circumstances we considered it most expedient to bestow upon you the name and rights of a man’” (Howe, H 29). Laurence’s gender assignment is simply the most practical choice.

Precisely because he/she won’t be able to marry, the infant Laurence is made a man:

> It was resolved to invest me with the dignity and insignia of manhood, which would at least permit me to choose my own terms in associating with the world, and secure to me an independence of position most desirable for one who could never hope to become the half of another. I was baptized therefore by a masculine name, destined to a masculine profession, and sent to a boarding school for boys, that I might become robust and manly, and haply learn to seem that which I could never be. (Howe, H 3)

For the first part of the book, Laurence attempts to play a part he can never fully enjoy. He lives, essentially, as a man and enjoys masculine freedoms. He falls in love with men and women; he experiences moments of deep spirituality, deep passion, and deep shame. Emotionally, he is womanly. But
because he is intellectual, a scholar, Laurence’s male status, assigned by his father, offers him intellectual options that aren’t open to women. Here we can see Howe’s critique of the idea that minds are gendered: through Laurence she shows that to access the world of the mind, one had better be born—or labeled—male.

But according to Aristotle’s Master-piece, sexual acts can also determine the hermaphrodite’s gender. And here, as in the discussion about assigning gender ad placitum, the notion of the hermaphrodite as “both, rather than neither” breaks down in the face of a cultural need to assign a single gender to each body (Howe, H 195). The Master-piece asks, for instance:

Q: Is an hermaphrodite accounted a man or woman?
A: It is to be considered in which member he is fitted for the act of copulation; if he be fittest in the woman’s then it is a woman; if in the man’s he is a man. (“Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher” 195)

If sexual acts determine gender, a hermaphroditic child would have no gender until he or she began to engage in sexual activity. This accords with Howe’s claim that “a child . . . has no sex” (Howe, H 3). But once begun, a hermaphrodite’s sexual career has surprising definitive power.

In addition to determining a hermaphrodite’s gender, the Master-piece claims that sexual acts can determine a hermaphrodite’s legal status.

Q: Shall he stand in judgment in the name of a man or woman?
A: According to the law he should first swear, before he be admitted to judgment, which secret part he can use, and so is to be admitted according to the use and power of that part. (“Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher” 195)

If the idea of people swearing to judges about their secret parts is strange, the notion that “the use and power of that part” would mean either access to or denial of one’s rights to citizenship and property ownership is even stranger. It begs the question of why any hermaphrodite would ever admit to acting the woman’s part. But Aristotle’s Master-piece leaves unanswered the question of what determines one’s fitness to play any particular role in the “act of copulation.” Is it one’s physique—or the part one desires to play? The possibility remains open for hermaphrodites to determine gender through pleasure. And importantly, no option for sexual behavior is closed to a hermaphroditic person, at least within the pages of the Master-piece.

Howe explores the notion that sexual experiences determine gender in
Chapter Four

The Hermaphrodite, but significantly not through Laurence. Instead, Laurence’s first love interest, the beautiful young widow Emma von P., comments:

“Laurence, I hope you are not one of those unsexed souls.”

“Have you never been one?” said I.

“Never,” she replied, “since I have learned what it is to be a woman.”

These words made a strong impression upon me—“what is it to be a woman?” I asked of myself: “It is obviously a matter of which I have small conception.” (Howe, H 15)

Laurence has no conception of womanhood not because he lacks a feminine side, but because he is sexually inexperienced. In contrast, Emma implies that her sexual experiences have taught her the meaning of womanhood.

The same nineteenth-century school of thought that assigned different intellectual capacities to men’s and women’s brains imagined that they had different sex drives as well; women were expected to maintain a tight rein over their sexuality because men’s passions were simply too strong to control (a notion in stark contrast to the early modern view). Howe explores the limits of this philosophy through Emma. A widow, Emma von P. is sexually experienced, financially independent, and free to remarry. She is also the person in the text who is most appalled to learn that Laurence is a hermaphrodite. But in terms of changing nineteenth-century ideas about women’s sexuality and marriage, what is pertinent here is the way in which she learns this fact—when she offers herself to Laurence sexually without the benefit of marriage, saying:

“I am still young, rich, and perhaps handsome, but I do not pretend to be worthy of you—had I such a hope, I should scarce be at your feet, but look you, I am here alone, in your room, in your power, at dead of night—you cannot misinterpret this, it must convince you that I love you better than life, better than honour, better than my own soul and God. Give me but this night, but this one hour—do you ask where I shall be tomorrow? I can die tomorrow—I shall have been happy.” (Howe, H 18)

If the naïve Laurence cannot, neither can we as readers misinterpret Emma’s offer. All she wants is a night of sex, no strings attached.

Emma’s overpowering sexual desire is easily explained, according to Aristotle’s Master-piece: in widows, “this strong inclination of theirs may be known by their eager gazing at men, and affecting their company, which sufficiently demonstrates that Nature excites them to desire coition. . . . It may be observed in young widows who cannot be satisfied without that due
benevolence which they were wont to receive from their husbands” (“Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher” 22). Emma’s extremely powerful sex drive is easily understood—even normative, according to Aristotle’s Master-piece, which offers an equally straightforward cure: more sex. Though she suggests that sex outside of marriage might be worth more than life, honor, her own soul and God combined, Emma’s desire puts her in a predictable bind.

Emma’s sense that dire consequences that will follow sex with Laurence echoes Aristotle’s Master-piece, which (though not consistently) classifies sex outside of marriage as risky business. The anonymous author of the Master-piece begins the book with a disclaimer of sorts emphasizing that the pleasures the book describes and depicts may only be experienced within marriage: “Whatever is spoken of the venereal pleasures, is spoken to those who have, or may have, a right thereunto, by being in a married state. For, Who to forbidden pleasures are inclin’d / Will find at last they leave a sting behind” (“Aristotle, the Famous Philosopher” 20). In the context of vernacular sexual discourse, Emma’s sense of the risks she takes by propositioning Laurence seems reasonable. And Emma does, in fact, die from the encounter. Yet it is worth noting that what kills Emma isn’t sex—it’s the sight of Laurence’s body. Howe allows Emma’s sexual desire to be powerful but not deadly. What kills Emma is her inability to think and love outside of clear-cut gender categories.

After Emma dies, the question of marriage is foreclosed, not just for Laurence but for almost every other character in the book. But Howe’s removal of marriage as a possibility for her characters does not mean the foreclosure of sexual pleasure. Laurence is so beautiful that he becomes the object of sexual desire for both men and women in the text—and in one of the book’s most memorable scenes it seems likely that Laurence does have sex with his former student and true love, Ronald. The experience, however, fills Laurence with such self-loathing that he exiles himself from Ronald and moves to Rome. Because choosing any sexual part to play is impossible for him, the world of pleasure available to the hermaphrodite in Aristotle’s Master-piece and “Upon an Hermaphrodite” is closed to Laurence—not by any of his would-be lovers, but by Laurence himself. Instead, pleasure moves beyond the classifiable—if not for Laurence, then for the people with whom he comes into contact as his travels unfold.

The Woman’s Secrets I Have Surveyed

If the first half of The Hermaphrodite establishes Laurence’s beautiful intersex body as a trope for the married couple—and not coincidentally, a source of horror, self-abnegation, and pain—the text’s final section sees the classification—
obsessed Laurence choosing both sides: he does the intellectual work of a man while dressing as a woman. This part of *The Hermaphrodite* opens to Laurence and the reader Italian attitudes toward gender, sex, and marriage radically different from American ideals, while showing that American ideals about marriage may be dangerous to women’s mental health.

To gain this perspective, Howe detaches Laurence from his intense personal relationships. After moving from Germany to Rome in order to study with his unconventional tutor, Berto, Laurence becomes a participant-observer in an almost anthropological study, going undercover as a woman named Cecilia in order to infiltrate the world of women. He muses, “It would certainly seem odd enough that I, who had roamed the world so wildly, and with such a luxury of freedom, should consent to take upon myself the bondage of this narrow life” (Howe, *H* 131). Laurence laces up his corsets both to hide out from his father and because Berto believes that “it is important that you should see men as women see them, and no less that you should see women as they appear to each other, divested of that moral corset de pré-caution in which they always shew themselves to men” (Howe, *H* 133). The world Laurence enters is extremely limited—he lives a cloistered life with the three sisters of his mentor. In this Roman interior world, Howe explores Laurence’s hermaphroditism as a privilege that allows him a special understanding of women’s lives and desires. And, significantly, the text begins to engage with America.

What follows is not simply a study of womanhood, for Berto’s sisters transcend traditional expectations for their gender. The three sisters, Briseida, Nina, and the Gigia, love men but for a variety of reasons can’t or won’t marry the people they love. “Two of them,” Berto explains, “are at the limits of their youth, and are neither married, nor likely to be so. My sisters are of natures at once too enlightened and too expansive to doom themselves to the narrow ropewalk of Conventual life. They are, on the other hand, too proud to present themselves as candidates for selection in the great woman market of society” (Howe, *H* 136). Neither Conventual nor conventional, these two proud sisters, Briseida and the Gigia, each pursue intellectual projects (Briseida is a scholar, the Gigia a painter) and have lovers. They reveal to Laurence, in his disguise as Cecilia, a feminine freedom that has been invisible to him.

But Laurence’s feminine, emotional side is most touched by Berto’s youngest sister, Nina. Nina, too, has openly had a lover, Gaetano, who has been banished from Rome for his political views. “America was his place of exile” (Howe, *H* 137). Already betrothed, Nina had wanted desperately to marry Gaetano before he left so “that she might share the fortunes of her beloved
one” (Howe, H 137). But on being assured that his absence will last only for a year, Nina resigns herself to her brother’s demand that she remain in Rome. Her studies, Gaetano’s letters, and her formidable imagination will allow her to share her lover’s journey, if only in her mind.

Before Gaetano leaves, Nina transforms her “little boudoir” into a study, filling it with “maps, charts, and books of travel” (Howe, H 137). Her private bedroom becomes a site for intellectual work; love and distance transform her into a scholar. A diligent student, “the little enthusiast even conquered the difficulties of the English language, that she might read the best books descriptive of America” (Howe, H 137). “These will be my guides,” Nina tells Gaetano, “you will write me constantly of your movements, and I shall study so diligently that I shall soon have a clear idea of the countries in which you will dwell, of their aspect and climate. Do not then dare to be unfaithful to me, for my soul goes forth with your soul, and wherever you may be, I shall stand beside you” (Howe, H 137). Through her intellect and imagination, Nina can ensure that their two souls remain one. Here, Nina embraces the developing nineteenth-century American ideal of marriage: two souls merging in romantic union.

Fueled by writing, their romance flourishes as it becomes simultaneously transatlantic and literary. Gaetano writes “full and frequent letters” to Nina for a year, and as long as she keeps receiving his letters she maintains her studies, vividly picturing the places he describes with the aid of her “guides.”

She passed her days in these studies, in writing to her lover, and in reading his letters a thousand times over. Gradually she began to make for herself a story of his life, and from the data given, to trace for herself a more detailed outline of his daily movements.

“He is on the Mississippi today,” she would say, or on another occasion: “something tells me he is at this very moment looking on the Niagara.” We were sometimes startled by the intensity of these impressions, but as all love is madness, I thought her no more crazy than any lovelorn damsel. (Howe, H 138)

Again, Howe reinforces the new ideal connecting marriage to romantic love. To the classifier Laurence, Nina is readily legible according to this paradigm: a “lovelorn damsel,” “crazy” in love.

But slowly, Nina’s studies and letter writing become actual madness. Gaetano’s letters stop coming, and her romantic love is reduced to visions that her family and friends struggle to understand.
She has, apparently, no knowledge of external facts, no thought beyond the dream life in which she dwells, with her phantom lover. . . . Gigia briefly called her mad—Briseida considered her simply magnetic, while I became convinced of the presence in her of that abnormal illumination which is technically termed clair-voyance. (Howe, H 158)

What does Nina’s clairvoyance give her? And why does Howe connect this part of the text to America—not the refined upper-class New York in which she grew up, nor the intellectually stimulating world of Boston in which she would spend much of her adult life, but the rough frontier, a place of streams, forests, and grizzly bears? America is a dream state—a caricature of itself that can only appear in a set-piece as ridiculous and overblown as Laurence’s cross-dressing becomes. Yet while Laurence’s cross-dressing is played for laughs, the masquerade that is America is the source of tragic pain.

Only outside of “civilization,” and only through a state called madness, is marriage possible in The Hermaphrodite. Yet the companionship of the mind Nina enjoys with Gaetano is missing a crucial element—a physical, sexual relationship. This lack drives Nina mad. That their imaginary relationship is sexual becomes clear when Laurence asks Nina:

“Looks Gaetano as he used to look?”

“Oh no! he is attired like a savage, in skins and a blanket, with a hunting pouch, and bow, and spear. His carbine is slung at his saddle bow, and instead of a sword, he carries an axe. But he is beautiful in his wild attire, and the Indians call him the young fir-tree, so slender and erect is he.”

“And you are his wife, Nina?”

A slight tremour passed over Nina’s frame, and her utterance was broken and uneven, as she replied:

“Berto, I know not what that word means. We are wedded, oh yes! we have been wed for years, and I have no heart but to love him, no hands but to labour for him, and yet, and yet, look at these” and she held up her arms “somehow, they are always empty.” (Howe, H 142)

If the imagery attached to the new world Gaetano, attired like a savage, as “slender and erect” as a sapling, does not indicate clearly enough the sexualized way in which Nina imagines their relationship, she conveys an uneven but fairly direct yes to Berto’s question of whether she and Gaetano are wed. Yet her trembling body’s arms are empty; she can speak, but only brokenly. Though elsewhere in the text Nina seems detached from reality, here she seems all too aware of her imagination’s constraints. The absence of physi-
cal love, manifested in Nina’s empty arms, is impossible for her to bear. The physical reality of sex is absent, and without it, marriage, even a perfect marriage of minds and souls, is simply a prescription for madness and eventually death. While Laurence reveres Nina’s self-sacrificing adoration, the book’s other characters see Nina’s imaginary love as simple insanity.

In Europe, or at least within the cloistered walls where Laurence is masquerading as Cecilia, it seems clear that, while they can’t marry, intellectual women like Nina’s sisters can pursue sexual relationships with men fairly openly. But when Howe trains her European characters’ eyes and imaginations back on “America,” she discovers there a paradoxical land where desire is, if anything, more difficult to fulfill. This America is not Howe’s New York or Boston, but a paradoxical space where the fantasy of perfect intellectual/soulmate love is fulfilled while its physicality is denied.

The Strictest Searchers

If Howe reveals the consequences of public women’s moral imprisonment through Emma von P., she constructs in Rome a cloistered world in which women may escape their moral roles, if only privately. *The Hermaphrodite* itself is a clear parallel to this world, in that writing the text offered Howe an opportunity to transcend, imaginatively, the restrictions her new roles as wife and mother placed upon her. While allowing for the possibility that imaginative transcendence may leave her arms as painfully empty as Nina’s, the text also asserts a world of possibility accessible in private that evades restrictive expectations for gendered sexual morality.

Marriage is a paradox in Howe’s text. Made impossible, marriage nevertheless returns as a question for all of *The Hermaphrodite*’s characters, whether they refuse it, like Briseida and the Gigia; are prevented from it, as Berto, Laurence’s younger brother, and Rösli are; or refuse to repeat it, as in the cases of Laurence’s father and Emma von P. Thus, Howe detaches the figure of the hermaphrodite from the trope of marriage to which popular and scientific texts persistently linked it. But in writing *The Hermaphrodite* and keeping it secret, Howe enacts the very vision of sexual identity popularized in *Aristotle’s Master-piece* that she undermines in the text.

Thus the woman’s secrets I have survey’d
And let them see how curiously they’re made.
And that, though they of different sexes be,
Yet in the whole they are the same as we.
For those that have the strictest searchers been,
Find women are but men turn’d outside in:
And men, if they but cast their eyes about,
May find they’re women with their inside out.

Laurence may, like the woman in this poem, be a man turned outside in; he may just as easily be a woman turned inside out. In either case, the text keeps the answer a secret. Although the doctor who examines the dying hermaphrodite’s body pronounces him “rather both than neither” (Howe, H 195), the doctor, Berto, and Briseida get a rational, scientific, sympathetic view of Laurent (as he is called at this point in the text) that the reader is not privileged to obtain. The “answer” about the hermaphrodite’s identity remains as sealed off from readers as the text’s female world is cloistered from Rome.

Whatever Howe felt about her own marriage, and however she played out those feelings in The Hermaphrodite, she put her writing away, and only now can we begin to turn the secret text inside out. As we do, The Hermaphrodite reminds current readers that much of the boundary-breaking around nation, gender, desire, marriage, and sexuality endemic to the twenty-first century was being examined and imagined by nineteenth-century thinkers in a variety of disciplines. The Hermaphrodite can help us to understand how earlier Americans thought about sex, marriage, and nation differently—in some ways more restrictively but in others far more flexibly—than we think about these ideas today. This is particularly true in the context of vernacular ideas about sex and desire found in texts like “Upon an Hermaphrodite” and Aristotle’s Master-piece that helped to shape European and American sexual sensibilities in the early nineteenth century. Both texts grapple with complex issues of gender, pleasure, and identity through the figure of the hermaphrodite, whose potential to unsettle categories and customs reveals the categories themselves to be social constructions. The Hermaphrodite thus operates as an intertext of sorts, mediating between the freewheeling libidinousness of eighteenth-century urban and literary culture and the more restrictive norms of bourgeois marriage that would emerge in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Written privately and never published, Howe’s text can only now take its place in literary history. And as it does, it may help to rewrite literary historians’ notions of sex, gender, and marriage in the nineteenth-century United States.
Note

1. In addition to Johnson's Dictionary and Aristotle's Master-piece, the couplet appears under the definition of hermaphrodite in encyclopedias, including The New Encyclopædia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences, and Encyclopaedia Perthensis, or, Universal Dictionary of the Arts, Sciences, Literature, etc.: Intended to Supersede the Use of Other Books of Reference.
That two of the foremost icons of nineteenth-century womanhood wrote novels dealing with such gender-bending themes as a female Faust, a hermaphrodite, female power, cross-dressing, and gender questioning is not something that their contemporaries—or readers for decades afterward—would have suspected. Yet Julia Ward Howe, whose name has come down to us primarily for her stirringly religious Civil War anthem, “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and Louisa May Alcott, who is remembered primarily as the author of girls’ fiction, most notably Little Women, were also the authors of two novels that were so out of step with mid-nineteenth-century American mores that they were unpublishable during the authors’ lifetimes. For over a hundred years the manuscripts languished in library archives. It was not until 1995 that Alcott’s 1866 novel, first titled “A Modern Mephistopheles,” was published under the title A Long Fatal Love Chase. And in 2004 Howe’s untitled “Laurence manuscript,” begun in 1847, was published under the title The Hermaphrodite. Alcott had attempted to publish her novel pseudonymously as she had other mystery fiction, but the publisher rejected it as “too sensational.” However, Howe apparently never attempted publication of her manuscript, and, as Gary Williams has argued, it is doubtful that she even showed it to anyone (Williams, “Speaking” x, xxxvi).
It is not that the topics discussed in these two novels were unknown at the time; however, the topics were inconsistent with the image required of a “respectable” mid-nineteenth-century American woman. As Alcott once said, she could not afford to throw off the “chain armor of propriety” demanded of a woman (Pickett 107–8). In Howe’s work, the narrator, Laurence, uses the same concept to describe the restrictions of women’s dress, calling it a “complete armour of silk and linen” (Howe, H 147).

It is this image of the circumscription of women that provides the principal connection between the two works. In this essay, I look at the ways in which Howe and Alcott in these unpublished texts interrogated society’s construction of women and explored their own resistance to and deviance from contemporary heteronormative definitions of womanhood.

Both Alcott and Howe knew that if it were known that they had written on—or even had thought about—the topics in these novels, their reputations would be destroyed. Would people buy their other works? Would their families suffer? Would they lose caste to the extent that they would not be admitted to polite society? Would their friends shun them? These were not idle thoughts. Women who overstepped the boundaries established by mid-nineteenth-century society often found themselves relegated to the status of pariahs. When Lydia Maria Child published her controversial pamphlet An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans in 1833, people ostracized her, sales of her books plummeted, her children’s magazine failed, and her library privileges at the Boston Athenaeum were rescinded.2 Fanny Fern wrote anonymously at first, but when an irate publisher broke her cover in December of 1854, she found herself shunned and gossiped about. People refused to be introduced to her because her independent stance translated into an impropriety. Journalist Thomas Butler Gunn, for example, wrote in his diary that he refused to meet her because he assumed that she was “base and unwomanly like her writings” (Gunn, April 10, 1859).3 Reviewers castigated her for her “unfeminine” writing, with Putnam’s Monthly declaring that her novel Ruth Hall was “overflowing with an unfemininely bitter wrath and spite,” while the New York Times, echoing the sentiment expressed in many other reviews, openly stated that “If Fanny Fern were a man . . . Ruth Hall would be a natural and excusable book”; it was because the novel was written by a woman that it was inexcusable. Because Fern did not write as a “delicate suffering woman” of the time was expected to write, her work was called “unfeminine,” “vulgar,” “monstrous.”4

In Howe’s work the term “monster” provides a metaphor for the person who manifests the characteristics of both genders. Emma, the woman who falls in love with Laurence, calls him “monster” when she discovers that he
is a hermaphrodite (Howe, H 19). And later, Laurence in his despair applies the term to himself (Howe, H 193). Given the criticism expressed throughout the novel of society’s trivialization of women and Howe’s own intellectual aspirations (which at the time would have been regarded as “masculine”), it seems apparent that, although there are other interpretations for her use of the hermaphrodite theme, in one sense Howe uses the image of the hermaphrodite to portray the situation in which she found herself—a woman with what were regarded as a man’s intellect and aspirations. Similarly, Alcott portrays in Rosamond a woman who yearns for the power and freedom of a man. Since such “manly” characteristics were not in a woman’s “job description,” and in fact were socially unacceptable for women, a woman who openly manifested such qualities was regarded as a kind of monster, or, as Robert Bonner wrote in an 1859 editorial criticizing the strong, independent woman who ventured outside the domestic sphere, she was “a monster, a man-woman” (Bonner).

The term “monster” or “monstrous” was also used in the nineteenth century to denigrate the woman who sought what was regarded as a “masculine” education, or an intellectual education equal to that given to boys. Such an education, wrote Dr. E. H. Clarke in his 1873 book Sex in Education, would damage a woman’s reproductive abilities and “was a crime before God,” a threat to the continuation of the species (Clark 31–60, 90, 98–109, 127). Educated women, he said, were in danger of being made sterile, and if they did manage to have a child, they could be unable to nurse it. Clarke’s book was taken seriously as a scientific argument, and some colleges issued disclaimers, warning women that a college education could be hazardous to their health. Clarke’s book sold two hundred copies in one day at the University of Chicago, and the University of Wisconsin, which had admitted women ten years earlier, issued the following disclaimer in 1877: “Every physiologist knows that at stated times, nature makes a great demand upon the energies of early womanhood. . . . It is better that the future matrons of the state should be without university training than that it should be produced at the fearful expense of ruined health” (quoted in Rosenberg 12). Clarke was not alone in asserting his thesis. Other medical men adopted the same “scientific” explanation as to why women should not have what was thought of as a boy’s education. Dr. Thomas Emmet, for example, wrote in Principles and Practices of Gynecology in 1879 that intellectual effort or other “exciting pursuits” could impair a young girl’s reproductive abilities; her mind, he said, “should be occupied by a very moderate amount of study, with frequent intervals of a few moments each, passed when possible in the recumbent position” (Emmet 21).
In 1874 Julia Ward Howe published a book entitled *Sex and Education: A Reply to Dr. E. H. Clarke's “Sex in Education,”* a collection of essays taking issue with Clarke's thesis. The collection included critiques of Clarke by such writers as Mary Peabody Mann, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and Howe herself, as well as statements by spokespersons for colleges that had admitted women. Howe in her essay noted that Clarke's “scientific” book was not at all scientific, but simply a statement of opinion without evidence to back it up. Clarke, she said, claimed that education was causing the “ever increasing deterioration” of the health of American women, who, he said, were “tending ever more and more towards the monstrous type, sterile and sexless” (Howe, *Sex* 14–15; my italics).

There is a parallel here with the situation Betty Friedan described in *The Feminine Mystique,* her 1963 critique of the post–World War II construction of femininity, which confined women to a domestic role and allowed no room for intellectual or other pursuits outside the home. A woman of the period once told me that when she first read Friedan’s book, she felt great relief because she no longer thought that she was a “freak” for having aspirations beyond her household. Previously, she said, she had felt like a freak because she knew she did not fit society’s definition of womanhood. Howe and Alcott are expressing a similar interrogation of nineteenth-century definitions of gender identity. Alcott in 1883, five years before her death, commented, “I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body” (quoted in Moulton 49). And in Howe’s novel, the term “monster” provides a paradigm for the socially induced self-criticism that a woman might feel who did not fit the mold.

Howe’s and Alcott’s unpublished novels, then, reflect the authors’ questioning of the social construction of gender that marked as “freak” or “monster” any woman who transgressed conventional boundaries. Let us look first at Alcott. Louisa May Alcott urged women’s independence, but she was always circumspect in her public articulation of her ideas. Her popular fiction, which was written for children, contains suggestions of her belief in women’s independence, but it is only in her anonymous and pseudonymous fiction for adults that Alcott gave full expression to her belief in autonomy for women. Particularly significant is her posthumously published novel, *A Long Fatal Love Chase.* Written in 1866, two years before the publication of *Little Women,* this novel, which was originally titled “A Modern Mephistopheles” (a title that Alcott used eleven years later for a novel with a male protagonist), tells the story of a young woman who is willing to sell her soul to the devil in order to win her freedom. Living on an isolated island with an indifferent grandfather, eighteen-year-old Rosamond feels stifled by convention. Main-
taining that she feels like a “caged creature,” she declares, “I’d gladly sell my soul to Satan for a year of freedom” (Alcott, Chase 1). She amuses herself in such an “unfeminine” way as climbing out onto the roof, and, as she says, “testing her courage” by walking around the outer ledge of the balustrade with no railing between her and the precipitous cliffs below (Alcott, Chase 21). “‘I like danger,’” she says, “‘there’s excitement in it’” (Alcott, Chase 22).

Yearning to experience the freedom and adventure open to a man, she wants to be “‘free as air, to see the world’” (Alcott, Chase 9) and vows, “‘I’ll do anything to get out of my prison’” (Alcott, Chase 38). Thus when Philip Tempest wins her from her grandfather in a card game and agrees to marry her, she is glad to go with him. As she says when she first goes aboard his yacht, “‘Ah, I wish I had such liberty as yours’” (Alcott, Chase 29).

Instead of finding freedom, however, she finds that she is the possession of a tyrannical man whom she comes to suspect of murder. After living with him for over a year, she discovers that her marriage to him is fraudulent; he already has a wife and child. Shocked at the horror of her situation, she flees to Paris, where she supports herself as a seamstress for nine months until the obsessive Tempest finds her and “exultingly” attempts to reclaim her like a “master who has recovered a runaway slave” (Alcott, Chase 137). Conscious that he no longer has any legal “power over her” (Alcott, Chase 136), but imprisoned by him in her sixth-floor room, Rosamond asks for a delay and escapes by climbing out of the window and across the roof, until, with bleeding hands, she is able to reach the window of another seamstress. (Her youthful roof-top adventures stand her in good stead here.) Later, cross-dressing to elude Tempest, she is taught to walk like a boy, “‘to take a larger stride, to look boldly up and swing her arms’” (Alcott, Chase 163–64). Rosamond concludes that she likes being a boy because of the freedom it gives her: “‘I like it, Lito,’” she says, “‘and if I were a boy I’d roam the world over, happy with my pipe [and] my freedom’” (Alcott, Chase 166). The novel becomes a power struggle between her and Tempest. She tells him early in the novel, “‘You might kill me but not bend me’” (Alcott, Chase 63). Tempest is determined to “see her proud spirit broken” (Alcott, Chase 225), but even after he has her imprisoned in an insane asylum and she is weak and ill, he realizes that “however weak her body might be her soul was unconquered still” (Alcott, Chase 261–62). Confronting him with “dauntless determination,” she tells him that she will “‘never yield’” (Alcott, Chase 220–21; original emphasis). Alcott reiterates this assertion of Rosamond’s strong will over and over throughout the text.

In fact, Rosamond’s yearning for freedom and independence is close to Alcott’s own. Alcott wrote in her diary in 1856: “I love luxury, but freedom
and independence better” (Alcott, *Journals* 82). Implicit in Alcott’s focus on the search for power is the realization that the ability to earn money was in itself a source of power for women. In “Behind a Mask,” published under the name A. M. Barnard in 1866, it is Jean Muir’s ability to gain enormous wealth that makes her invulnerable. Jo March, when she finds she can earn money for herself, is exhilarated by her newfound power: “She . . . began to feel herself a power in the house” (Alcott, *LW* 201). Alcott herself exulted in her own power of independence. In 1868 she wrote: “I want to realize my dream of supporting the family and being perfectly independent” (Alcott, *Journals* 162). Alcott’s capacity to earn a living from her writing made her father call her an “arsenal of powers”—which was particularly significant considering the lifelong power struggle between Alcott and her father (Bronson Alcott 397). When she was twenty-four years old and working to support herself in Boston, she wrote home to her father: “I think I shall come out all right, and prove that though an Alcott I can support myself. I like the independent feeling; and though not an easy life, it is a free one, and I enjoy it” (Bronson Alcott 89; original emphasis). Considering the fact that her father was notoriously unable or unwilling to support his family, this letter is clearly a put-down of her father; it is also an assertion of her joy at being independent.

Alcott knew that the portrayal of woman as power seeker was not socially acceptable. In a revealing interview, Alcott once commented that the reason she did not write “lurid” fiction (she did not acknowledge that she wrote it anonymously) was that she did not want to forfeit the approval of society: “[T]o have had Mr. Emerson for an intellectual god all one’s life is to be invested with a chain armor of propriety. . . . And what would my own good father think of me if I set folks to doing the things I have a longing to see my people do?” She characterized herself as a “victim” of “respectable traditions” (quoted in Pickett 107–8). Alcott’s periodical publishers attempted to persuade her to sign her name to her thriller fiction, even offering her more money if she would do so, but she adamantly refused. There were only two occasions when Alcott did agree to sign her name to her mystery stories, and it is significant that in those two cases, although the stories are “lurid,” the heroine is not a power-seeking woman as in most of her mystery fiction. Not only are the heroines of these stories not power-seekers, they are wholly selfless.7 Clearly, it was not simply because of the “luridness” of the material, but because of her portrayal of the woman as power seeker that Alcott refused to publicly acknowledge her thriller fiction.

The thriller stories that were published without Alcott’s name signed to them focus almost wholly on the theme of female power. The subtitle of “Behind a Mask,” the most well-known of these stories, is “A Woman’s Power.”
Jean Muir, the female protagonist, is the puppeteer and entrepreneur who successfully orchestrates her own ascendance to wealth and power. As the character Helen asserts in “The Mysterious Key,” a story published the following year (1867), “I am tired of pity. Power is sweet, and I will use it” (Alcott, Mask 206). Other anonymous and pseudonymous stories also focus on female power. “A Pair of Eyes” explains how “a sense of power” brings “exultation” to a woman (Alcott, Double 68). In the story “Taming a Tartar,” in many ways a rewriting of Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew with role reversal, the heroine sets out to tame a man who has a “cursed temper” and a “despotic will.” She is triumphant in the power struggle, and by the end of the story he yields to her, humbly declaring, “I submit” (Alcott, Double 241, 244). This bold assertion of female power never appears so explicitly in the fiction to which Alcott signed her name.

When protected by her anonymity, Alcott redefined female gender to include the power that her society associated with masculine independence, but in the fiction to which she signed her name, she was more circumspect. Unlike a writer like Fanny Fern, whose reputation was already tarnished by the scandalous stories spread by her ex-husband, she did not have nothing to lose; she needed to protect her “chain armor of propriety.” In her anonymous works the heroine could assert her power, challenging the annihilating male will; there, Alcott portrayed the female power seeker as autonomous, shrewd, and unregenerate. But in the works to which Alcott signed her name, her heroine kept within the bounds of normative behavior. Privately and anonymously, Alcott established new and radical assertions of female gender identity, but she was not willing to risk her own reputation by publicizing under her own name her redefinition of woman.

In The Hermaphrodite Howe accomplishes the same thing that Alcott did in her thriller fiction. Portraying a man-woman in the unpublished Laurence manuscript, she was able to write about gender issues that she, as a respectable middle-class wife and mother, could not have publicly acknowledged. First, it is significant that, although her protagonist is literally both male and female, his parents choose to raise him as male. As he tells us at the beginning of the novel, “it was resolved to invest me with the dignity and insignia of manhood, which would at least permit me to choose my own terms in associating with the world, and secure to me an independence of position most desirable for one who could never hope to become the half of another” (Howe, H 3). That there should be no question but that his family would make this choice is indicative of the different ways that men and women were regarded by society at the time and provides a statement of Howe’s recognition of the lack of respect and power accorded women.
Moreover, Howe observes that men do not respect women’s minds. Laurence, while at college, calls women “pretty moths,” and notes that the college men seek them out when they wish to “trifle,” not when they wish to “reason” (Howe, H 5). Later, he comments on the “endless tedium” of a woman’s life, with its attention to “trivial details” and “microscopic interests” (Howe, H 132). Here Howe echoes the opinion of the time expressed most insultingly by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who commented at a women’s rights convention in Boston in 1855 that a woman’s proper function in life was to “embellish trifles”; women, he said, should not seek any other pursuits (Emerson, “Woman” 409).

Howe, however, did not believe that women had no other talents. The problem, she makes clear, was the faulty education they received. As Berto says, women “are educated rather to triviality and routine than to strength and virtue—they are taught to appeal to our indulgence, not to command our esteem” (Howe, H 99). Advice books at the time focused on this goal for women. Popular books like Samuel K. Jennings’s *The Married Lady’s Companion* (1808) and William A. Alcott’s *The Young Wife* (1837) insisted that a woman was created to be “man’s assistant” who should adapt herself to her husband and always submit to his authority as to God (William Alcott 27, 29). Outspoken critics like Margaret Fuller and Fanny Fern asserted that women needed to resist such books, which only taught them how to be placid sycophants even to the most unworthy husband. Fuller wrote in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* in 1844 that books on woman’s place only “fit her to please, or, at least, not to disturb, a husband,” and Fern, who often expressed her contempt for the one-sidedness of advice books, wrote in her own “Hints to Young Wives” in 1852, “Shouldn’t I like to make a bon-fire of all the ‘Hints to Young Wives,’ ‘Married Woman’s Friend,’ etc., and throw in the authors after them?” (Fuller, *Woman* 93; Fern 224–25). In *The Hermaphrodite* Berto tells Laurence that women have “high capacities” and suggests that a study of women would help one to “appreciate the wrong done them by education and position” (Howe, H 99). Women, he said, are “not taught to think”; consequently, they become the “slaves of men” (Howe, H 101).

In her 1874 reply to Dr. E. H. Clarke’s dire warnings that a “boy’s” education would damage a woman’s reproductive organs and injure her health in general, Howe pointed out that if women are unhealthy, it cannot be blamed on education. Women, she said, have been in ill health and even sterile in many countries throughout history (she cites the Bible among other sources) whether educated or not. Clearly there are other reasons for women’s health problems. One, she said, was the unequal treatment they receive in society:
Boys are much in the open air. Girls are much in the house. Boys wear a dress which follows and allows their natural movements. Girls wear clothes which impede and almost paralyze their limbs. Boys have, moreover, the healthful hope held out to them of being able to pursue their own objects, and to choose and follow the business or profession of their choice. Girls have the dispiriting prospect of a secondary and derivative existence, with only so much room allowed them as may not cramp the full sweep of the other sex. The circumstances first named directly affect health, the last exerts a strong reflex action upon it. (Howe, Sex 27–28)

Not only are women deprived of an intelligent education, writes Howe in *The Hermaphrodite*, but their freedom of movement is restricted. Women are “kept under lock and key” and “under surveillance” even at home. It is not enough that they are “imprisoned” by their guardians, but their every move is judged and assessed, with society quick to blame them for even the most minor transgressions: they cannot go out without being “interrogated at every turn by the sentinel of public opinion” (Howe, *H* 131). That these comments reflect Howe’s own experience is clear from biographical evidence. When she published an anonymous review of Lamartine’s narrative poem *Jocelyn*, the story of a man who falls in love with a young man but discovers later that he is a woman, her uncle commented that he wished “she knew more about housekeeping” and less about books (Howe, *Rem* 20). Howe’s father’s conventional ideas on “woman’s place” led her to refer to him as her “jailer” (Richards and Elliott, vol. 1, 49). As a young woman, she was not allowed to go out in the evening or even to entertain friends at home. Her adventurous brother Sam Ward intervened on her behalf, writing in an 1838 letter to their father, “You always exact too much of her in desiring not only that she obey you but be happier in so doing than in following up certain wishes of her own” (quoted in Elliott 176). Sam, who returned from a four-year stay in Europe in 1836, encouraged his sister’s literary interests and was instrumental in introducing her to such European writers as George Sand, Lamartine, Balzac, perhaps Gautier. As she said later, he “opened a new world” to her, bringing into the “Puritanic limits of our family circle a flavor of European life and culture” (Howe, *Rem* 58, 48–49, 67–68). Some of the most important aspects of “European life” that Sam brought to his sister were books by George Sand and stories of Sand’s unconventional behavior. Sam admired what he called the “free genius” of Sand, whom he described as a “moral hermaphrodite” and characterized as “superior to Balzac.” Sand’s writing, as well as her cross-dressing and gender-bending behavior, was exciting and liberating for Howe. In 1861 she wrote about how, as a young girl, she had read George Sand’s
books clandestinely, knowing that her father would not approve, but as she read, she said, the “atmosphere grew warm and glorious” (Howe, “Sand” 514).

Influenced, perhaps, by her knowledge of Sand’s cross-dressing, Howe wrote in *The Hermaphrodite* of the extent to which the restrictions of mind and behavior that encumber women are exacerbated by the tangible restrictions of women’s dress. When Laurence must disguise himself as a woman, he finds that women’s clothes are “like the fabled vest of Hercules, full of uneasiness and of torture” (Howe, *H* 136). And when he is finally able to take them off for good, he exults to be “released from the ignominious bondage of petticoats, that my legs should be disencumbered of a mass of articles utterly foreign to their use and purpose, and that my diaphragm should be allowed to expand in freedom broader than the lacings of a woman’s bodice.” The dress he calls an “ally of weakness and deformity,” and when Laurence strips off the “odious disguise,” he and Berto celebrate by dancing and shouting around the clothes, trampling on them, and finally burning them to ashes (Howe, *H* 187–88).

If the author betrays a kind of wish-fulfillment in this jubilant escape from the bondage of female clothing, there is also a suggestion that Howe may have herself cross-dressed for greater freedom. But whether she is describing her own experience or that of other women whom she knew of (George Sand, for example), she reveals a sympathetic understanding of the phenomenon in her narrator’s description of how women “are very naturally glad now and then to throw off their chains with their petticoats, and to assume for a time the right to go where they please, and the power of doing as they please” (Howe, *H* 131). As Fanny Fern noted, in reporting on her own excursions in male dress in the 1850s, in addition to the glorious freedom of the experience, she found that men talked to a woman as if she were a human being when they thought she was a man, instead of patting her on the head condescendingly or flattering her insincerely: “To be able to step over the ferry-boat chain when you are in a distracted hurry . . . ; to pick up contraband bits of science in a Medical Museum, forbidden to crinoline, and hold conversations with intelligent men, who supposing you to be a man, consequently talk sense to you. That is worth while” (Fern 299–304). In *The Hermaphrodite* Howe, too, not only describes the freedom that comes with the assumption of male dress; she maintains that women can gain a truer view of men and of life when they are not encased in feminine trappings, which constitute a barrier to the realities of life and to the free interchange of ideas:

What a new world does this open to a woman! . . . It is a world of reality in exchange for a world of dreams—it is dealing with facts instead of forms,
with flesh and blood, instead of satins and laces. She can hear the conversation of the camp, the cabinet, the café, the gaming table. She can learn how men talk and act when they are drunk, and angry, and sincere. . . . If she be so minded, she may learn to drink, game, and swear with the best of them. . . . She may find a keen pleasure in new investigations of men and things, a mischievous delight in the usurpation of rights not her own, or a philosophical satisfaction in intellectual relations divested of the dangerous attraction and repulsion of sex. (Howe, H 131)

In their unpublished works, then, Howe and Alcott provide a glimpse of the yearnings of a restricted mid-nineteenth-century woman who felt herself to be a “freak” or “monster,” but maintained the respectable exterior required of her in order to retain the respect and approval of her contemporaries. Shielded from what Howe called the “sentinel of public opinion,” they were able to interrogate gender questions with impunity. Neither author was able to provide a satisfactory solution to the problem in these works, however. In spite of—or perhaps I should say, because of—Rosamond’s strong will and adventurous spirit, in the end she must die because there is no place for her in society. And at the end of Howe’s manuscript, the hermaphrodite also dies—or is entombed in a living death. There is no place for the man-woman on earth. Howe can only suggest that perhaps in the afterlife there will be a happier future for Laurence. Berto’s sister Briseida sees Laurence as a Swedenborgian “heavenly superhuman mystery, one undivided, integral soul” (Howe, H 195–96). And Alcott also can only look toward a visionary future for the man-woman, the “noblest ideal of womanhood”—the “strong-minded, strong-hearted, strong-souled, and strong-bodied woman . . . who is to stand alone” (Alcott, Girl 263, 257–58). Both these authors use their unpublished texts to think out gender roles—what they are, what society’s construction of them is, and the implications of their impact on women.

Notes

1. Alcott wrote in her diary in September 1866 that she had submitted the manuscript to James R. Elliott, who had published other of her pseudonymous works, but that he “would not have it, saying it was too long & too sensational” (Alcott, Journals 153).
2. For a discussion of the repercussions from the publication of Child’s pamphlet, see, e.g., Karcher, The First Woman in the Republic 91–92.
3. See also Warren, Fanny Fern 182.
4. Putnam’s Monthly 5 (February 1855): 216; and New York Times (December 20, 1854). For a discussion of the reviews criticizing Fern’s writing as “unfeminine” and “un-
womanly,” see Warren, *Fanny Fern*, esp. 124–28. Fern's husband James Parton's family was hostile to her because of her “unfeminine” unconventionality (186–94). Gunn comments in his diary on March 24, 1856, that women were “especially down upon” her, and her editor, Robert Bonner, wrote in February of that year of the “malignity and cruelty with which some women and more men have causelessly persecuted her” (quoted in Warren, *Fanny Fern* 180–81).

5. For example, Gary Williams suggests that one of the reasons for Howe's interest in the hermaphrodite theme may have been as a way of understanding the “intense connection between her husband and his younger friend,” Charles Sumner (Williams, “Speaking” xxii–xxvii).

6. The discussion of Alcott here is revised and expanded from an earlier version that appeared in my book *Women, Money, and the Law* (2005) and is used with permission of the publisher.

7. The two thriller stories that were originally published under Alcott's name were “The Mysterious Key and What It Opened” (1867), reprinted in *Behind a Mask*, and “The Skeleton in the Closet” (1867), reprinted in *Plots and Counterplots*.

8. For a discussion of Sam Ward’s importance to Julia’s development, see Williams, “Speaking” xi–xx.

9. Sam Ward’s letters to Longfellow of April 25, 1839, and March 1, 1842, are quoted in Elliott 250–51, 342–43.
Writers for most U.S. periodicals in the 1830s and ’40s—the years in which the novels of Balzac, Eugène Sue, Paul de Kock, and preeminently George Sand began to be noticed—regarded French writing as Satanic. Representative is a reviewer for Horace Greeley’s New-Yorker in 1836, provoked by Victor Hugo’s Lucretia Borgia: “Modern French literature is so atrociously corrupt that, whether its pictures be directly and openly subversive of moral rectitude or only descriptive of abominations which have or have not occurred, it is alike vicious and revolting” (New-Yorker 349). Private reaction in many quarters reflected this attitude. George Templeton Strong, New York attorney and indefatigable diary-keeper between 1835 and 1875, noted that although he felt obliged to learn French, “I’m ashamed of myself for complying so far with popular prejudices as to have aught to do with so despicable a dialect.” Before long he was dismissing it as the “miserable dialect of monkeys, hyenas, and man-milliners,” and after reading a work by Kock, he invoked Samuel Johnson’s view of Lord Chesterfield to express his opinion of the French: “‘possessing the manners (and the mind) of a dancing master and the morals of a whore’” (Strong, vol. 1, 204, 287–90).

For others, however, French fiction created a potent imaginative space to explore cultural paradigms alternative to those they lived within. George
Sand's writings and public persona, in particular, performed this work. Reading her novels, in some cases even simply reading reviews of her works, encouraged some Americans to interrogate the rigidity of standard nineteenth-century gender prescriptions. As Catherine Masson noted in 2003, most American intellectuals—“malgré des réticences”—considered Sand a great, even a very great writer (Masson 158). The full account of these “réticences” remains to be told, although segments of the story exist piecemeal in studies of individual writers—Carolyn Karcher's biography of Lydia Maria Child, for example, and Helen R. Deese's edition of the diaries of Caroline Healey Dall (Karcher, First Woman 320, 328, 412; Dall). Two whose appreciation has gone mostly unremarked were Samuel Ward and his friend Henry Longfellow. Ward spent four years abroad in the 1830s, a good part of that period in Paris. When he returned to the U.S., he brought with him several of Sand’s early novels and thus was among the earliest American readers of her work. Beginning in 1836, Ward and Longfellow (whom Ward had also met abroad) carried on an epistolary conversation that frequently invoked French fiction and Sand’s in particular. When Longfellow began work on his autobiographical romance Hyperion in 1839, Ward was an enthusiastic reader of the manuscript, offering suggestions that indicate his extensive knowledge of French novels. Simultaneously he was himself penning a two-part article for The New York Review about Hyperion in the context of Balzac’s work. The exchange concerning these projects reveals important information about Sand’s presence—or, more accurately, her absence—in serious American discussion of fiction.

On April 25, 1839, Ward wrote that Joseph Cogswell, Ward’s mentor and the editor of The New York Review, had “circumscribed” the first part of Ward’s article, the section dealing with Balzac. “The deeper parts of the Study he left out,” Ward reported, adding drily that he and Cogswell “differed about the conclusions to be drawn from the History, nature & art of Romance—from its History as a chapter in the biography of the Human mind, from its nature as among the productions of the Kingdom of intelligence, and from the powers exercised in its creations and delineations.” And as if it weren’t enough to have had his enthusiasm for the literary value of Romance edited out, he seems also piqued at having had to muffle sentiments of a more specific kind. In this context, without transition, he continues:

George Sand is superior to Balzac. It is inconceivable how the free genius of that woman gives birth to ideas of the highest order of masculine beauty clothed in a language worthy of Rousseau. She displays none of the machinery a knowing eye can detect in Balzac. Whether it be to throw up a palace
in a few pages or to unfold a whole poem of Auto-biography—to summon the spirits of a drama and follow its lights & shades & scene shiftings—her pen is ever ready. I believe that she and La Mennais are the two first writers in France of the present day—and that France numbers now the best writers and most accomplished critics in the world.

A paragraph later, again abruptly, Ward returns to Sand: “Don't you want to read some of George Sand? I wish she might be criticized here—but a Reviewer would be forced to endure a censorious and moral [grimace?] and she is excessively heterodox. But the holiest painters have never refused to take prostitutes even—as models of beauty.”

Longfellow did, at Ward's prompting, read Sand, though not immediately. His journal indicates that he began with *Jacques*, starting it in June 1840, and shortly after that read *Spiridion*, about which he wrote: “What a magnificent style the woman writes in! Truly there is more poetry in such prose, than in Racine's so-called poetry.” Ward had encouraged him (June 20, 1840) by describing *Spiridion* as “the most tumultuous & true exhibit of possible passionate individuality I ever read” and observing how “strange” it was “that a woman should have depicted the heart of man.” But then Longfellow's interest evidently flagged, for Ward wrote on July 8:

If “Spiridion” does not stimulate your thoughts it is because you have never indulged in speculations upon religious topics and suffered from doubt, or that your mind is made up. In fact, your life has been too full of intellectual exertion to permit that dreamy passion of useless reverie about matters impenetrable to overpower you.

The second sentence, with its suggestion that Sand's novel might immobilize or stupefy, could be read as an indication that Ward's own enthusiasm had waned. In fact, this state of “dreamy passion” was exactly what Ward was missing in his banker’s life on Wall Street and what he had believed he might retrieve for himself (and encourage in others) through writing about Balzac and Sand. Later in the letter Ward indict the dancer Fanny Essler and George Sand for feeding on triumphs and reveling in ambition, instead of finding contentment in love. Further, he accuses such women of being “dangerous to [their] sex and to humanity.” But this apparent attack seems ironic, intended to prick the perennially phlegmatic Longfellow's sense of what is worth attending to.

Ward continued to champion Sand's talent and to send her works to Longfellow. He seems to have felt that if his poet friend could just catch a little
of Sand’s fire, his own works would benefit. His October 4, 1841, response to
the poet’s “Excelsior” praises the work’s “magical, electrical” effects and the
“mingled effect of poesy & music,” but chides that because “French Romances
prove barren to you as the East Wind,” Longfellow cannot appreciate or
appropriate the more galvanic poetic qualities of Sand’s works. “Her motto
is Excelsior,” Ward needles. Le Compagnon du Tour de France, which Ward
had just finished, seemed (Ward implies) much more likely than Longfellow’s
poem to “move thousands,” drawing its materials from the working classes
“with a truth, an earnestness, an absence of all pretension & of all exaggera-
tion & an entire unconsciousness of the public & indifference to its applause
or its censure—which invest the narrative with an almost apostolic quality.”

I have elsewhere traced the young Julia Ward’s exposure to Sand through
her brother Sam’s agency and have posited that reading Sand’s early works was
transformative, giving important impetus to Julia Ward Howe’s desire to be
a writer (Williams, HH 13–16; 240–41; Williams, “Speaking” ix–xlv). Howe
first wrote in 1861 of this impact, remembering stolen hours with a flickering
candle in a wintry room and how “the atmosphere grew warm and glorious
about us,—a true human company, a living sympathy crept near us,—the
very world seemed not the same world after as before” (Howe, “Sand” 514).
Even in much later life, when the “powerful ideas of life and character” that
Sand’s novels offered seem faded and readers had tired of hearing of “women
whose merit consists in their loving everything better than their husbands,”
Sand herself still burned in Howe’s memory as a purveyor of “wicked delight,”
a personage “not content to be either man or woman” who beckoned “like a
wild Bacchante” (Howe, Polite 39, 69; Fuller 135–36).

Among the Sand works that inspired these reactions, there is no men-
tion of a relatively minor piece, Gabriel, a novel in the form of a play written
in 1839 and published in three installments in the Revue des Deux Mondes.⁴
Howe’s papers contain no reference to Gabriel (though she could well have
read it, and probably did read Francis Bowen’s remarks on it in a North Amer-
ican Review essay on the 1839 Brussels edition of Sand’s works).⁵ But parallels
between Gabriel and The Hermaphrodite are striking: both provide a remark-
able window into the process of a female-identified writer trying to imagine
an existence unbound by the strictures of gender.

Sand’s work, set in Italy in the 1630s, tells of a female raised as a male
so that her branch of the family can maintain property rights. (Questions
of inheritance also play a significant role in Howe’s narrative.) At age sev-
enteen Gabriel does not know that she is female—in fact, she has been
raised to despise everything associated with women. Her tutor reassures her grandfather:

Since his earliest childhood he has been imbued with the grandeur of the masculine role, the abject condition of the feminine role in nature and society. The first paintings to strike his attention, the first facts of history to awaken his thoughts, showed him the weakness and subjection of one sex, the freedom and power of the other. (Sand 7)

When the intentions and deceptions of her upbringing become known to her, Gabriel sets out to thwart her grandfather’s desires by meeting the (male) cousin whose inheritance rights she has unintentionally compromised. Despite the fact that she eventually claims her femaleness for the sake of an intimate relationship with her cousin (with whom she falls in love), Gabriel throughout the work is psychically hermaphroditic: “I don’t feel my soul is one sex or the other,” she muses in a speech responding to her tutor’s conventional essentializing of gender roles. “I want to know everything, feel everything, possess everything, brave everything!” (Sand 10, 14). This sentiment finds an echo in Howe’s narrative, in Berto’s ethos for educating Laurence: “Know that I abhor onesidedness, fixed idea, and all the insanities of the learned. . . . I desire to do entire justice to every fibre of my brain, every nerve and muscle of my body” (Howe, H 95).

Gabriel, still presenting herself as male, first encounters her cousin Astolphe in a down-and-dirty tavern. Astolphe is conspicuously steeped in male identity from his first entrance (Gabriel notes his “noble bearing” and envies “his masculine features, his large hands” [Sand 26]), and furthermore, Astolphe evaluates Gabriel’s actions and looks in terms of how male he is. After a bloody bar fight among gangsters and students, Gabriel and Astolphe wind up together in a jail cell. Bemused by Astolphe’s insouciance in the wake of the fight (during which both have killed someone), Gabriel is tempted to understand this difference between them as a manifestation of gender: “I seem to be the only one concerned with it, as if, in effect, my soul were of a different nature. . . . No, I will not accept that idea of female inferiority!” (Sand 34). Such distinctions on the basis of anatomy, Gabriel posits, are human-created and condemned by God. Later, while Gabriel sleeps, Astolphe looks at him/her and is conscious of strong and unexpected feelings—one of which is surprise that such a “beautiful boy . . . raised like a maid deep in an old castle” could kill so lightly. This meditation begins Astolphe’s own interrogation of the gender binary. “I feel I like that boy, I love such bravura in a delicate constitution,” he muses. “I’d like to have a mistress who looked like
him. But a woman would never have that kind of beauty, that candor mixed with strength” (Sand 36).

In the second act, set during Carnival in Florence, Astolphe, in pursuit of his androgynous fantasy, has persuaded Gabriel to go out dressed as a woman. Gabriel bristles at the confinements of female attire and finds his/her costume “indecent” (Sand 50), but is nonetheless struck by her beauty when she looks in the mirror. The moment evokes the sensation created in Théophile Gautier’s Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835), in which Madeleine de Maupin, masquerading as a man, appears in costume as Rosalind in As You Like It: a female in male drag costumed as a woman. Pratima Prasad concisely describes the innovative qualities of Sand’s handling of this situation:

Transvestism implies a transgression; it is based on the assumption of an inside core . . . that precedes the act of disguise, which the disguise then proceeds to “cross” or “transgress.” In masculine clothing, Gabriel can be said to be disguised since h/er anatomy is female. However, which gender boundaries can s/he be said to be crossing, if h/er gender identifications are mostly masculine and sometimes fluid? What if we consider the fact that the cross-dressed subject h/erself perceives her “inner” self as masculine and therefore considers her [usual] costume to be gender normative, not transgressive? On the other hand, when s/he is in feminine clothing, there is continuity between anatomy and costume; yet it functions as a disguise. . . . Exterior costume, whether masculine or feminine, is always already a travesty. (Prasad 341)

This scene also calls to mind its parallel in The Hermaphrodite, in which male-identified Laurence chooses a gender-neutral costume, a domino, in order to escape notice by “the crowd of squeaking and grinning buffoons” during the Roman Carnival and thereby better position himself as an observer (Howe, H 121).6 His insight—fueled by Berto’s perception that many in the crowd wear disguises “that they might act the truth” (Howe, H 121), hiding their faces in order to reveal their hearts—transcends gender considerations altogether: it is that fervent hearts in general are always necessarily in drag. Passions of the soul, whether male or female, must be clothed in the apparel of normativity; artists must speak with the voices of others—as Sand’s ungendered heart does in the guise of Gabriel, as Howe does through her dual-gendered Laurence.

As the Carnival scene in Gabriel spins forward, Sand progressively undermines gender fixedness in both her main characters. Astolphe—whose mistress Faustina has already observed Astolphe’s woman-like attention to his own costume—is smitten with the appearance of Gabriel in a beautiful dress,
but his reaction is not only to her appearance; it is partly also to her character. He praises him/her without at first using physical descriptors: “I have in my imagination, in my heart, an ideal woman! And it’s a woman who resembles you, Gabriel. An intelligent and simple being, forthright and refined, courageous and timid, generous and proud” (Sand 52). Gabriel, meanwhile, has had her dress made to reflect the appearance of an androgynous being she dreamed of—“not an inhabitant of this world. I had wings, and could fly high enough to traverse other worlds, toward I don’t know what ideal place” (Sand 12). Astolphe says Gabriel dreams of angels and advises her (him, he still thinks), “Don’t wake up, because you’ll only find women in real life!” (Sand 53).

But the charged fluidity in these exchanges crashes abruptly into binary genderedness at evening’s end when Astolphe interrupts Gabriel undressing. Gabriel, unable to undo the dress’s ties and pins, in frustration rips the dress open (Sand’s stage direction in Manifold’s translation stunningly reads, “he takes his sword from the table and cuts the corset’s laces, baring his breasts” [Sand 64]), and thereafter relations between the two proceed according to the world’s expectations for an anatomical woman and anatomical man. When we next see Gabriel and Astolphe, they are a living-together couple, and she has been linguistically feminized with an “le” attached to his name.

Coupled—and predictably discontent. Gabrielle hates being left at home with servants and Astolphe’s mother, expected to make small talk and mend household linens. Priest and mother register objections to her desire to read Thucydides. Gabrielle bridles, but even in her protest she embraces a view that accepts the reality of culturally constructed distinctions between male and female:

Look, Astolphe, you made me become a woman again, but I haven’t given up altogether being a man. Even though I put on the clothes and occupations of my sex, I keep in me that instinct for moral grandeur; that calm of power that a male education develops and cultivates. It seems that I am something more than a woman. (Sand 78)

Astolphe, to his credit, is deeply sympathetic and willingly embraces “this bizarre and delicious voyage” they’ve charted (Sand 80). Gabrielle experiences what Laurence begins to discern when he lives as a woman with Berto’s sisters. Addressing his gown, the engendering mask that renders him specifically female and thus less than his whole self, Laurence fumes, “‘Toga of hypocrisy . . . what an odious imposture art thou! Thou art the ally of weakness and deformity, the cruelest enemy of beauty—thou art a very tissue of
lies’” (Howe, H 188). Like Laurence, Gabrielle from the moment she sees herself garbed as a woman wonders why women can’t be “pleasing without these simpering affectations” (Sand 50).

In Gabriel’s Act IV, a compromise has been worked out: the couple lives several months in the mountains of Calabria (Gabrielle as a woman) and then in Florence as brothers for the balance of the year. Astolphe would prefer to lengthen the Calabrian existence, Gabrielle the Florentine, but Astolphe becomes maniacally jealous when other men in Florence, believing Gabriel to be male, treat him with easy familiarity. The unexpected arrival of one of Astolphe’s former associates in their Calabrian hideaway blasts the fragile equilibrium, and Gabrielle flees. The last act presents a nightmare of pursuit and attempted coercion. Astolphe tries to persuade Gabriel’s former tutor to reveal her whereabouts and then marry them: “I feel that a little authority, legitimized by solemn vows on her part, would protect me against her independence and pride” (Sand 103). The tutor urges Astolphe to “let her live and die in disguise, happy and free, with you,” but Gabrielle recognizes that Astolphe’s putative love is really “savage pride, a thirst for vengeance and domination.” Because he’s male, she says, a life “made up only of love and contemplation could not suffice for him” (Sand 105, 120). As Astolphe’s efforts to force Gabrielle into unambiguous femaleness escalate, Gabrielle electrifyingly foresees the shipwreck of their “bizarre and delicious voyage”:

He wants to call me before a court, before an assembly of men. And there, before the judges, before the mob, have the guards tear away my doublet, and, for proof of his rights to fortune and power, unveil me for all to see the female breasts that he alone has seen palpitate! . . . But as for me, I say never! I refuse to lend myself to this final insult, and rather than suffer that affront, I will rip open my chest, mutilate my breasts to render them objects of horror to all who look on, and no man will smile at the sight of my nakedness. (Sand 122)

As Ann McCall astutely remarks (in a study of the work as reflecting Sand’s disdain for the elderly Bourbon king of France, Charles X), Gabrielle’s “secret and essential illegality remains her body.” Her death in the final scene, in McCall’s reading, illustrates “how systematic rejection and destruction of the feminine allow for the peaceful transition of power between males who bond over her dead body” (McCall 44, 47). It might be said further to signify the death of Sand’s personal dream of a non-hegemonic relationship. The work surely reflects, as so many of Sand’s novels in the 1830s do (and in particular the work just preceding Gabriel, Les Sept Cordes de la Lyre), her own despair
in trying to construct alliances with the men in her life that would afford her the same degree of freedom they enjoyed.8

Sand's Gabriel is the nearest thing to a hermaphrodite that conventional biology allows. Her construction as a male, although the intention behind it is to cement her into a social role that will preserve property at the expense of her selfhood, instead provides her with a sense of ungendered normativity of the kind described by Peggy McIntosh as bestowing on the subject an “invisible knapsack” of privileges. “I don't feel that my soul is one sex or the other,” s/he says: “I don't feel in myself any absolute power for anything” (Sand 10). Yet once she learns what she anatomically is, she feels that her female body liberates her from the desire to dominate and gives her the will to live generously, companionably, lovingly, on equal ground with her beloved (and nearly redeemed) Astolphe. Although these two attitudes reflect competing ideas about the origins of gender-associated behavior, their embodiment in Gabriel/le envisions a mode of existence potentially unencumbered by the drag of gender.9 The world, however, will not allow it. Astolphe's maleness, anatomical and constructed, will not allow it. Only death permits Gabriel to become the being of her dream: “free . . . the dream . . . flying,” she murmurs as she dies at the hand of a hired assassin (Sand 126).

It is the grandfather who hires the assassin, and in Ann McCall's reading his gestures inscribe “a blueprint for postrevolutionary [French] society where dynastic, family and gender politics converge in a terrifying depiction of abjection” (McCall 39). The grandfather's goal throughout is to prevent Gabriel from rendering her inheritance into the branch of the family represented by Astolphe, the son of the younger brother. But Sand's ending is subjective as well; it contains her understanding that Gabriel/le's hermaphroditic existence will inevitably fall victim to the relentless monolith of Astolphe's maleness. Sand brings Astolphe explicitly to an understanding, in the last scene, that it is he, Astolphe, who has really killed Gabriel.

HOWE'S hermaphrodite Laurence, we might speculate, provides a site for considering ungendered or dual-gendered existence not as a dream beyond death, but as an embodied possibility. What if the hermaphroditism were actual, not metaphorical? Howe might be thought to wonder. Given that a being must inevitably be gender-constructed through nurture and education, what if that being were at least free of a gendered anatomy? Howe's trope, like Sand's, opens room for consideration of whether gender is in fact immutable (an extremely rare phenomenon in 1840s American culture; much rarer than in France, where fascination with the ambiguously gendered creature
was widespread\textsuperscript{10}). But Howe’s own conflicted attitudes on the subject appear to have generated a plot no less melancholy in its implications than Sand’s narrative.

Being raised male seems to give Laurence an inescapably male mind, despite his ambiguous body; he exhibits little of the fluidity, the genuinely double personality that is Gabriel’s defining characteristic, and certainly little pleasure in his state. In speaking of his early interactions with men and women, Laurence notes that a simple ungendered soul, “not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender, has but a lame and unsatisfactory part to play in this world” (Howe, \textit{H} 5). To be gendered, he clearly believes, is to be enabled to live fully, and though his early years, in retrospect, look pleasant enough, he also remembers them as “interrupted by deepest melancholy” and threaded with “hope for something far better and brighter”—a state of existence for which, he notes, he is “waiting still” (Howe, \textit{H} 6). Further,

the struggle from childhood to comparative maturity had had for me its secret agonies, its hours of depression and desolation—of these, I do not speak—I have never revealed them—I have never willingly laid upon another the lightest portion of the burthen which it was given to me to bear through life. (Howe, \textit{H} 6)

The point scarcely needs detailing: in all of Laurence’s interactions and speculations, not once does he find liberation in his hermaphroditic identity. The reverse is true; he is at relative ease only when securely fixed within a gendered persona, as when he exhibits his maleness to Ronald by throwing big rocks or when hiding from discovery by his father’s minions by becoming “Cecilia” in the household of Berto’s sisters. It is never clear whether Berto knows all along of Laurence’s anomalous body, but in the opening sections of the narrative’s second part, the two of them behave entirely as two young gentlemen of their age, culture, and historical moment would plausibly behave, and these are the pages in which Laurence is most relaxed, least troubled by anxiety about being a “beautiful monster” (Howe, \textit{H} 193).\textsuperscript{11}

Several early readers of \textit{The Hermaphrodite} have remarked on passages with a misogynistic cast.\textsuperscript{12} Berto is regularly the mouthpiece for such sentiments. His attitudes are displayed early in Part II as he discusses his intention to educate Laurence through “the discipline of society”—a pedagogy he will employ with the supposedly male Laurence but would never try with a female. “[T]hey [women] are educated rather to triviality and routine than to strength and virtue—they are taught to appeal to our indulgence, not to
command our esteem,” he says, which might be taken as an indication that he believes women’s putative failings to be a product of alterable nurture if he didn’t continue by assigning essentialist qualities to explain why women so readily embrace the trivial:

“All things run easily to extremes, in their excitable natures, and as one sees their piety become superstition, and their learning, pedantry, so in society their love of approbation becomes outrageous vanity, and their coquetry something for which I can scarce find a name which would be at once true and decent.” (Howe, H 99)

His attempts to dissuade the Swiss girl Eleonora from embracing the Church seem to have cemented his disdain for women: “‘Who ever by reason convinced a woman, much less a girl? Born to feel, and not taught to think, they are ever the slaves of their own impulses, until they become the slaves of men, nor do they give up one caprice, until it is trampled underfoot by its successor’” (Howe, H 101). Near the end, debating with his sister Briseida and the doctor treating Laurence about whether the male or the female predominates in Laurence, Berto again disparages women, this time on the basis of their allegedly shaky sense of duty. The “best” women, in his opinion, are in fact capable of arriving at a reasonable idea of duty, but once arrived, their application is dubious: “‘The thing which they are most especially fond of doing, be it never so mischievous, is always their duty’” (Howe, H 194).

Laurence sometimes seems to share Berto’s opinions. He is given the narrative’s most extensive (and offensive) anti-female rant in the passage in which he muses on women’s desire occasionally to “throw off their chains with their petticoats;” assume male attire, and move freely in the world:

And this masculine mania may last long, and go far, but it will not last forever. However strong, or depraved, or metaphysical the emancipated woman may be, she will in the end feel the want of some one to bully and protect her, the necessity of being cherished and admired, or kicked and cuffed. And so some day she will ignominiously strike her flag of defiance, and creep back to her woman’s trappings, and to her woman’s life as best she may, happy after all her wanderings if she can find some kind brute to play the Beast to her Beauty, someone who though he may outrage her best feelings, laugh at her convictions, and offend her taste, will yet praise her eyebrows, and pay her bills. (Howe, H 131)

So insistently masculine is this passage (and its larger context) that it tends to distort Laurence’s characterization in light of what he says about himself
at the narrative’s beginning. There, we are told that he was raised male so as
to be able to choose his own terms in associating with the world and “haply
learn to seem that which [he] could never be” (Howe, H 3). Evidently he
learned the terms well; even Gabriel’s rigorous programming (“the grandeur
of the masculine role, the abject condition of the feminine role in nature and
society” [Sand 7]) does not lead h/her to anything like this condescension.

Like Berto, Laurence is an older sibling to sisters, and in his brief account
of them he reflects something of Berto’s cynicism: when he meets them as
adults, they are “changed past all remembrance, the world, matrimony and
maternity having had full sway over them” (Howe, H 24). One has married
for money, the other for love, and neither evokes any emotion in him; they
appear to represent object lessons in female abjection. But if Laurence shares
Berto’s misogyny to a degree, Howe offers several additional shades in Lau-
rence’s character, arising in part from his relationship with Emma von P. and
in part from his close-quarters experience living with Berto’s sisters.

Laurence’s apparent freedom from the sensation of sexual desire enables
a view of Emma that, one feels, does her justice. She is beautiful, and more
than that—witty, tactful, self-possessed. She is something of a queen bee,
eXpecting homage, but that possibly negative attribute only renders her more
charming to Laurence, who is the object of her conquest. “I was her chosen
knight, and never have I been promoted to more gentle service” (Howe, H 8),
he preens, delighted by her comprehensive loveliness until she seriously falls
in love with him, but even then able to take accurate measure of the “hid-
den strength of her nature” (Howe, H 12). He is, of course, devastated by her
death and by his role in it, yet that loss, as he notes, permits her to grow into
“an object of mystic reverence and wonder, devoutly shrined in my inmost
soul—revered and worshipped, perhaps, all the more for being no longer
seen, for never having been possessed” (Howe, H 43). Although Laurence has
earlier lamented his own inability either to surrender to another or to possess
another, here he seems to understand that existence prior to that moment
of engenderedness through sex has a quality that is lost once humans are
jailed in their biological identities—and that women stand to lose the most.
Gabriel/le after her capture by Astolphe is a case in point.

Berto, it is true, does appear to see his sisters as somewhat removed from
the ordinary condition of women and therefore more admirable than others;
the older two are “enlightened . . . expansive . . . intelligent . . . genial,” while
the youngest, Nina, is “more womanly than her sisters” in being dependent
on another’s affection to secure her own happiness (Howe, H 136–37). Sharing
their apartments enables Laurence to develop a more nuanced view of
them; Berto, he notes, is “not quite at the bottom of their secrets” (Howe,
H 150). They body forth in the novel as individuals, not as generic repre-
sentations of Woman and certainly not as dismissable coquettes maimed by “excitable natures” (Howe, H 99). Briseida, in particular, arouses Laurence’s admiration for the pragmatism with which she embraces the realities of her relationship with Pepino. Laurence praises her for relinquishing any kind of battle for Pepino’s affections and suggests that while her attitudes may be self-defeating, they are at least not “worldly and designing” (Howe, H 152). It is her character that prompts Laurence’s comparison of women to vines ripening near volcanoes (Howe, H 154–55). Determining to keep her choices unknown to Berto, he concludes that there is “nothing paltry, or trivial, or ungenerous in her composition” (Howe, H 155).

Berto’s object in arranging for Laurence to live as a woman is allegedly so that he can “see men as women see them” and also “‘see women as they appear to each other, divested of the moral corset de précaution in which they always shew themselves to men’” (Howe, H 133). Because Berto also needs to conceal Laurence from his dangerous father, this education-rationale is cast somewhat in doubt, and in truth, aside from certain mores regarding Roman love and marriage, Laurence’s sojourn doesn’t seem to teach him much. His women’s clothes are simply a disguise, never an identity, and his donning of and extrication from them is played for its humor (although they cause him “uneasiness” [Howe, H 136] at first, since they evoke the disturbing evening when he portrayed Juliet in Ronald’s presence). When Gabrielle must put on women’s clothes and embrace female existence, the restrictions give rise to sympathy for the narrowness of her mother-in-law’s life, and by extension that of all women: “I see that the best of men can neither fully love nor completely esteem women. My tutors were right to carefully teach me that the female sex plays the most abject and unhappy role on this earth!” (Sand 79).

H/er perceptions are informed and empathetically enlarged by her experience; Laurence’s, on the other hand, are part of the accumulation of knowledge that, the following month, will move to encompass natural history. As he disrobes on the first night in Berto’s sisters’ dwelling, he diverts himself from the tedium of loosening his corset by “repeating . . . the tenses of a Hebrew verb” (Howe, H 147). When the experiment comes to an end, the climactic note is Berto’s pleasure in the success of the deception and satisfaction with Laurence’s “investigations” of his youngest sister’s “symptoms” (Howe, H 187). Laurence’s apostrophe to his gown as a “toga of hypocrisy” and “the cruelest enemy of beauty” doesn’t register as a critique of gender imprisonment; he’s just relieved to resume his male identity.

Of the text’s women, Nina absorbs Laurence’s attention most fully. Why is she his favorite? Berto describes her as “‘not so clever or so ambitious’” as her sisters (Howe, H 137), but, unlike them, defined by her capacity for love.
Laurence’s first impression that she is “bloodless” and “icy” gives way quickly when the thought of her lover Gaetano makes her smile. In a paragraph-long reflection on how smiles reveal souls, Laurence contrasts Nina’s smile with the ordinary variety: “Nina’s smile was more like an electric gleam of delight which the same soul, enfranchised and soaring free, might in passing cast upon its human prison” (Howe, H 141). Enfranchised and soaring free: although essentially a “prisoner of hope” (as she is later described [Howe, H 183]), Nina appears to Laurence as the only entirely liberated being he knows, liberated precisely by her bondage in love. Identified emphatically by Berto as “‘the woman,’” she merits the term (in Laurence’s view) because she is “wife and mother” though also still “maiden bud” (Howe, H 142)—a being defined by her relationship to the male, rendered susceptible to illness and madness only because she is a Rachel weeping for children she has not yet had. Laurence’s (and the text’s) greatest enthusiasm is for the highly conventional master–servant relationships represented by Gaetano/Nina, and even more insistently by Rafael/Eva in the manuscript of Berto’s uncle. A strange thing, finally—that this astonishingly transgressive text should so avidly embrace the very binary it interrogates.

Writing in 1861 about the period in Sand’s life just after her grandmother died (Sand was 17), Howe characterized it as a perfect blend of childhood insouciance and awareness of the value of that insouciance, a moment of suspension before the “terrible” demands and interests of life overtook her. Howe paused to consider this state of being:

Would that this ideal period could be prolonged for women!–but the exigencies of the race, or perhaps the fears of society, do not permit it. The two-faced spectre of marriage awaits her, for good or ill. The aphelion of a woman’s liberty is soon reached, the dark organic forces bind her to tread the narrow orbit of her sex, and if, at the farthest bound of her individual progress, the attraction could fail, and let her slip from the eternal circle, chaos would be the result. (Howe, “Sand” 528)

The ambivalence in this passage, as in The Hermaphrodite, is pronounced. Yes, she acknowledges, chaos would erupt if woman stopped being woman. But the forces that keep her in orbit are “dark”; the orbit is “narrow”; its outer edge is “soon reached”; marriage is a “two-faced spectre”; its positive issue is far from clear. Later, reflecting on Sand’s adoption of male clothes in Paris, Howe notes that when Sand’s daughter Solange came to live with her, “you
put on your weeds of weakness again;—your little daughter made you once
more a woman!” (Howe, “Sand” 531). Is Howe glad to be able to report this?
Distressed? “Rather both than neither” (Howe, H 195)? Near the end of the
essay she allows that “[t]he world knows that the life before us is no example
for women to follow,” though is quick to insist, despite this, that “she who led
it was on the whole an earnest and sincere person, of ardent imagination and
large heart, loving the good as well as the beautiful, even if often mistaken
in both,—and above all, honest in her errors and their acknowledgment”
(Howe, “Sand” 533). Yet the essay’s final word is very much like the Laurence
narrative’s final word: “If there be a divine of passion for which it is noble to
suffer and sacrifice, there is also a deeper divine of duty, far transcending the
other both in sacrifice and in reward” (Howe, “Sand” 533). This sentiment
underscores Valarie Ziegler’s suggestion that Eva and Rafael’s transfigura-
tion into a single being emblemizes a “true” hermaphroditism born from “transfor-
mative spirituality,” possibly more radical and disruptive of nineteenth-cen-
tury gender prescriptions than the blighted, monster-like figure of Laurence
(Ziegler 70).13

The narrative probably encodes, among other autobiographical notes,
Howe’s decision to embrace the inevitability of this unequal power distribu-
tion in her own marriage. Both practicality and her ethical sensibility com-
pelled such a resolution in the 1840s. Aside from the Eva/Rafael story, the
text contains other suggestions regarding Howe’s resignation to her circum-
cstances. A poem at the head of chapter 7 encapsulates Howe’s determination
to live in the world that existed for her:

\begin{quote}
Come, earnest labour, earnest thought,
Life must fulfill, and not destroy;
A noble sorrow, nobly borne
Is better than a vulgar joy. (Howe, H 34)
\end{quote}

Perhaps most poignant is what we learn of Ronald’s thesis. He is reluctant
to show it to Laurence, sure that he won’t like it, knowing it is not at all
what Laurence supposes, and finally delivers it with extreme reluctance. The
story—of a pilgrim who worships the marble image of a saint, “impiously”
praying that it will come to life and therefore dying just as his wish is granted
(Howe, H 75)—might be taken as an expression of Howe’s fears regarding
her own “thesis.” Suppose life could proceed on terms hermaphroditic—freed
from gender assignment, freed from the hierarchy attendant on gender—
what then? What if that particular “saint” could come to life? Laurence leaves
no doubt:
“[W]hen we seek to wring the impossible from Heaven, we pray for our own destruction. The order of our lives, like the order of the universe, is good and beautiful, and the intervention of a miracle in the one might be as dangerous and destructive as the admission of some lawless comet in the other.” (Howe, H 75)\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Howe’s} headnote for her article on George Sand underlines the differences between herself and her subject. It is a reference to Cleopatra from Horace’s Ode I.37: \textit{deduci superbo / non humilis mulier triumpho} (“Not for her the enemy ship, the crownless voyage, her role in the grand parade of Triumph: she was no weak-kneed woman.”\textsuperscript{15}). Horace, as Howe notes, celebrates Cleopatra’s heroic end, even while exulting in her overthrow. Sand, for Howe, is “another woman of royal soul,” deservedly illustrious, but finally a woman of sin, the associate of Sappho and “the Magdalen” (Howe, “Sand” 534), needing forgiveness. Sand’s \textit{Gabriel}, if it was a touchstone for Howe, would have struck her as tragic but true: Gabriel/le dies willingly, realizing that loss of the soul’s freedom, the triumph of \textit{either/or} over \textit{both/and}, can lead only to madness. S/he blesses h/er murderer for having “carried out heaven’s will” (Sand 124–25). Any other ending would have been unthinkable.

And yet it was not quite unthinkable, and the testament to that fact is the existence of \textit{The Hermaphrodite}. Whether these writers’ historical moment could have permitted another outcome for these imaginaries is beside the point. Both works evidence the reality that women were working to embody the possibilities within the imaginary. Rafael thanks God that Eva’s love for him was “‘single’” (Howe, H 180), since otherwise she’d have lost him. We, on the other hand, can be grateful for Howe’s (and Sand’s) double vision.

\textbf{Notes}

1. Masson includes a reliable list of references to Sand in American books, newspapers, and periodicals between 1837 and 1876, as well as brief accounts of the histories and political slants of the periodicals. The vicissitudes and nuances of early Anglo-American reaction to Sand’s fiction are a study unto themselves, as are those of the twentieth-century scholarly work on this topic.

2. See also Child, \textit{Lydia Maria Child: Selected Letters, 1817–1880}, and Karcher, “Margaret Fuller and Lydia Maria Child.” In 1858 Child wrote to Lucy and Mary Osgood, “I have always known that George Sand was my twin sister. . . . [T]he grain of the wood is certainly the same in both of us. This consciousness of her being my double has given her works an irresistible fascination for me. They often provoke me; sometimes shock me; but I am constrained to acknowledge, “Thus in all probability, should I have written, had I
been brought up in France. ‘I never read a book of hers without continually stumbling on things that seem to have been written by myself’ (Child 315–16). Dall’s interest in Sand began in 1845; she translated *Spiridion* in 1854–55 and published a portion of it in *The Una*, July–October 1855.

3. Ward’s *New York Review* essays are examined in Stafford. On the Longfellow–Ward friendship, see Thomas, especially pp. 93–95 on the disagreement between Ward and his father over the worth of *Hyperion* and Longfellow himself. Excerpts of Ward’s letters appear in Elliott; however, her transcriptions are extremely free and idiosyncratically edited. The letter and journal manuscripts from which I quote are among the Longfellow Papers at Harvard’s Houghton Library. Even in their sanitized form, the essays on Romance and Longfellow came under attack by Park Benjamin, editor of *The New Yorker*, as “unworthy of the *New York Review*” (quoted in Elliott 250).

4. The work appeared in the July 1, July 15, and August 1, 1839, issues of the *Revue*. According to Gay Manifold, whose translation provides the text for this study, the work also was published in a number of book editions beginning in 1840; see Sand xix. Sand evidently wrote the work quickly, in an effort to generate some much-needed revenue from the *Revue*’s editor François Buloz, to whom she had been under contract since 1832. Buloz, dissatisfied with the works Sand had been producing since having come under the sway of Pierre Leroux’s Christian messianism, was looking for something lighter, racier—something more like her sensational early novels *Indiana* and *Jacques*.

5. Bowen’s was the first substantial essay on Sand by an American. For more on Bowen and this essay, see Rabinovitz. Bowen discusses *Gabriel*, calling the plot “a fine field . . . for the development of the writer’s opinions respecting the injustice done to woman, and the false position, which is assigned to her by the verdict of society,” but providing only a truncated and distorted account of the play’s central issues (Bowen 132–34).

6. In Act V, during a later Carnival season in Rome, Gabriel wears a domino costume.

7. Compare Ronald’s dream of Laurence: “‘I saw you robed in white, crowned with flowers, and half veiled by the floating tresses of your bright hair. You were transfigured in a light which seemed to emanate from yourself, and all your motions were accompanied by a faint music’” (Howe, *H* 74).

8. The issue of the play’s argument regarding the appropriate roles of women and men is somewhat more complicated than this brief account suggests. Gay Manifold’s introduction proposes ideological affinities between Sand’s incomplete (and never translated) *Lettres à Marcie* (1837) and *Gabriel*, a connection that accrues plausibility in light of two later studies of *Lettres*: Naomi Schor’s “Feminism and George Sand: *Lettres à Marcie*” (1992) and Catherine M. Peebles’s *The Psyche of Feminism* (2004).

9. See Schor’s perception that “Sand is exemplarily feminist . . . because of her contradictions, and not despite them. . . . In all feminism in the broadest sense of the term there would then be equal parts of conservative and contestatory forces” (Schor 46).

10. The classic treatment of this topic is Busst, “The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century” (1967).

11. One might argue that the figure exhibiting the more plausible hermaphroditic characteristics in this narrative is Ronald. Howe’s paragraph introducing him refuses to allow determination of his gender: he is “one whose sex disclosed itself in a form of perfect beauty” (Howe, *H* 50). Ronald manifests conventional female behavior in taking care of Laurence when he finds him in the forest retreat. Later, during his university days
and especially during the *Romeo and Juliet* scenes, although Ronald ostensibly believes Laurence is female, Howe lets ambiguity surround the nature of their mutual affection. See Bethany Schneider’s enlightening discussion of chapters 15 and 16 elsewhere in this volume. At the very end, Ronald seems to have been queered by his love for Laurence: his life has taken on emotional proportions remarkably like Laurence’s, and he has had to settle into a blighted existence as inheritor of his father’s estates. Life is much like it was in his adolescent state before he met Laurence. Note Howe’s language in this summary sentence: “Nothing has changed, except the gay boy who once sang, and shouted, and frolicked among woods and waters the livelong day—the country people say that an evil fairy came and stole him away in his boyhood, and sent back to them only this miserable substitute” (Howe, *H* 192).

12. I offer gratitude to the members of the Nineteenth Century American Women Writers Study Group, who devoted their spring 2005 meeting at Amherst College to consideration of *The Hermaphrodite*. My essay has taken shape in the context of the writing that has grown out of that meeting and is indebted to many of the scholars whose work appears in this volume.

13. Ziegler emphasizes the fact that, as the Laurence manuscript fragments were deposited in Houghton Library, the Eva–Rafael piece was first in the folder. She reads this parable as a central motif for the entire narrative—“the theme of unwavering devotion rewarded, after much suffering, by ecstatic union” (Ziegler 64)—and interprets its prominence as Howe’s acknowledgment that “there was something unnatural, even perverse, about her desire to achieve autonomy and exercise her voice independent of [her husband’s]” (Ziegler 69).

14. The comet image recalls Howe’s poem “The Heart’s Astronomy,” in which she compares her nightly walks around the house to the orbit of a comet and touchingly portrays her children watching from the window, afraid that she may not return. The poem ends by advising her children not to count firmly on that return: “when ye know / What wild erratic natures are, / Pray that the laws of heavenly force / Would help and guide the Mother star” (Howe, *PF* 100–102).

In chapter 16 of *The Hermaphrodite*, Julia Ward Howe describes what looks like an attempted rape. Laurence is the eponymous “hermaphrodite” in this unfinished and, until 2004, unpublished novel, which Howe wrote in the 1840s. Laurence has been allowing himself to be understood as male in his capacity as tutor to Ronald, a young nobleman. Ronald has venerated and loved Laurence for a long time, without ever knowing of his ambiguous sex. As Ronald moves deeper into adolescence, his passion grows so strong that it worries Laurence, who claims to have no sexual desire at all. It also worries the collegiate boys among whom Laurence and Ronald live. They find the intensity of feeling between the preternaturally handsome tutor and his student strange. Nevertheless, no one suspects that Laurence is not, or is not entirely, male. When Ronald discovers that something isn’t quite right about his tutor’s sex, he attacks Laurence, and the ensuing scene seems to roll forward on the greased wheels of genre, with Laurence girlishly resisting Ronald’s lustful masculine advances, finally repulsing Ronald by drugging him.

I think that the physical struggle between Laurence and Ronald in chapter 16 can and should be read two ways, and this essay is largely a close reading arguing for the importance, though not the singularity, of the less obvious way. The scene is, at first glance, a representation of a failed rape, and as such
it achieves certain narrative ends. But it is possible and necessary to read beneath its generic façade and understand it simultaneously as a representation of consensual and mutually enjoyable sexual exchange: of consummation. Indeed, the more obvious reading protects and enables its opposite. For most of the manuscript, Howe insists upon Laurence's lack of sexual desire, a prosthetic insistence that allows her to ask questions about the social construction of gender without the complication of sexuality. Throughout *The Hermaphrodite* Howe clearly puts her character through his paces as a means to explore how gender is effected, performed and policed. But it is a mistake to think that because she needs him to be without desire for the vast majority of the book, she therefore never explores this equally essential question about the character she has otherwise made so multidimensional. Here we see her quietly, even secretly within her own secret manuscript, using her ambiguously sexed character to interrogate desire and the acts that constitute sex, and asking how gender informs acts of sex and how gender is transformed through sex. Indeed, the most important consequence of my reading of this scene is that the passionate sexual exchange renders Ronald's body also ambiguously sexed.

To argue that the sex I see in this scene is pleasurably consummated and mutually constitutive is not to say that there is no struggle, or that this is a happy scene. The scene is still a scene of violence, and it is still a scene in which Laurence resists and triumphs over Ronald's violent assault, but I read the violence as that of genre. “Gender” and “genre” are, of course, the same word. English took it from French twice; the first time, several hundred years ago, the French pronounced the word with a “d,” and English snapped it up as “gender.” The second time, the word entered English without the “d,” as “genre.” But in French, *genre* remains a homonym. In “The Law of Genre” Jacques Derrida takes the pun to town, claiming that the law is simple: “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them” (Derrida, “Genre” 55). He explains: “as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity” (Derrida, “Genre” 57). Convinced of Laurence's womanhood, Ronald begins the work of division and enclosure that is what I will call the law of genre/gender. He insists that Laurence divide his ambiguously sexed self and straddle separate spheres, inhabiting public masculinity and private femininity, and Ronald demands that Laurence do this within a marriage-like arrangement. He then attacks Laurence. Laurence passionately resists both ultimatum and physical assault. The more obvious reading of the scene relies on us understanding Laurence's refusal of Ronald as him rejecting, and indeed not even wanting, sex—as he does elsewhere in the text. But what if
the very physicality of Laurence’s rejection comes not through resisting but through instrumentalizing the sex act itself and turning it against the strictures of gender? If we read the passage as a sex scene, we can see that through sex Laurence is able to constitute Ronald as also ambivalently gendered and sexed. In other words, what Laurence saves himself from is not sexual passion but the constrictions of literary and social genres that enforce gender and the social division of men and women, the very things Ronald demands of him at the beginning of the scene. Laurence protects and indeed spreads the “impurity, anomaly [and] monstrosity” of indeterminate gender and sex. Across this secret sex scene, Howe explores the possibility of Laurence’s and Ronald’s (and perhaps everyone’s) physical intersexuality and bisexual desire, to use contemporary language to describe states of being for which Howe had no single words but which she could, I argue, quietly describe and theorize with incredible complexity.

This intervention into the generic rules governing gender and sex is facilitated in part through the novel’s engagement with an intertext: William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In chapter 15, Laurence and Ronald attend an all-male college production of some scenes from the play. When the boy playing Juliet turns up tipsy, Laurence unwillingly steps in at the last minute and takes the part. Laurence’s impromptu performance causes uproar in the student body; they love the performance and carry Laurence in triumph from the stage. But Freiherr von ____, the boy who plays Romeo, experiences what he thinks is a revelation: the seemingly male Laurence is actually a woman. The Freiherr expected to play Romeo opposite a boy playing a girl but is instead confronted with a brilliant unrehearsed performance by a “man.” This “man” flawlessly performs Juliet at a moment’s notice, without the mediation of the time it takes to memorize lines, rehearse staging, or learn to seem to be a girl. And not just any girl; Juliet is the *sine qua non* of girlhood, just as *Romeo and Juliet* is the *sine qua non* of heterosexual romance. Laurence, in other words, steps into both genre and gender without any rehearsal. But here we see that genre and gender are the same thing, and for Freiherr von ____, the fact that Laurence seems naturally, not artificially, the ultimate girl in the ultimate love story means that he must “really” be a girl. The Freiherr has clearly not been made to read either Derrida or Butler in English classes. For him, Laurence’s perfect Juliet undoes the possibility that gender is performative, for he is not seen to be copying a script but rather simply being it.

Extending P. Gabrielle Foreman’s concept of the “undertell,” which I employ later in this essay, I want to argue that Howe introduces us here, in chapter 15, to the power of what we might call the “overtell.” She relies, in this
chapter, on her readers knowing the play so well that she need not even cite it, and indeed, *Romeo and Juliet* was at a particularly fevered pitch of popularity in the 1840s. It is a play whose story has been told too many times, and Howe uses exactly that generic ubiquity to comment upon the generic ubiquity and totalizing plot of gender. The play's universality means that a schoolboy can play Juliet and still be Juliet (or, for Howe's contemporaries obsessed with Charlotte Cushman's performances opposite her sister's Juliet, that a woman can play Romeo). The play was written in the sixteenth century with cross-dressing boy actors in mind. But even in a later era when women could perform on stage, the power of overtell means that within the confines of its performance, men can play at being women and vice versa, and audiences can enjoy the titillations of cross-gendering without that enjoyment halting the ideological juggernaut of the heterosexual plot. The polymorphous perverse can romp within the city wall of the overtold play so long as everyone agrees that it is merely a story. But playing Romeo opposite Laurence's Juliet teaches the Freiherr to “know” that Laurence is a woman (a “knowledge” he demonstrates by leading Laurence from the stage by the hand, continuing the performance of boy and girl across the threshold from theater to real life). Watching the performance teaches Ronald to feel, for the first time, hotly gendered rage and jealousy (he tries to push the Freiherr away from Laurence when they descend from the stage), before he even allows himself to “know” that Laurence is a woman. *Romeo and Juliet* teaches these two boys to turn their backs on the sexual ambiguities of youth, and to enact and police rigid gender categories in their everyday lives. The two boys are changed by the play, and changed away from play. They enter the theater ready to suspend their disbelief and enjoy the performance of gender ambiguity onstage. They exit the theater believing they know how to see and feel the “truth” of genre/gender. After the performance, they are violently dedicated to defending the rigidities of gender roles in lives that immediately begin to follow generic formulae for masculine behavior, namely duels and sexual aggression.

The *Romeo and Juliet* chapter comes immediately before the chapter in which Ronald attacks Laurence. This positioning should be an object lesson to readers. Howe makes the point about *Romeo and Juliet* very clear: overtell—the power of stories told again and again and known “by heart”—brings beautiful ambiguous youth with its endless possibility for play to a violent end. This happens in the plot of the drama, but Howe shows us that it is also the consequence of acting in and watching the performance. In *Romeo and Juliet* the teenage lovers die because their parents have overtold their enmity and poisoned the next generation; their children die for their parents’ dedication to genre. In *The Hermaphrodite* the performance of the play
turns pretty boys who can play both male and female into violent men, and
the pretty “hermaphrodite” who can also play both male and female is forced
into the position of weak woman. Howe is partly making an argument about
how gender is enforced culturally, but she is also training us to read her next
chapter. She is about to offer us a generic scene of sexual assault. If we read it
only generically, she warns, we may experience the pleasures that come with
the unfolding of plot, but we also run a risk: the Freiherr and Ronald think
they see truth but have only enslaved themselves to the law of genre/gender;
despite his name, the “Freiherr” is not free at all. The challenge, which Howe
lays down in the *Romeo and Juliet* chapter, is to read as well for what Foreman
calls the “undertell,” about which more later.

After the performance, the Freiherr tells Ronald that “Your Juliet is a
woman” (Howe, *H* 82). Ronald denies it and is quickly catapulted into that
most generic of male responses—he calls for a duel. But through the logic of
homosociality, whereby the conventional interactions of men exclude and
constitute woman as man’s opposite, Ronald’s scripted masculine defense of
Laurence’s honor seems to confirm what the Freiherr thinks: Laurence is
female. Ronald loses the duel in more ways than one. He could resist being
affected by Laurence’s performance, but he cannot resist the effects of the part
he plays. In other words, when Ronald himself joins the overtold melodrama
of masculinity, he is captured by the generic, and returning to their shared
rooms late at night, Ronald is now convinced that his mentor is a woman.
He lays down the laws that govern the gendered divisions of Howe’s world
and that define what love and marriage can be. It takes only one sentence for
Ronald to outline the fantasy of separate spheres, of men whose masculinity
is proved in the rigors of the wide world but who come home to be comforted
by cloistered, angelic women: “You shall be a man to all the world, if you will,
but a woman, a sweet, warm, living woman to me—you must love me, Lau-
rence” (Howe, *H* 86).

Ronald hurls himself upon Laurence, who resists. A struggle ensues,
described in a single short paragraph:

Still, other words of terrible import, half heard, and dimly comprehended;
still that terrible grasp, straining me closer and closer to the heart which,
one once pure and peaceful, was now in its hour of volcanic might and ruin.
On my part, a faint but rigid struggle, a sob, a mute and agonized appeal to
heaven—that appeal was not answered. Suddenly, I felt Ronald shiver and
tremble—gaining courage, I raised my eyes to his face, and saw the burning
flush pass, in an instant, from his cheek—exhaustion was already subduing
the fever of his wound, maddened by wine—a certain confusion of thought
was visible in his countenance. This was the critical moment—by the Mercy of God, I took advantage of it. (Howe, H 87–88)

The last line of this passage can easily be understood as describing an escape from sexual embrace and thus the preservation of Laurence's virginity; after a struggle, he seems to recognize a “critical moment” of weakness in Ronald, a moment he grasps “by the Mercy of God.” Used as we are to the generic understanding that rape or even consensual premarital sex constitutes a “fate worse than death” for a girl, it is easy to read the “Mercy of God” as an escape from sexual penetration. Keeping that reading in play, I think it is also possible to understand that pleasurable sexual acts occur in this paragraph and that Laurence is a willing and indeed active participant in them.

The final line of the passage is, in fact, the second of two moments in the paragraph when Laurence references the divine. The first comes mid-paragraph, with his “faint but rigid struggle, a sob, a mute and agonized appeal to heaven.” Immediately after the temporal pause and spatial thrust of the dash we learn that “that appeal was not answered.” Because the next word is “Suddenly,” we understand that some time, either a little or a lot, passes between the appeal not being answered and the next event, which is Laurence feeling Ronald “shiver and tremble.” The physiological descriptors make possible the reading that Ronald’s desire to have sex with Laurence has resulted in sexual release: Laurence feels the young man come. Having felt it, he also witnesses the immediate aftereffects of that orgasm: he “saw the burning flush pass, in an instant, from his cheek—exhaustion was already subduing the fever of his wound.”

What is it that Laurence asks from God that first time? The generic reading is that he asks to be delivered from sexual assault. But his prayer is not answered here in the middle of the paragraph. Are we to assume that he is successfully raped and that he feels Ronald’s ejaculation unwillingly? No: the generic reading has us scoot over this moment when God deserts Laurence and take the ending of the paragraph as the moment of successful resistance to rape. And yet that troubling phrase remains, dividing the paragraph: “that appeal was not answered.” Reading even more closely, we see that Laurence’s struggle is “faint but rigid.” Laurence is both man and woman, and this odd pair of adjectives given to us as incompatible or even opposite—faint but rigid—could be a genital description of Laurence’s response to a young man whom we know he admires. “Faint” could be a description of female arousal—swooningly passionate rather than weak. “Rigid” could be a description of male arousal, an erection, rather than resistance. Is Laurence—both the male and female parts of him—aroused by Ronald? Does
that “Suddenly,” after which Ronald’s ejaculation is described, come after the enactment of passions mutually enjoyed by both parties? Perhaps Laurence’s first appeal to God is that he, Laurence, will be able to hide his desire, to retreat to the passionless life he has cultivated. Perhaps Laurence gives in to and demonstrates passion, or rather, male and female passions, “faint but rigid,” that he feels for Ronald.

This reading complicates the second reference to God that comes at the end of the paragraph: “This was the critical moment—by the Mercy of God, I took advantage of it.” Again we have the pause and forward push of the hyphen, as we did last time. But this time Laurence is active, while Ronald is in a state of swooning confusion. We could argue that here is where the lovers switch positions, where Ronald becomes the girl to Laurence’s boy; certainly this short paragraph gives us both an active and a passive Laurence and an active and a passive Ronald. It is important to let our imaginations do the dirty work here and let ourselves sense Howe thinking through the physical details of the sex these two characters might have. And why shouldn’t she, and why shouldn’t we? Generically, men aggress and women resist, men have passions and women don’t, men are rapists and women are vulnerable. Here in this almost nonexistent sex scene I think we can see, out of the corners of our eyes, Howe writing against genre beneath the cloak of genre and theorizing gender through sex in a way that contemplates the mutability of gender and sexual desire for both men and women. I think she is asking here whether and how gender, male and female, and desire, heterosexual and homosexual, can morph and change and flip in the crucible of sexual activity, and what implications such mutability has for the law of genre/gender. Under this reading, if Laurence’s first cry to heaven is unanswered and sex goes forward, then Laurence’s salvation at paragraph’s end, when he reemerges from crisis in control of the situation, is quite radical. I think we find him finally the consummate hermaphrodite. He is sexually knowledgeable and at the same time actively and consciously “innocent” of gender. He has succumbed to sex, but he has protected the bothness of his own gender identity and introduced the pleasures of bothness to his lover.

This is not the first time that we have sensed Laurence’s desire for Ronald, and we can learn something about the structure of his desire by turning back the pages. Earlier in the book, Laurence has seen Ronald as perfect, innocent and beautiful. The boy’s attraction for Laurence is shown to be the affection of a pure soul. Ronald is carefully described as sexually ambiguous, and his purity stems from indeterminacy. Laurence is attracted to these qualities in Ronald, and the lure is at least partly physical:
Scarce knowing what I did, I stooped to print the lightest, faintest kiss upon his forehead; but as I did so, his red lips parted and he murmured: “Laurence!” I shrank back into myself. I turned away, lest a tear should fall upon his face. I spread over him hands which seemed able to compel from heaven its dearest benediction. One more look, and I was gone—oh soft bloom of adolescence, oh gentle type of nascent manhood! (Howe, H 76)

In Plato’s Symposium, Aristophanes explains that originally “there was a distinct type of androgynous person, not just the word, though like the word the gender too combined male and female” (Plato 25). Androynes comprised, along with men and women, the three genders of humanity, but these original three genders were round beings, with two faces, four arms and legs, and two sets of genitals. They were complete in themselves, without need of anyone else for comfort. They were very powerful and challenged the gods, and Zeus split them in half, thus getting rid of androgynous humans altogether. So traumatized were the newly divided men and women that they were dying of grief and apathy. Aristophanes explains that we remain divided and yearning, but we manage to live with that pain because “Love draws our original nature back together; he tries to reintegrate us and heal the split in our nature” (Plato 27). Laurence draws back not because he does not feel desire, but because Ronald addresses him as a beloved—“‘Laurence!’”—revealing that Ronald is already moving past sexual ambiguity and into definite manhood. He is already incomplete and needs a partner who can make him whole. The difference, as Plato and Howe theorize it, is love. Laurence “shrank back into myself” and turns away so as not to sully Ronald with a “tear.” Is this proof that Laurence feels no passion, or that he feels no love in that sense of painfully divided creatures yearning toward wholeness? In this moment, I think that Laurence recoils from love rather than from passion.

Reading shamelessly, let us admit that it is possible to say that Laurence satisfies his passion for Ronald by himself here: he masturbates. Shrinking back into oneself and turning away to shed “tears” elsewhere than on the body of the beloved is a description of two methods of withdrawal—emotional and sexual. Ronald will later accuse tears of being the currency and ocular proof of womanhood, but whether the liquid emanates from Laurence’s masculine or his feminine body, he withdraws and carefully does not spend his passion on Ronald because he realizes that the boy has already lost his sexual ambiguity. Ronald’s “nascent” manhood is beginning to emerge. If we read the shrinking back and the tear as both genital and emotional, then we understand that Laurence’s sexual passion wanes because he realizes...
that he is too late: time has already robbed him of the Ronald he can desire, the Ronald who, like him, is ambiguously sexed. That ambiguity is a passing moment in a male or female human but an eternal condition for a “hermaphrodite.” By the time of the rape/sex scene we know that Ronald’s sexual ambiguity has receded almost completely. His demand that Laurence “must love me” as a woman is the fully articulated yearning of a divided heterosexual human.

So if by chapter 16 Ronald is given over to the generic structures of gendered love, how can I argue that Laurence, who desires only an ambiguous Ronald, has passionate sex with him, sex that teaches Ronald the joys of polymorphous perversity? I can because I think Ronald, even in the very moment of his highly performative, drunken and violent accession to the overtold genre of masculinity, is himself made physically ambiguous and thus available again to Laurence’s desire. To see this possibility we must be attentive to what happens immediately before the rape/sex scene. Laurence returns to his rooms after the play. He describes an angel who defends his innocence this last night before the violence that will occur the next day: “He stood at my threshold, and waved his flaming sword across it, so that no dark or dangerous thing could enter there, and on the eve of ruin, and on the verge of desolation, I slept in innocence, in peace, in safety” (Howe, H 81). That threshold and its innocence of anything “dark or dangerous” entering it constitutes a barely disguised description of female virginity. But the flaming sword that crosses the entrance? We are actually never shown the contents of Laurence’s combinations: his genitals are never described. But he bears a “strange resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Howe, H 9), and I think we are meant to understand that physiologically Laurence has both a “threshold” and a “sword” that waves across it. What is Laurence’s innocence, then? It is more than simple sexual purity. He fears the rape of his female body but feels protected by his male body; his innocence is the perfect duality of his gender, what I have already called his bothness. God placed an angel with a sword at the gates of Eden after Adam and Eve were banished; here we see Laurence as himself the Garden of Eden and his genital bothness as the gate to innocence. The boys want to make Laurence into the woman they think they know he really is. But Laurence’s bothness is angelic protection against the fatal “knowledge” of gendered, fallen humans, who seek endlessly for a way back to an innocence they forfeited when they mistook their nakedness for generic difference.4

We are given this portrait of Laurence lying in peaceful, prelapsarian wholeness and the description of his anatomy and its state—the sword is flaming and the threshold is uncrossed—as elsewhere Ronald prepares for
a duel. He fights it, loses, and is wounded. Ronald's wound is an engvasion. His masculinity has faltered in the very excess of its overtell: his body has been pierced and symbolically feminized. When Ronald finally arrives at Laurence's architectural threshold, he is also sexually ambiguous, but sufferingly and sinfully so, rather than innocent. As Dana Luciano puts it elsewhere in this volume, in Howe's “sentimental theology, to be human is to remain ever-vulnerable to being wounded, and thus woundedness itself manifests humanity; it is in this sense that wounds, viewed from a certain perspective, carry within them their own redemptive power” (Luciano 231). And indeed, at the moment of his accession to the law of genre/gender, Ronald is wounded by his disillusion with it and thereby saved from it. Both Ronald's new manliness and his painful, wounded womanliness cause the young man to approach the door with inexpert steps that reveal him to be, again, nascent: “The step that ascended my stairs was heavy and rough; the hand that undid my door was slow and unskillful, but the sound approached, the door opened, and Ronald staggered into the room, and flung himself heavily upon a chair” (Howe, H 85). It is not his generic manhood that is dewily emergent this time, rather, it is a still “unskillful” but mature sexual ambiguity that works against the law of genre/gender, “impure, ambiguous and monstrous,” in Derrida's terms. Why, after all, does the angel of the flaming sword not protect Laurence's threshold against Ronald's entrance? Perhaps because Ronald's very emergence as sexually ambiguous is the key that allows him entry.

Yes, I think Howe is now juggling two “hermaphrodites,” and I think there is reason to pay very close attention to why she does so. She brings the wounded ambiguous body of Ronald up against the flawless ambiguous body of Laurence and compares them. She looks closely at how each character falls into passion and what passion does to them. And it is through Ronald, not Laurence, that she theorizes the pain and complexity of human sexuality. Howe is a Christian, and in Ronald she fabricates a Christian “hermaphrodite.” Laurence's sexual ambiguity is indebted to, among many other sources, the Platonic androgyne; he has no need for love. But Howe filters Ronald's sexual ambiguity through the Judeo-Christian origin story. The stories in The Symposium and Genesis are similar. Eve is made of Adam's rib, and the two people don't know they are different until they threaten the sovereignty of their god. Their punishment is the same as the androgynes—suffering, pain and estrangement. Plato's divided humans are saved from death by the god Love, or Eros. For Christians, the answer to the death that comes with the Fall is the divine love of Jesus, who offers eternal life. The earliest Christian writers were Greeks and Hellenized Jews familiar with the Platonic corpus. Interpreters of the life of Jesus, like the author of 1 John (ca. 100 c.e.) and
Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254 C.E.), were deeply indebted to Plato for their explications of Jesus’s love—for humans, God and the church—as multiply gendered. Plato’s origin story is entangled with the origin of Christianity itself, and the possibilities for gender ambiguity that Plato’s story allows were carried over into Christianity from the beginning. Nor were those possibilities absent in nineteenth-century American considerations of Jesus’s body and capacity for love.

But if the origin stories are so similar, why and how does Howe shift so decisively to the Christian story when theorizing Ronald’s sexual ambiguity? Because there is a crucial difference between the stories, and it lies in the definition of love and its relationship to the divine. Eros saves divided humans by turning their attention toward one another, and the life he saves is their terrestrial life. In Christian thought, the love that humans have for one another is triangulated through the pierced and suffering body of Jesus; the life that is saved is that of the immortal soul. As the New Testament author puts it in 1 John 7–11 (KJV), “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God. . . . He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. . . . Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.” Laurence is Eden before the fall and the androgyne before Zeus’s thunderbolt. Ronald is a Christian human, and his yearning for a beloved is also his yearning for his god; he can only find the love of a human if he can find the love of his god and vice versa: “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.” In Ronald, Howe pushes that Christian structure of love, whereby human love leads to divine and back again, to a postlapsarian and Christian sexual ambiguity, and she does it in order to theorize human sexuality outside the law of genre/gender. Howe’s Platonic (and Edenic) Laurence is, throughout the book, a foil for her exploration of gendered human culture. But if she is going to think about how sexual ambiguity manifests itself in and through the sexual practices of so-called men and women, she needs to bounce her Laurence against a person whose sexual ambiguity is not legible in the evidence of his genitals, but in the evidence of his suffering. She needs a character whose sexual ambiguity is post- rather than pre-genre, post- rather than pre-gender—someone whose sexual ambiguity is not the sign of his completeness and perfection, but is the result of the wounding pain of division and the quest for wholeness through human and divine love.

In dueling, Ronald falls from his youthful ambiguity and becomes aware of male and female even as his body, penetrated, becomes both male and female, capable of pain, suffering, and salvation. His wound is Christ’s wound,
but his sin is Eve's sin. Having eaten of knowledge, Ronald's wound bleeds, and he shows it, the sign of his knowledge and his femininity, to Laurence before he explains that he “knows” that Laurence is a woman. “Does the sight of it make you sick?” he asks, for like Eve he now knows that he should be ashamed to show his sex (Howe, H 86). Ronald, like Eve, is made to bleed painfully for the knowledge of sex and gender. Indeed, he argues that he is Eve to Laurence's Adam and that therefore Laurence should love him: “my first crime is also yours, for it is born of the union of your soul and mine”; he doesn’t understand that Laurence's bothness is in fact the Eden from which divided, gendered humans are expelled (Howe, H 87). Ronald goes on to make explicit his femininity, telling Laurence that the proof of their union is Ronald's virgin blood. It is female virgins who bleed at the time of their “first crime.” Virgin blood is the telltale sign of consummation and, under a marriage contract, it proves the bride's so-called honesty in coming into the bargain “whole.” Ronald clarifies his gendered alliance to Eve in particular and women in general in a sentence that seems, on the surface, to proclaim his masculinity: “yes—women weep, and it does not cost them much, but I have bought you with tears of blood” (Howe, H 87). The generic reading of this sentence asks us to understand that Ronald was wounded like a real man in a duel defending the honor of a real woman, and his difference from women lies in the liquid he sheds. But we should also read this sentence thusly: any woman can cry cheap tears, but Ronald is paying for Laurence's love with a woman's most valuable currency—her virgin blood.

And Ronald experiences consummation as a woman as well as a man. After Ronald comes, we learn that “exhaustion was already subduing the fever,” but this is not the fever of male arousal, rather it is the fever “of his wound” (Howe, H 87; italics mine). When Ronald demands that Laurence “must love” him, he means it, as I have already argued, from his position as a now generic man demanding that a generic woman be private to his public, gentle to his forceful, etcetera. But here Howe shows us that Ronald's sexual desire—which is different from his need to enforce the law of genre/gender—emanates from his own recently carved-out ambiguous body; he desires Laurence because of, perhaps even from, his wound, his slash. Ronald, as well as Laurence, is satisfied as both a man and a woman: he shivers and trembles as a man, but the exhaustion of that satisfaction also subdues the fever of his “wound.” And Ronald can’t get enough of it. After the encounter he says, ostensibly of the wine, “I have drunk, but not deeply enough,” and he cries, “Here is to love, a past without a reckoning—a present without a future!” (Howe, H 88). This is a radical redefinition of the love that he demanded before attacking Laurence. In the struggle that immediately pre-
cedes the rape/sex scene, he wanted Laurence to “love” him, but the definition of that love was decidedly temporal, decidedly nineteenth-century in its division between public masculinity and private femininity. It is the violent divisiveness of that generic demand that I have argued Laurence resists. Now, at the end of the paragraph, Ronald raises a toast that is hardly the pledge of a young man who has just raped an unwilling woman, but could well be a revelation of the bliss of love outside the law of genre/gender, outside of time itself. Howe gives this moment of blissful revelation to Ronald, not Laurence.\(^6\)

Laurence was “born that way.” Ronald’s sexual ambiguity is born of adult pain. His transformation from the sleeping innocent whose beautiful ambiguity attracted Laurence, through generic masculinity to the passionate adult of ambiguous sex whom we meet in chapter 16, is Howe’s exploration of what happens to gender and desire in the crucible of experience and knowledge. More precisely, it is an exploration of what happens in the wake of the complex disillusionment and suffering that comes after the shattering of youth’s generic dreams, after the fantasy of separate spheres and marriage that Ronald outlines before he attacks Laurence is revealed to be a trap. It is through genre- and gender-altering love like he has just experienced that Ronald can imagine the bliss of an existence not driven forward into generic and gendered futures: “‘a past without a reckoning—a present without a future.’” Through this new definition of love, in other words, Christian Ronald can glimpse immortality. But it is exactly the cry to love, which seems so freeing to Ronald, that horrifies the more pagan Laurence; again, his desire dies. It is at this point, when Ronald toasts love, that Laurence, the consummate hermaphrodite, drugs him and flees. The rape/sex scene ends here. In the first, generic reading, Laurence resists rape and escapes, passionless and sexually untouched.

And in the second reading, Laurence and Ronald emerge from a bed of almost unimaginable pleasures that briefly carry them beyond and outside the law of genre/gender. But Ronald’s ambiguous sexuality is the coming to fruition of his Christian humanity, and he needs love to reach salvation. Laurence, the consummate hermaphrodite, does not. The idyll must and does end.

Understanding that there is a way to read the text that enables Laurence not only to feel sexual passion but to give and receive sexual pleasure allows us to do things with this text that are restricted if we believe only the overtell: that sexual feeling is not included in Laurence’s deluxe toolbox of sexual equipment. In “Manifest in Signs: The Politics of Sex and Representation in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” P. Gabrielle Foreman defines the narrative strategy of what she calls “undertell.” Foreman provides a brilliant reading of Jacobs’s text that allows us to understand the possibility that Jacobs was raped
and, through “undertelling” that rape, could remain very much in charge of her own text and its effects. Jacobs had to negotiate a white readership with crippling expectations of what a black woman could experience and express. Foreman argues that in that context we need to recalibrate what we understand as “truth.” She encourages us to understand that the text’s “truth” operates on several levels that seem opposed only if we remain obsessed with a narrow, ultimately genital understanding of Jacobs’s claim to sexual triumph. It is in Jacobs’s acrobatic control of genre that Foreman suggests her triumph lies—a triumph over the readerly prurience of white women as well as the sexual prurience of white men.

This essay does not attempt to substitute one reading (Jacobs’s triumph over Norcom) for another (that Norcom really raped her). I resist accepting or offering any critical exegesis as a definitive one. Yet I do mean to call into question the politics of transparency that often lead critics to accept Jacobs’s principal script, her sexual ‘triumph,’ and that act to quiet down a subtext which constitutes her signifying narrative success. (Foreman 93)

Howe and Jacobs are of a generation, but Howe, born a banker’s daughter in 1819, is a very different author from Jacobs, born a slave woman’s daughter (and therefore a slave herself) in 1813. Howe is writing from the very center of Northeastern class, race, cultural, educational and marital privilege. She is writing a novel with no claims to “truth.” Unlike Jacobs, Howe did not publish her text and put it before the lascivious gaze of a judgmental readership, whether or not she was worrying about a potential audience while writing. And where Foreman is arguing that we should see a rape concealed behind the conventions of true womanhood, I am arguing that we should see mutually pleasurable sexual consummation behind the conventions of a rape scene. Nevertheless there is much in Foreman’s reading of Jacobs that is helpful here. Most immediately, I am inspired by Foreman’s call that we look past the question of “did she or didn’t she” to the question of how an author’s manipulation of textual convention allows her to almost silently theorize sex and sexuality. And theorize them far more complexity than we—always bound in spite of ourselves to the repressive hypothesis—ever allow the female members of Howe’s and Jacobs’s generation.

Foreman makes it clear why Jacobs’s strategy of undertell was entirely essential to both her political project and her integrity as a writer and a human being. But why does Howe employ it? If she did imagine that she was writing for an audience, she clearly couldn’t describe sex itself, but she could make her character libidinous. If she knew she wasn’t writing for publica-
tion, she could have written more explicitly about Laurence’s sexuality and again, made him libidinous. The reason, I think, is that both Laurences—cold Laurence and horny Laurence—are important to what Howe is trying to theorize through her novel, but the two Laurences cannot touch because their critical projects are mutually exclusive. Denying Laurence sexual feeling allows Howe, for the majority of the text, to concentrate on the generic and diametrically opposed codes of nineteenth-century Euro-American gender. Howe is fascinated by the cultural opposition of men and women and by the limits of their gender performance. She pushes the envelope of that opposition, placing both male and female characters at the extreme edges of acceptable masculinity and femininity, then sets her “hermaphrodite” loose among them to explore what actually crossing the line might look and feel like. This exploration depends upon the thesis that Laurence has no sexual feeling; his asexuality keeps an analysis of gender categories in play. Were he to desire these men and women, his own use as a tourist—his abstraction from the characters he studies and his sentimental journey in their strange lands and among their bizarre customs—would be compromised.

But in the “undertell”—the reading that allows Laurence to be a passionate, pleasure-giving and -seeking lover—Howe explores something else, something we are now critically adept at parsing: that biological sex is different from gender and that neither biological sex nor gender are roadmaps for sexual desire. This “undertell” is the way that Howe explores the possibility that the biological codings of sex and the social codings of gender performance are immediately scrambled when mapped onto sexual feeling. It is the way she explores the inexpressible possibility that there is a wider spectrum of sexual attraction and practice than either biological sex or gender can account for. Foreman quotes Karen Halttunen’s description of the “sentimental typology of conduct” at mid-century: “The most important law of polite social geography was that no one shatter the magic of the genteel performance by acknowledging back regions that alone made the performance possible” (quoted in Foreman 78). If gender is the “principal script” of The Hermaphrodite, sexual desire is the “back region.” Howe couldn’t have the principal script without the suppression of the undertell, and the very fact that the narrator firmly denies the existence of sexual joy and consummation for Laurence should tell us that of course sexual joy is quietly pleasuring itself in the wings.

How Laurence denies sexual desire is itself very revealing. What exactly is he denying? Early in the novel, Laurence explains that:

For man or woman, as such, I felt an entire indifference—when I wished to trifle, I preferred the latter, when I wished to reason gravely, I chose the
former. I sought sympathy from women, advice from men, but love from neither. Like all other young creatures, I was gladly in the company of the gay and the gentle, but I could not be in it long without learning that a human soul, simply as such, and not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender, has but a lame and unsatisfactory part to play in this world. (Howe, H 5)

Is Laurence really saying that he cannot feel sexual passion? I think not. “For man or woman, as such, I felt an entire indifference.” That “as such” provides a world of possibility. A man “as such” is a man. But what about a man or woman who is not “as such?” What about for man or woman, as something else? A man who is a woman or a woman who is a man? Or both? And what does it mean to feel an “entire indifference” for man or woman? Entire and indifferent (from the Latin indiferens, “making no distinction”) are, of course, what Laurence is. He is entire man and entire woman—each in its entirety. He is literally indifferent—not different from either—except that of course to be both in one is to be entirely different from everyone else. To say he “feels an entire indifference for” is not the same as saying he is without sexual passion. He is saying that he cannot feel the vive la différence that is endlessly hawked as the genre-driven engine behind heterosexual desire, because he is literally indifferent to both man and woman, as such. He is telling us, in other words, what doesn't turn him on, what isn't his kink. That doesn't mean he has no kink at all.

So what are “man” and “woman”? They are the structural pieces of narrative, of story, of time. They are gender and genre, modes of entertainment, the one trifling, the other grave, the one sympathetic, the other instructive. Together they produce narrative—specifically described here as theater—that Laurence chooses, when he “wants.” Man and woman “as such,” then, provide for Laurence’s picky narrative desires, which are satisfied by strongly gendered players whose performances please him socially though not sexually. But the price of being the voyeur, genderless and genreless, is high. For Laurence, there is nothing outside of the watching: “A human soul, simply as such, and not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender, has but a lame and unsatisfactory part to play in this world.” Here that tricky, slippery “as such” is brought to bear not upon gender but upon the human soul. When used with “man or woman,” “as such” shakes the foundations of those two words and invites us to understand them as unstable. It hints at Laurence’s potentially voluminous sexual desires, were those generic codes to topple. But when used with the singular “human soul,” which has no opposite against which to ricochet and deliciously break, that phrase “simply as such” seals Laurence’s fate and shows us why the sex scene
I have argued for ends with Laurence running away from Ronald. In that scene we see Laurence physically capable of both entire possession and entire surrender; he is physiologically male and female and he uses sex to protect his “entire indifference,” his “simply as such” bothness. In the same scene we see wounded Ronald learn the pain and pleasure of both possession and surrender; his sexual pleasure is like Laurence’s, but for the young man the revelation of sexual joy outside the law of genre/gender leads to a revelation of spiritual joy. Both characters invite us to consider the possibility that possession and surrender, action and passivity, giving and receiving, public and private (the list goes on forever) are not specific to gender or to sexual acts, but to moments in time. Both characters experience and delight in a physical interlude in which I think we see Howe theorizing sex beyond gender. But it is when that capacity for passionate flux is brought to bear upon the soul, genderless and immortal, that Ronald and Laurence part ways. Physical passions experienced outside the law of genre/gender are, for Christian Ronald, the gateway to a new definition of love—and that new love is the thing that makes humans human and promises them immortality: “a past without a reckoning—a present without a future.” In contrast, Laurence’s description of his soul (rather than his body) as “not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender” is a description of a soul that is not divided from itself, and that is therefore not invited to the orgy of post-lapsarian human feeling—love—promised in the New Testament: “he that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.” Laurence is hermaphrodite in body, Ronald in soul. Laurence can have amazing sex, but he cannot move through the dramatic and sentimental teleology of salvation to Christian immortality. His immortality is of a different sort. He seems to come at last to speechless, motionless, eternal consciousness of his own powerlessness and voicelessness, possibly buried alive by friends who cannot see past the generic appearance of death. There is no narrative, no part in the play of heterosexual pairings and gendered posturing, and no possibility of salvation from that narrative, for a genreless human soul, simply as such.

In the principal script of The Hermaphrodite the exclusion of the ultimately speechless Laurence from time and narrative is the tragedy of gender and genre. But like Romeo and Juliet, whose plot informs The Hermaphrodite, this novel is perhaps a tragicomedy. In the undertell, the back region of the text, the above passage points us to a different understanding of the possibilities of being outside the script. Not a happy ending (there can be no ending at all for a storyless immortal, and indeed, the manuscript of The Hermaphrodite has neither a beginning nor an end), but stolen moments outside the structures of gender and genre, as there are in Romeo and Juliet—moments
of consummation. Neither man nor woman, Laurence can only be a watcher, with perhaps a “lame and unsatisfactory” walk-on role. But reading for the undertell, the implication is clear. Look offstage. Howe puts Laurence onstage as Juliet, and, because genre drives gender and vice versa, he is misread as a woman in disguise. Take him offstage, look back in his rooms—outside the script, beneath the text itself—and he is passionate man to Ronald’s woman and vice versa and both and neither.

Notes

1. Like Dana Luciano elsewhere in this volume, I mostly describe Laurence as “ambiguously sexed” rather than as a “hermaphrodite,” though sometimes that term is useful to me. For her careful parsing of the reasons for this choice, see her footnote 2.

2. See Gary Williams’s discussion of the importance of Cushman and her performances to Howe in note 24 of his introduction to The Hermaphrodite (Williams, “Speaking” xli–xlii), and Lisa Merrill’s discussion of Cushman’s performances in When Romeo Was a Woman (2006).


4. Renée Bergland, in her essay in this volume, carefully delineates which of several Borghese hermaphrodite statues Howe might be referencing here. Only one statue, which Howe could not have actually seen, represented male and female genitalia. Bergland argues convincingly that it is in fact a more coy statue that Howe probably knew. As Bergland explains, “The inaccessibility of the genitalia of the sleeping hermaphrodite in the villa make it the likeliest inspiration for Howe’s novel, since sexual inaccessibility is a much more central theme in Howe’s work than sexual exposure. But there is great erotic energy in sexual denials, and nineteenth-century writers seem to have shared Howe’s association of hermaphrodite statues with erotic impossibility” (Bergland 168). I agree with Bergland, and I think that Howe does describe the otherwise unseen genitals of the hermaphrodite in this section. She does so, however, in terms that reduplicate the statuary perfection and distance from human experience that Bergland theorizes in her essay: “nude sculptures offer ideal beauty without the soft pollution of actual flesh” (169). Here Howe describes Laurence’s genital bothness as Edenic, pre-gendered, and pre-sexed. She thus shows us the hermaphrodite’s bothness in the very moment that she asserts that bothness as the state of perfection from which humans are ontologically, teleologically, and narratively fallen, and of which human fleshliness, desire, and suffering is the punishing opposite.

5. For consideration of the anxieties and excitements surrounding the genders of Jesus in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American thought, see Stephen D. Moore 41–45 and 109–114. Suzanne Ashworth’s essay in this volume, “Spiritualized Bodies and Posthuman Possibilities: Technologies of Intimacy in The Hermaphrodite,” is a useful parallel to and historical anchor for my argument. She places the text in relationship to eighteenth-century Swedenborgian theological thought that theorizes the ungendering of the human spirit the closer it gets to perfection.

6. Dana Luciano in this volume reads Ronald’s toast as a cancellation of the “possibility of the conventional romance’s sequential progression. . . . [T]his desire calculates,
rather violently, on the moment alone” (235). I agree, but would add that Ronald’s redefinition of love comes after his disillusionment with gender and genre and that his reach to timelessness as a way of describing the love he now feels casts the “moment alone” as beyond rather than against genre/gender. This is a reading that dovetails with Ashworth’s delineation of the importance of Swedenborgian thought to Howe. Laurence will find himself in just such a timeless state at the “end” of the text, but in despair rather than bliss, a trance state that Bergland describes as a “Swedenborgian coma” (Bergland 165). The manuscript winds down with Laurence trapped in that trance because his bothness is physical rather than spiritual. The manuscript ends in mid-sentence, with Ronald in motion toward his statue-like lover. That motion toward love that never resolves into an ending is another “moment alone” given to Ronald but not to Laurence, and again it is the gesture of immortality, the genre/genderlessness of the spiritual rather than physical hermaphrodite.
In a very strange letter, Charles Sumner announced that his bosom friend Samuel Howe wanted to marry Julia Ward. As Sumner put it, Howe, “as Presid’t of the Phrenological Soc., . . . would like to have her head in their collection—perhaps I might . . . [add] that he would like it for his private cabinet” (quoted in Williams, HH 47). This metaphor of murder, decapitation, and connoisseurship is a little disturbing. Even before the marriage, the rivalry between Charles Sumner and Julia was fatal, at least metaphorically.

Perhaps in some senses Sumner was right, and Julia Ward Howe’s marriage was a sort of murder. Her gloomy newlywed poetry certainly supports this notion. But as she began to recover herself and started to work on The Hermaphrodite, Julia might have imagined a sort of a “private cabinet” of her own. Hers would have been furnished with marble sculptures rather than phrenological specimens. Like most nineteenth-century Americans interested in sculpture, Julia Ward Howe would have given a prominent place in her mental gallery to Hiram Power’s iconic Greek Slave. Next to it, she might have imagined a copy of the lovely hermaphrodite of the Villa Borghese, a statue that must have fascinated her. Perhaps other niches would have held busts of the two great rivals for her husband’s attention: Laura Bridgman (sculpted by Julia’s friend Sophia Peabody Hawthorne) and Charles Sumner
(sculpted by Julia’s brother-in-law, Thomas Crawford). In the halls of Howe’s imagination, Bridgman and Sumner might have served as objects of contemplation, frustration, perhaps even horror. A little further along, perhaps Howe would have placed a great, unfinished sculpture of Michelangelo’s, an emblem of impossible genius. These sculptural forms could have helped her to shape her own great, unfinished novel.

Sculpture was desperately important to Julia Ward Howe. She associated it with artistic genius, with disembodied spirituality, and with sexuality. Statues represented the extreme case of being trapped in a concrete body, an idea that Howe found so desperately frightening that she often veered between fear of death and fear of fleshly embodiment. Somehow, statues were both for her: dead, and concretely embodied in fixed form. And at the same time, so many statues were nude. For Howe, sculptures tied sexuality to death and to the confining limits of embodiment. They aroused her creative excitement and awakened her erotic interest.

One of the strangest moments of Howe’s Reminiscences is her account of the birth of her first daughter, Julia Romana, in Rome in 1844. “The early spring brought the dear gift of another life to gladden and enlarge our own,” Howe writes. And then, without a clear transition, the following paragraph continues: “Of the months preceding this event, I cannot at this date give any very connected account. The experience was at once a dream and a revelation. My mind had been able to anticipate something of the achievement of human thought, but of the patient work of the artist I had not had the smallest conception” (Howe, Rem 128). Readers who begin the paragraph expecting that Howe may have been preoccupied with pregnancy during the “months preceding” her first child’s birth may presume that her dreams and revelations were concerned with childbearing. At first, even “the patient work of the artist” seems that it might be a metaphor for gestation. But in fact Howe soon makes clear that during the months preceding the birth, she was preoccupied not with pregnancy but with sculptures and tombs. The “conception” that she remembers is her new understanding of the possibility of death—brought home to her when she fears being lost in the catacombs, and culminating with her new appreciation for sculpture. The sculpture galleries move her and frighten her, she explains:

Among the wonderful sights of that winter I recall an evening visit to the sculpture gallery of the Vatican, where the statues were shown us by torchlight. I had not as yet made the acquaintance with those marble shapes, which were rendered so lifelike by the artful illumination that when I saw them afterward in the daylight, it seemed to me that they had died. (Howe, Rem 129)
Light and shadow, death and life, stone and flesh. For Julia Ward Howe, as for many of her cultured contemporaries, sculpture was richly paradoxical, sometimes embarrassing, sometimes terrifying, but always fascinating. And on top of all that, it somehow managed to be polite. Howe did not publish a graphic account of the actual conception of her first daughter. In its place, she offered an account of the revelatory new conception that took place in the sculpture galleries of Rome.

Howe's *Reminiscences*, with their strange omissions and associations, were definitely written for publication. Indeed, the woman who sat down to compose them had been a literary celebrity for much of her life. But the Laurence manuscript was much more private, much more raw. There is no evidence that Howe ever really considered publishing it. Strikingly, in the private manuscript the connection between sex and sculpture is, if anything, stronger than in the public one. *The Hermaphrodite* is plotted around statues. Although the plot turns on its protagonist's anomalous genitalia, there is relatively little discussion of Laurence's body. Where we might expect flesh, Howe gives us marble. Rather than monsters, she presents us with statues. Or perhaps she writes her own gothic Pygmalion story—the gradual coming to life of a statue who eventually becomes a “beautiful monster” (Howe, *H* 193) in his own eyes, even as his admiring friends insist that he is “‘the poetic dream of the ancient sculptor, more beautiful, though less human, than either man or woman’” (Howe, *H* 194). Not man, not woman, and not quite human, Laurence is instead the dream of a sculptor.

In this essay, I discuss a number of specific statues. First, *The Greek Slave*, by Hiram Powers, offers a context for discussion of nineteenth-century neoclassical sculpture. Second, I turn to the only statue that is mentioned by name in Howe's novel, the Borghese hermaphrodite. Laurence's sexual ambiguity is coded through his resemblance to this statue. Yet although the Borghese hermaphrodite is the touchstone of Howe's *Hermaphrodite*, it is not the only statue that the text takes up. Each of the significant episodes in the narrative can be keyed to a particular sculpture. The hermit's cottage episode contains a long description of a bas-relief of a veiled woman. I associate this renunciatory image with the third statue I discuss, a bust of Laura Bridgman. Next, Laurence and Ronald's passionate friendship is broken when Ronald compares Laurence to a statue and tries to embrace him with enough passion to “‘turn marble itself to molten flame’” (Howe, *H* 87). For this essay, Charles Sumner is the emblem of impassioned intimate friendship between men, and the bust of Sumner, the fourth in this essay’s imaginary gallery, must be considered here. Finally, in Rome, Ronald's renunciation of Laurence leaves him a “beautiful monster” made of stone. I connect Howe's beautiful monster to Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures, the fifth and final group of statues.
under discussion. Other than the reference to the Borghese hermaphrodite, the associations that I offer here are speculative. And yet, Howe’s concrete ties to these particular sculptures were very strong. Considering the specific statues that were important to Howe offers a useful strategy for understanding the issues of physicality and spirituality, anatomy and identity, that inform her conceptions of life and death, tangled as they are with her conceptions of art and sex.

I. The Greek Slave

Why sculpture? What does making statues have to do with the complexities of sexual anatomy and sexual identity in play here? Although these are real questions for readers today, in the 1840s the connections would have been fairly obvious. For one thing, the prevailing neoclassical aesthetic dictated that most human figures were nude. At the same time, extremely modest clothing fashions meant that sculpture galleries were one of the few places where the human form was on display. After Hiram Powers’s wildly popular Greek Slave (figure 1) toured the United States in the 1840s, cultured men and women of the nineteenth century equated statuary with naked bodies. Looking at sculpture was an occasion for contemplating human anatomy and for thinking about sex and sexuality. Four decades after Howe’s marriage, a terrified Edith Wharton, “seized with such a dread at the whole dark mystery,” asked her mother what would happen on her wedding night. Her mother said, “with an effort, ‘You’ve seen enough . . . statues in your life. . . . You can’t be as stupid as you pretend!’” (Lee 76).

And so it makes sense that Howe would turn to sculpture as she tried to represent sex. Many scholars document the prevalence of this sort of thought. Most notably in Marble Queens and Captives, Joy Kasson argues that nineteenth-century Americans turned to statues to explore their “ideas, hopes, fears, and associations surrounding the subject of women—their roles, their capabilities” (Kasson 2). As Kasson explains it, The Greek Slave embodied contradictory meanings, “—eroticism indulged and denied, passion and passionlessness, power and powerlessness” (Kasson 72). Nineteenth-century Americans didn’t merely associate sculpture with sex, they associated it with sex’s contradictions. To add a further layer of complexity, the statue explicitly represented a white slave, defined as “Greek,” her chained nude body constructed from pure white marble. In America in the 1840s, whiteness, nakedness, and slavery were a shocking and fascinating combination. Thinking about sculpture was a way to think about both race and sex, and about the vexed relationships between anatomy and identity.
Figure 1. Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*. By permission of Yale University Art Gallery
Anatomy and identity are a difficult problem. Alice Dreger explains, “The great theorist of racism W. E. B. Du Bois asserted that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line. I argue . . . that we are far from having solved this problem, and that the problem of the twenty-first century will be the great fault on which the color line falls: the anatomy-identity line” (Dreger, One 9–10). Dreger’s revision of Du Bois moves from color to anatomy, from racial identity to identity itself. Her reformulation allows us to think about sex alongside race, and it also opens up space to consider blind people, deaf people, hermaphrodites, conjoined twins, dwarves, users of wheelchairs and crutches or prosthetics, pregnant women, and comatose people who linger on life support—in short, those with anomalous bodies and complicated identities. But Dreger, like Du Bois before her, is careful not to focus attention exclusively upon the anomalies. Whether normal or strange, the real problem is that anatomy is tethered to identity in ways that no one quite understands. The problem is the relation between anatomy and identity and the lines that link them together and divide them from each other—tough as steel hawsers, fine as gossamer. Anatomy–identity lines are as hard to locate as they are easy to cross.

Dreger may be right that the anatomy–identity line is central to twenty-first century thought, but this doesn’t mean that the problem is new. Long before Dreger, long before Du Bois, American thinkers were fascinated with similar philosophical and political problems. The paradoxes of equality and difference have been central to the United States since its founding. People of color and women have often struggled with the tangled relation between anatomies and identities, since whiteness and maleness were the foundational norms for United States citizenship. In such a context, to be female or to be nonwhite is to be anatomically anomalous—and hence to have an anomalous identity, whether you want it or not.

Alice Dreger’s anatomy–identity line offers useful new words for an old problem. Like Mark Twain and Julia Ward Howe (and others), Dreger focuses her discussion on the extremely anomalous bodies of conjoined twins and hermaphrodites in order to consider fundamental philosophical issues surrounding race and sex. These hard cases exemplify the complexities of identity for us today as they did more than a hundred years ago when Twain wrote Pudd’nhead Wilson and “Those Extraordinary Twins,” and Howe secretly penned her hermaphrodite novel. But although there are many similarities between nineteenth-century approaches to the problem of identity and twenty-first-century approaches, there are also some startling differences. Today it makes sense to consider many angles that would be utterly foreign to Julia Ward Howe—for us, film and photography, along with medical scans
and genetic codes, are places where anatomies and identities come into focus. For Howe, on the other hand, sculpture was a clear locus for working through the problematic contradictions of anatomies and identities, bodies and souls.

The first decades of the nineteenth century saw a sudden surge in sculpture making. Artists from all over Europe and the Americas converged on Rome, where they learned the complex technological process of nineteenth-century sculpture. Many knew how to cut, chisel, and polish stone, but sculptors were not stone cutters—they worked in wax or clay for the most part, then hired workmen to transfer their designs to marble. Nineteenth-century statue making was an industrial process, relying on trains and shipping lines to transport materials and using a coordinated workforce of many specialized laborers. A sculptor’s studio was a hive of activity, stacked with dangerous chemicals, tools, and machines, along with dozens of highly trained workers to use them. Studios were loud and crowded. There was nothing solitary or private about them. To the contrary, most studios were open to the public and functioned as showrooms and galleries as well as workplaces. When Charles Dickens visited sculptors’ studios in Italy in 1844, he commented that it seemed “so strange to me, that those exquisite shapes, replete with grace, and thought, and delicate repose, should grow out of all this toil, and sweat, and torture!” (Dickens, *Pictures* 106) Like many of his contemporaries, Dickens was fascinated by the intense contrast between the toil, sweat and torture of early industrial production and the “delicate repose” of neoclassical sculpture.

The industrial and Victorian aspects of nineteenth-century sculpture may not be immediately apparent to us, in part because the sculptors often tried to emulate classical statuary. To a large extent the aesthetic forms were ancient. Even so, Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* was wholly of its time. Art historian Tom Flynn explains that its success “can be attributed to its timely subject matter, managing on an abstract level to evoke a range of contemporary political and social issues” (Flynn 106), including the Greek War of Independence, the abolitionist movement, and the women’s movement (all causes very important to Samuel and Julia Ward Howe). In addition, the startling anachronism of crinolined Victorians viewing neoclassical nudes changed the classical aesthetic deeply. Powers’s presentation of a naked female body was very Victorian—the statue was carefully crafted to present female nudity as the apotheosis of modesty. In a pamphlet that Powers distributed to the throngs who came to see *The Greek Slave*, the Reverend Orville Dewey carefully explained that “The Greek Slave is clothed all over with sentiment; sheltered, protected by it from every profane eye” (Kasson 58). Victorian sentiment, strenuously applied, could clothe the naked. But at the same time,
the shock of nudity was much greater for Victorians than it would have been for ancients, or even than it is for us in the spandex-clad present. Tom Flynn argues that the success of *The Greek Slave* derives from its “managing to hold such contradictory values in fruitful tension” (Flynn 106). Like Powers’s *Greek Slave*, nineteenth-century sculpture in general was paradoxical and exciting, if sometimes troubling. Sculpture embodied contradiction as much as it embodied sex.

**The Sculpture Motif**

Although Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* was the most popular statue in mid-nineteenth-century America (as both Margaret Fuller and Henry James commented upon with disgust), Howe does not mention it in *The Hermaphrodite*. Rather than a chained, naked white woman, her subject is likened to a series of sculptures, starting and finally ending, with the ancient Greek hermaphrodite in the Borghese collection. The first telling reference to sculpture is on page 12. Emma says to Laurence (the ambiguously sexed narrator): “You are like this marble against which I lean my head, whose pulses throb so that there seems to be a pulse in the cold stone itself—thus, a heart that is near you may think to feel the presence of one in you, but it is marble, only marble” (Howe, H 12). Emma does not know about Laurence’s ambiguous genitals, but she fears he is one of those “unsexed souls” (Howe, H 15). She wants to rescue him from unsexedness—transform him from marble to flesh. Laurence tells us that Emma’s radiant love and delight “sent a strange thrill to the very core of my frozen heart, and again I asked myself: ‘What is it to be a woman?’ But just as Laurence starts to feel his first strange thrills, he overhears an Italian stranger remark that he bears a “strange resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Howe, H 16), and deadly faint at being compared to the sculpture, he rushes away. When Emma follows him to his bedroom, Laurence listens to her propositions “in stony silence.” She realizes her mistake, runs mad, and dies.

In penance, Laurence retreats to a hermit’s cottage that has a marble chapel. “No portraits of saints, no luxury of religious symbols appeared on the walls, but that upon the left of the altar supported a strange, monumental conceit. This was a sculptured bas-relief, describing the head and bust of a female figure. The forms of neck and shoulders were delicately chiseled, . . . but a strange caprice of art concealed the features that should have given the charm of soul to such perfect physical beauty. The sculptor, and his patron, had kept their secret—a marble veil covered the face, as hopeless as
the grave” (Howe, H 38). Laurence falls into a coma on the marble floor in front of the veiled statue, and he is discovered there by Ronald, “quite alone, stretched on the floor as stiff and cold as the marble itself” (Howe, H 50).

Ronald and Laurence share their lives for a few years, but then Ronald writes a poem about falling in love with a statue that eventually comes to life and kills the lover with a fatal embrace. The moral of his poem: “It is more dangerous to love marble than flesh and blood” (Howe, H 75). In spite of the danger, Ronald embraces Laurence and passionately claims, “I bear in my bosom a wondrous fire, a strange alchemy, that can turn marble itself to molten flame” (Howe, H 87). In response, Laurence drugs Ronald, turning him to a statue in his turn: “No marble could have been more unconscious than Ronald, as I laid him upon his couch” (Howe, H 88).

Finally, Laurence runs away, moving to Rome to assume the garb of a woman. Here, he experiences the limitations of women’s clothing and social roles for the first time, while he waits for Ronald, who eventually arrives to kiss Laurence “on cheek, brow, and lip” and then renounce him, saying: “By day perhaps again, but by night, never!” (Howe, H 193). As Laurence tells it, “These words awoke in me a consciousness of shame, and I snatched myself abruptly from Ronald’s grasp, but as he turned to leave me, shame was swallowed up in agony—I sprang to his side,—I held him fast with all my strength—we looked again into each other’s eyes. One long gaze of tearless anguish, one mute appeal to heaven, and Ronald was gone, and the beautiful monster sat as before on the heap of stones, in the ancient forum, himself as mute and dead as any thing there” (Howe, H 193).

Desolate, Laurence falls into a Swedenborgian coma in which he/she is finally acknowledged as both male and female (rather than neither) and likened to “the poetic dream of the ancient sculptor, more beautiful, though less human, than either man or woman” (Howe, H 194). The manuscript ends mid-sentence, with the paralyzed but conscious Laurence listening to the hurrying footsteps of Ronald, approaching the bed.

II. The Borghese Hermaphrodite

The only particular sculpture that Howe’s manuscript explicitly refers to is the Borghese hermaphrodite. Although there is no question that Howe means to invoke an actual sculpture, there are a number of hermaphrodites associated with the Villa Borghese. The first was a very beautiful Hellenistic statue of a sleeping hermaphrodite that was sold to the Louvre a few decades before Howe visited Europe.
Figure 2. *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, Roman copy of a Greek original, second half of 2nd century B.C.E. Marble, 148 cm. MA 231. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. Louvre, Paris, France. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY
The Hermaphrodite Room in the Villa Borghese was designed to display this version of the sculpture. It’s likely that Howe saw this sculpture in Paris. When she arrived in Rome, she had the chance to see a few more versions of hermaphrodite statues from the Borghese collection—two in the Villa Borghese and a third in the Palazzo Borghese. Ever since the first sleeping hermaphrodite was transferred from the Borghese Collection to Paris, a second, very similar sleeping hermaphrodite has taken its place as a prominent feature in the Hermaphrodite Room of the villa, surrounded by paintings and mosaics depicting Hermaphroditus’s fateful meeting (and melding) with the nymph Salmacis. But the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (whose book was translated by Howe’s acquaintance Giles Henry Lodge in 1849) also mentions that there was a second hermaphrodite that was kept locked in a closet at the Villa Borghese because its posture was “somewhat bold”—bent slightly backward, lifting its garments to offer full frontal exposure. Winckelmann particularly admired the closeted hermaphrodite: “Nothing can be seen lovelier, smoother, rounder, and especially softer, than these features, these limbs... The skill of the artist has enabled him to introduce... a touch of common humanity—a trace of sensuality—and even by this very means to enhance the fascination of his work” (Winckelmann 59). This secret hermaphrodite, Winckelmann explains, was intended for a niche, and so its back is “very carelessly handled, or rather it is only sketched” (Winckelmann 59). When the two Southern strangers compare Laurence to “the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Winckelmann 16), there is at least a chance that Howe is thinking of the unfinished hermaphrodite, the closeted, frontal sculpture. But it is far more likely that Howe is invoking the better-known sleeping hermaphrodite, nestled face to the wall in the Hermaphrodite Room. Gary Williams points out the coyness of this positioning: “the work is placed in the room so that the figure’s left side is to the wall, thus preventing precisely the view that the viewer presumably most wants” (Williams, HH 96). Winckelmann is clear about what there would be to see: “All figures of this kind have maiden breasts, together with the male organs of generation; the form in other respects, as well as the features of the face, is feminine” (Winckelmann 56–57). But in order to see either a hermaphrodite’s sculpted genitalia or its face, Howe would have needed to find access to the closeted hermaphrodite in the villa, or to travel to Paris, where the original Borghese hermaphrodite was displayed more forthrightly.

The inaccessibility of the genitalia of the sleeping hermaphrodite in the villa make it the likeliest inspiration for Howe’s novel, since sexual inaccessibility is a much more central theme in Howe’s work than sexual exposure. But there is great erotic energy in sexual denials. At least one nineteenth-century
writer seems to have shared Howe’s association of the Borghese hermaphrodite with erotic impossibility, while also understanding it as a wellspring of heightened passion. In 1863, Algernon Charles Swinburne wrote a series of highly charged erotic sonnets about the Borghese hermaphrodite that he saw at the Louvre. His poetry helps us understand the passionate lyrical eroticism that the hermaphrodite evoked for mid-nineteenth-century writers. Swinburne sees the hermaphrodite as an embodiment of sexual impossibility as well as possibility, what he describes as:

A strong desire begot on great despair,
A great despair cast out by strong desire. (Swinburne 104)

Like Swinburne, Howe was fascinated by the convergence of despair and desire, and she also saw the hermaphrodite as a locus of both. Winckelmann also understood the Borghese hermaphrodite as paradoxically chaste and voluptuous, explaining, “It was the intention of the artist to represent this Hermaphrodite as sleeping, it is true, yet sleeping unquietly, and excited by voluptuous dreams” (Winckelmann 57). The Hermaphrodite’s unquiet sleep was intimately connected to Julia Ward Howe’s own experience of Rome as a “dream and a revelation,” as her manuscript demonstrates. But these connections are complicated, ambiguous, and contradictory. Howe’s published Reminiscences make it clear that she can offer no “very connected account” of all that she was thinking and feeling in the first years of her marriage, but her unpublished hermaphrodite manuscript also shows us that she was fascinated by the strange connections she found between sex and statues, desire and despair, the possible and the impossible.

Perhaps because of its potent combination of erotic impossibility as well as possibility, many nineteenth-century thinkers saw the hermaphrodites as embodying ideal beauty. Winckelmann explained matter-of-factly, “artists sought to express in the mixed nature of two sexes an image of higher beauty: this image was ideal” (Winckelmann 56). Swinburne puts it more lyrically:

To what strange end hath some strange god made fair
The double blossom of two fruitless flowers?
Hid love in all the folds of all thy hair,
Fed thee on summers, watered thee with showers,
Given all the gold that all the seasons wear
To thee that art a thing of barren hours?

In another “Hermaphroditus” sonnet, Swinburne writes:
Yea, love, I see, it is not love but fear.
Nay sweet, it is not fear but love, I know;
Or wherefore should thy body's blossom blow
So sweetly or thine eyelids leave so clear
Thy gracious eyes that never made a tear? (Swinburne 105)

Actual human bodies disappoint. Flesh is weak and somewhat soggy.
Eyes that make tears can never be as unsullied as the hard eyes of marble statues.
For Swinburne, as for Howe and many mid-century thinkers and writers, nude sculptures offer ideal beauty without the soft pollution of actual flesh.
The Borghese hermaphrodite offers all this and more—the chance to imagine sex itself as equally fantastic and ideal, unbound from anatomical strictures that force most human beings onto one side or the other of the line that divides male from female.
The hermaphrodite allows us to imagine the human body as a place where both maleness and femaleness may blossom simultaneously.

Seeing these new possibilities seems to have been a deeply emotional and enlarging experience for many American tourists in Italy at mid-century.
Margaret Fuller remarked that the artworks at the Borghese Palace reflected her gaze back at her—the portraits, she wrote, "look upon me new and strange. They are portraits of men such as I have not known. . . . In the Borghese Palace one of the figures has developed my powers of gazing to an extent unknown before" (Fuller, AHAA 223).

Although she was not referring to the Borghese hermaphrodite, Fuller's experience of having her own "powers of gazing" developed by the galleries of Rome was quite common.
Many American women exulted in the experience. Upon her first visit to the Borghese gallery, Sophia Peabody Hawthorne exclaimed, "I congratulate myself, that I have travelled to Rome from America!" (Hawthorne, Notes 235).
The sense of exultation that Fuller and Hawthorne experienced in the Borghese gallery is closely related to Howe's deeply emotional experience there. There is no question that a large part of the emotion was intellectual passion—Fuller, Hawthorne, and Howe felt that they were becoming educated, cultured people. Particularly for women, whose access to formal education and culture was often limited, the tourist experience of art could be remarkably liberating. It was also undoubtedly passionate.
Remembering her 1851 departure from Rome, Howe remarked, "As the time of my departure approached, I felt how deeply the subtle fascination of Roman life had entered into my very being. Pain, amounting almost to anguish, seized me at the thought that I might never again behold those ancient monuments" (Howe, Rem 203–4).
Notice Howe's movement from "subtle fascination"
to “anguish,” as she tries to describe the way that the ancient monuments “entered into my very being.” The emotional and intellectual involvement with the classical sculpture that she found in Rome was intimately connected to her sense of herself—her being. And yet the complexity, ambiguity, and passion of those connections were so intense that it was hard for her to give a very connected account of what she experienced there. The talisman for all of these confusing passions was the Borghese hermaphrodite, a classical sculpture whose subtle fascination was the foundation for her first long, disconnected, writing project.

III. Laura Bridgman and Charles Sumner

Julia Ward Howe’s world was thickly populated with sculptures. She knew many sculptors, sculpture critics, and sculptor’s models, and she was a familiar guest in the studios of Rome. Before she married, she attended a conversation led by Margaret Fuller, who wrote quite a bit about sculpture. Also in attendance was Sophia Peabody, soon to be married to Nathaniel Hawthorne. At that time, before either woman married, Sophia Peabody was one of the most accomplished artists in Boston—she’d just made her first three-dimensional sculpture, and it was a great success at the Boston Athenaeum’s 1842 show. The model for Sophia Peabody (Hawthorne’s) sculpture was Laura Bridgman, the celebrated blind, deaf, mute student of Samuel Gridley Howe. The Athenaeum also proudly displayed a bust of Charles Sumner, Samuel Gridley Howe’s dear friend. Thomas Crawford, the sculptor of Sumner, would soon host the Howes on their honeymoon, fall in love with Julia’s sister Louisa and marry her. In the following years, his studio in Rome would be the central meeting place for Julia’s coterie of Roman friends, many of whom were sculptors, sculpture patrons, or art critics or historians. Crawford was a very successful American sculptor who would go on to win commissions for many of the most significant public sculptures in Washington D.C., including the figure of Liberty perched atop the dome of the Capitol building.

It is remarkable that both Laura Bridgman’s and Charles Sumner’s busts were on display at the Athenaeum Show of 1842, since Bridgman was Samuel Gridley Howe’s most celebrated student and Charles Sumner was his best friend. Early in their relationship, Julia’s interest in Samuel might have been piqued by the sculptures she was likely to have seen on her visits to Boston in 1841 and 1842. Neither bust would be referred to specifically in her first manuscript, but there is no question that Julia Ward Howe was familiar with
both sculptures: the Bridgman bust was in the Perkins school, where Howe lived in the first years of her marriage (along with Laura Bridgman herself). The Sumner bust would remain in the Athenaeum, a place Howe visited frequently. She couldn’t have missed it, especially since it had been made by her future brother-in-law. More important than her sister’s relationship to the bust’s sculptor, the fact that Charles Sumner was her husband’s closest friend would have drawn her attention. Both Sumner and Bridgman had been present on the day that Julia met Samuel.

From the very start, Laura Bridgman and Charles Sumner both triangulated the Howes’ difficult marriage. In many ways they were Julia’s rivals for her husband’s attention, if not his love. But what makes the busts of Bridgman and Sumner deeply important to a discussion of The Hermaphrodite are the anatomy/identity questions that motivate the novel. Bridgman was a disabled woman, arguably the iconic disabled woman of her time. Publicly, Sumner was best known as a Massachusetts Senator. Privately, Julia Ward Howe seems to have thought of him as something like a gay man, famously declaring, “Sumner ought to have been a woman, and [Samuel Howe] to have married her” (Williams HH, 61).

I consider Bridgman as Julia Ward Howe’s icon for the disabled woman and Sumner as her icon for the gay man. Howe saw herself as “a student and a dreamer” (Howe, Rem 84), and longed to write a masterpiece and transform herself into a woman of genius. Yet this identity, “woman of genius,” like those of the disabled woman and the homosexual man, would put her at odds with her own anatomy and position her outside of conventional nineteenth-century femaleness. The Hermaphrodite works through these tangled identities/anatomies by casting them into sculptural form.

IV. The Veiled Woman: Laura Bridgman

Although there are many sculptures of veiled women, the bust of Laura Bridgman is the one that graced the entry to the Perkins School where Howe lived early in her married life. Sophia Peabody had worked on the statue in the months before her marriage to Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1842.

A statue of a person like Bridgman presents a number of interesting aesthetic problems. The absence of sensation is particularly hard to depict, since statues are generally unable to sense. Sophia Peabody solved this problem by representing Bridgman with a light bandage over her eyes. Since Bridgman habitually wore such a covering it was an accurate as well as symbolic choice. The Peabody statue, with its subtle veil, possesses a fascinating interiority: It
Figure 3. Sophia Peabody, bust of Laura Bridgman. Photo by Renée Bergland
idealizes girlhood and blindness. It is not a full figure, but just a head and shoulders—as different from Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* as a sculpture can be. Neither sculpture dramatizes a woman’s gaze, but the Bridgman bust emphasizes her blindness from within, while the Greek Slave emphasizes her body from the outside, under other’s eyes. Megan Marshall describes the bust as “[a] remarkable likeness” that “captured Bridgman in a pensive mood on the verge of fame, her unseeing eyes masked with the cloth band she always wore, her youth and vulnerability poignantly expressed in delicate, bare shoulders and loose, lanky hair” (Marshall 418).

As Sophia worked on the bust, the *New York Times* reported on May 18, 1883, “Laura herself watched the progress of the clay model with keen interest, perusing its features with delicate, sensitive fingers, clapping her little hands with delight, and gleefully speaking of the bust as her ‘white baby.’”

The bust is an ambitious work by a young woman. Megan Marshall comments, “In some ways, Sophia’s sculpture was no less prodigious than her subject: the first three-dimensional work in clay she had produced from a live model would one day be cast into copies for blind schools across America, themselves brought into being because of Howe’s widely broadcast success with Laura Bridgman” (Marshall 418). The *Times* proclaimed the statue a “perfect success,” and announced that by 1883, “Copies have been multiplied, and nearly every school for the blind and for deaf mutes in this country . . . has procured one.” Thus, the Bridgman bust represented more than Bridgman herself—paradoxically it offered an idealization of female disability and an example of female artistic genius, each “ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (Garland Thomson 29).

The statue with veiled eyes may have been particularly resonant for the young Julia Ward Howe in the early years of her marriage, as she struggled to write her *Hermaphrodite* manuscript and to find her way in her very difficult marriage and situation. In the manuscript itself, after Laurence is exposed as a hermaphrodite, he retreats to a hermitage furnished with a marble chapel, where he spends his days fasting and contemplating a bas relief of a veiled woman. Howe describes the sculpture as “the head and bust of a female figure. The forms of neck and shoulders were delicately chiseled, . . . but a strange caprice of art concealed the features that should have given the charm of soul to such perfect physical beauty. The sculptor, and his patron, had kept their secret—a marble veil covered the face” (Howe, *H* 38). In this description, Howe’s emphasis on the delicate shoulders and neck, along with the veil, strengthens associations with the Bridgman bust. But what is more interesting is Howe’s emphasis on “strange caprice” and her opposition between “perfect physical beauty” and the secrets of the soul.
Even without the Bridgman associations, the veiled woman sculpture represents a body disassociated from a soul. All of the statues that are invoked in *The Hermaphrodite* concern bodies and souls (anatomies and identities) that are in tension—but the veiled woman at the hermitage is the most explicit embodiment of a longing to escape the physical senses. Laurence's sequestered life is ascetic almost to the point of being suicidal. Lying on the cold marble floor of the chapel, he asks, “What obligation binds me to languish in patient subjection to the laws of animal being?” (Howe, *H* 46).

Let me have no sights, no sounds, no soft bed to tempt me to repose, no fire to awaken the physical pleasure of warmth. I am choked with the solid, asphyxiating gases of our materiality—give me the pure atmosphere of the upper regions—let me once breathe the air of sublimated spirituality, even though that breath should forever dissolve the link that binds me to the visible and tangible. (Howe, *H* 47)

Laurence wants to become a disembodied soul. He longs to “have no sights, no sounds, no soft bed” and to “dissolve the link that binds me to the visible, the tangible.”

The delicate Laura Bridgman whom Charles Dickens described in *American Notes* and Howe described in her *Reminiscences* was certainly remarkable for experiencing no sights and no sounds and having no link to the visible. Bridgman, however, could still feel soft beds and warmth and was strongly linked to the tangible. Bridgman was without the senses of sight, hearing, or smell. Her sense of taste was not particularly acute. Touch was all for her. Of course, she and Samuel Gridley Howe communicated by touch—and once they had developed an effective mode of communication, Bridgman used it to communicate with all of her interlocutors. In a very real sense, all of Bridgman’s relationships were physical. This is not to say that Bridgman’s relationship with Samuel Gridley Howe was sexual, or even to imply that Julia Ward Howe thought of it in such terms. Rather, it provides an important piece of context for *The Hermaphrodite* manuscript, in which Howe works through questions about physical touch and physicality in general as well as sexuality.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines “the disabled woman” as “a cultural third term, defined by the original pair of the masculine figure and the feminine figure. Seen as the opposite of the masculine figure, but also imagined as the antithesis of the normal woman, the figure of the disabled female is thus ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (Garland Thomson 29). If we consider Bridgman as a “cultural third term,” then she becomes an important source for Howe’s thinking. Because of
her array of disabilities, Bridgman had been unable to communicate before Samuel Gridley Howe devised the tactile methods that made communication possible. Her soul was trapped in her body, isolated from others. And then, by touching, she became connected. This sort of connection is not sexual and not even necessarily sensual. And yet, there is an erotic edge, a certain unavoidable intimacy, to communicating by touch. By the time Helen Keller took Bridgman’s place as the iconic disabled woman of her time, many writers were more frank about their prurient interest in the sexual energy tied to tactile communication. Kim E. Nielsen comments, “What interests me is the discomfort with which so many consider Keller’s sexuality. She knew that her intense tactile nature made people uneasy . . .” (Nielsen 132). Nielsen sees Helen Keller as a “cultural third term” (as Garland Thomson would put it), particularly because of her sexual energy. “Physically attractive, and disabled, to many Keller literally embodies contradiction” (Nielsen 132).

The contradiction came because of shared cultural conviction that disabled women must avoid sex. When Alexander Graham Bell asked Helen Keller about whether she had considered marriage, Keller responded, “I can’t imagine a man wanting to marry me. . . . I should think it would seem like marrying a statue.” Keller understood herself as sexually interesting but forbidden from sexual activity. Tellingly, she reached for the metaphors of sculpture to articulate her own impossibility.

The same can be said for Bridgman. She was fascinating to many because of the very condition, and contradictions, that would later make Keller so fascinating (Nielson 132). For Howe, who shared a household with Bridgman while she was writing The Hermaphrodite, these contradictions and confusions were very much alive. Bridgman may well have been “ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (Garland Thomson 29), but the unhappily married Howe, spending her time writing rather than doing domestic chores, may have seen herself in a similar light. For Howe, such ambiguity was fascinating. Bridgman’s position as a “cultural third term” might have made her a sort of hermaphrodite in Howe’s eyes; certainly, as she struggled to write, Howe saw herself, like Bridgman, as “ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (Garland Thomson 29).

V. “The Marble Image of a Saint”: Charles Sumner

The idealized and unparticular statues mentioned in the body of The Hermaphrodite are not secretly coded references to particular works. The bas relief of a veiled woman is imaginary; it isn’t a description of Sophia Pea-
body’s three-dimensional bust of Laura Bridgman. Similarly, the “marble image of a saint” that Ronald writes his long poem about is certainly not a secret reference to a statue of Charles Sumner. The saint in the text seems to be female—or at least it is accorded a feminine pronoun when it descends from “her marble pedestal,” so that the lover may “clasp her to his heart” (Howe, H 75).

But although there are no direct equivalencies between Sumner and the “marble image,” it is useful to consider the man Sumner and at least one of the sculptures made of him during his life—the Roman bust by Thomas Crawford. During Sumner’s Grand Tour in 1839, he became fast friends with the young American sculptor who was struggling to start out in Rome. He commissioned a bust (figure 4) and sent it back to the Boston Athenaeum, where it was admired enough to convince Bostonians to commission a large Orpheus that Crawford had designed in clay and longed to make in marble. Crawford’s bust of Sumner can be said to have started the neoclassical sculpture craze in Boston, while the Orpheus convinced Bostonians that sculpture was “the natural talent of an American,” as Margaret Fuller put it, asserting, “I have no doubt that glories will be displayed by our sculptors unknown to classic art” (Fuller, AHAA 356). Fuller also wrote a sonnet on “Crawford’s Orpheus” and described Crawford as “the sculptor of Orpheus—him who had such faith, such music of divine thought, that he made the stones move, turned the beasts from their accustomed haunts, and shamed hell itself into sympathy with the grief of love” (Fuller, AHAA 242).

When Julia Ward visited in Boston in 1841 and 1842, Charles Sumner and Margaret Fuller were both there to introduce her to their passion for sculpture. She was sure to have admired Crawford’s bust of Sumner along with his grand Orpheus at the Athenaeum. Sumner also introduced Julia to Samuel Gridley Howe, on the fateful day when he and Longfellow took her and sisters out to Perkins to meet Laura Bridgman. Later, his letter of introduction to Thomas Crawford would lead to Julia’s sister Louisa’s marriage to Crawford.

There is no question that the bust of her husband’s best friend Charles Sumner made by her brother-in-law Thomas Crawford must have been a statue that Julia Ward Howe was aware of and one that she had contemplated. Further, since Sumner introduced Julia to Thomas Crawford and provided her introductions to Crawford’s circle of sculptors in Rome, Sumner’s link with the art of sculpture was very strong. The best emblem of Sumner’s love for neoclassical sculpture is the Crawford bust. It is startlingly handsome, depicting Sumner’s bare collarbones and neck and his carefully styled hair. His jaw is strong, and his lips are slightly open; it shows us the young Sumner
Figure 4. Thomas Crawford, bust of Charles Sumner. Rome, Italy, 1842. 68.6 x 35.6 x 26.5cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of Charles Sumner, 74.30.1. Photograph © 2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
before he became a senator, and it presents a heady mix of romanticism and republicanism, cast into “Greek,” neoclassical form.

The link between Sumner and the saintly statues that Ronald imagines is very faint, if there is any at all. Some did think of Sumner as a saintly figure. Later, after he was beaten by the pro-slavery South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks on the Senate floor, it became fairly common to refer to Sumner as a martyr for abolition, or even as a saint. There is a (probably apocryphal) tale that Sumner showed John Brown his bloody coat when Brown visited Boston and that Brown treated the stained garment with the reverence due to the relics of saint. But it is very unlikely that Julia Ward Howe ever thought of Sumner as saintly. Perhaps she may have thought of him as an “angel-fiend,” a term Ronald uses to upbraid Laurence.

Yet although the Sumner bust is not much like the statue that Ronald imagines embracing, the relationship between Ronald and Laurence had very strong parallels to the relationship between Samuel Howe and Charles Sumner. For Julia Ward Howe (if not for her character Ronald), the Sumner bust may have been very closely linked to Laurence, the hermaphrodite of her imagination. Julia was quite frank about her feelings of rivalry with Sumner—he was her husband’s closest friend, and, as Gary Williams discusses, the Howes’ unhappy marriage was painfully triangulated by Samuel’s intimate bonds with Sumner.

It is not clear that the relationship between Samuel and Sumner was sexual, though Williams points out several passionate exchanges between them that certainly focus on gender, if not sexuality. Sumner confided that something unmanned him when his friendship with Samuel Howe grew intimate—in a letter to Samuel, he wrote, “During our special intimacy, I have been blasted by another unhappiness, which unmanned me & took from me all interest in labor” (quoted in Williams, HH 59). The combination of “special intimacy” with “unmanning” may have sexual connotations for readers today; it may not have had the same connotations in 1844, but Williams is surely right when he comments that this correspondence shows great emotional intensity. It is just as foolish to completely exclude sexuality from the discussion as it would be to read Sumner’s unmanned in an overdetermined, exclusively homosexual way. The Howes were certainly aware of the possibility of same-sex physical love, even if they may have understood it differently from the way it is often understood today. It was common knowledge in the nineteenth century, as it is now, that sex between males had been socially encouraged in classical Greece and that attitudes toward same-sex contact differed in varying cultural and historical contexts. In this context, the Hellenistic, “Greek” style of the Sumner bust is particularly significant.
Although the pages of *The Hermaphrodite* make it clear that Howe was fascinated by same-sex love, it is less clear that Howe thought of homosexuality as an identity. Today, scholars generally use “sex” to refer to physiology, “gender” to refer to cultural norms, and “sexuality” to refer to sexual desires. All three—sex, gender, and sexuality—are framed as identities. But Foucault argues that before the 1880s, sexuality was not understood as an identity. People did not necessarily understand themselves in terms of their own patterns of desire. So that, according to Foucault, Sumner and Howe might have had a physical sexual relationship without identifying themselves as homosexual. Indeed, they would certainly not have identified themselves with that term, since it had not yet been coined. Rather than “homosexual,” later-nineteenth-century sexologists might have seen Sumner (and perhaps also Samuel Howe) as “inverts” or “Uranian” figures—often described as soul of a woman trapped in the body of a man (certainly a hermaphroditical sort of conception). These terms would begin to circulate in the 1860s, after Howe had (most probably) stopped work on the manuscript. Nonetheless, sexuality and identity are certainly in play in *The Hermaphrodite*.

Ronald is not exactly a gay man, and his “identity” does not seem to be a central concern. He falls in love with Laurence (who is, after all, a hermaphrodite) and begs him to “change my torment to the raptures of heaven. You shall be a man to all the world, if you will, but a woman, a sweet, warm loving woman, to me” (Howe, *H* 86). Ronald’s desire for Laurence is not a homosexual desire. His willingness to love Laurence seems situational rather than a matter of his own identity—he does not understand himself as someone who consistently desires to have sex with males (and, in fact, Laurence is not conventionally male).

Laurence is not exactly a gay man either. But for Laurence, sexuality is certainly a question of identity, just as sex and gender are. He struggles with all three of the aspects that contemporary scholars discuss (sex, gender, and sexuality) in terms of his identity. Because his sex identity is ambiguous, he believes that sexual desires are impossible or forbidden for him. How does this relate to Sumner? Most likely, Charles Sumner was not a person with anomalous genitals. It is improbable that he was physically a hermaphrodite. Williams does report that Sumner was known as “The Stag” while he was a college student, because his college classmates all knew that he was sexually impotent (Williams, *HH* 60). Much later (1866), he married a woman and was divorced after two years, amid a swirl of rumors that he “could not perform the functions of a husband” (Williams, *HH* 60). It is possible, if highly unlikely, that Sumner’s sexual impotence (if it existed) had particular anatomical causes. What is more likely is that Sumner was uninterested in
sex with women. This is all speculation. We will never have any certainty about Charles Sumner’s sexual anatomy or his sexual desires. Sumner himself may have been very uncertain about these matters. At any rate, although Julia Ward Howe probably had some theories of her own about Sumner, her insight was merely that of his best friend’s wife.

Charles Sumner should have been a woman, and Samuel Howe should have married her. Samuel reported to Sumner that Julia Ward Howe said this frequently. It is hard to interpret her statement. Partly, it was a way to express the wish that she and Howe had never married. Perhaps it was also an expression of jealousy. Howe might have been commenting on Sumner’s sex identity: Perhaps she saw him as someone who “should have been a woman,” even apart from his friendship with Samuel. The declaration certainly expresses dissatisfaction with the actual state of affairs—both the marriage of Julia and Samuel and the intense friendship between Samuel and Sumner.

It was clear from the very start that Julia and Samuel’s marriage was going to be difficult. Valarie Ziegler notes that Julia Ward Howe’s first poem about regretting her marriage was dated two days after the ceremony (Ziegler 32). Within six weeks, Howe had written enough verses to bind them into a small, very sad book. In Hungry Heart, Williams argues that her husband’s intimate friendship with Sumner was at the root of Howe’s despair (Williams, HH 42), noting that Howe described Charles Sumner as Samuel’s “intimate friend,” while styling herself Samuel’s “companion” (Williams, HH 43).

Who is closer, the intimate friend or the companion? Who is most beloved? These questions may have worried Julia Ward Howe: they were certainly very powerful questions for many in the early nineteenth century. Companionship marriage was a relatively new development at the time. According to Ivy Schweitzer, for many centuries previous, friendship had been a much more important emotional relationship than marriage. Early Americans experienced dramatic cultural and emotional shifts as marriage was redefined as a love relationship rather than a more hierarchical power relationship and began to replace friendship as the primary mode for intimacy. This transition was painful for many; as Schweitzer eloquently explains it, “marriage was the tomb of friendship” (Schweitzer 122) in the early republic, as Americans were forced to kill their same-sex loves for the sake of married love.

In this context, it is particularly notable that on their honeymoon, Julia and Samuel Howe made a strange pilgrimage to Wales, where they visited the graves of the well-known ladies of Llangollen, whom Howe described as “the once famous maids whose romantic elopement and companionship of
many years gave the place some celebrity” (Howe, Rem 111). The tomb of friendship, indeed. The next year, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow married, Charles Sumner wrote mournfully to Samuel, “In all these ceremonies, I have seemed to hear a knell; for a friend becomes dead to me. I ask pardon, dear Howe, for your most affectionate letters tell me I am wrong” (quoted in Ziegler 183). If the Howes’ marriage did not kill off the friendship between Samuel and Sumner, as Sumner claims here, then the triangulated relationship that Julia, Samuel, and Sumner tried to create worked directly against prevailing norms. Schweitzer’s discussion of marriage as the death of friendship invokes Judith Butler’s notion of “Melancholy Gender” to argue that cultural prohibitions of the period demanded “not only the denial of same-sex attachments, but the disavowal of those losses. . . . Society not only denies the significance of same sex friendships, but forbids us to mourn the loss” (Schweitzer 129). But what would happen if you refused to allow the intimate friendship to die?

Sumner and Samuel’s decision to maintain their intimate friendship was certainly anomalous. It can’t be reduced to the simple statement that Sumner was a metaphoric hermaphrodite. Rather, Sumner was one of the figures who forced Julia to give serious thought to sex, gender, identity, and love, and the sometimes conflicted lines between and among them.

But this is not to say that Laurence is Sumner, or anything so simple. Indeed, in at least one sense, Howe may have seen herself as Ronald. In 1858 she published a poem much like Ronald’s fictional one, about a sculpture coming to life.

**TO A BEAUTIFUL STATUE**

I would there was a blush upon thy cheek,  
That I might deem thee human, not divine!  
I would those sweet yet silent lips might speak,  
Even to say, “I never can be thine!”  
I would thine eye might shun my ardent gaze,  
Then timidly return it; ’neath the fold  
Of the white vest they heart beat to the praise  
Responsive that thou heedest not. I hold  
Thy slender hand in mine: oh, why is it so cold?

Statue! I call on thee! I bid thee wake  
To life and love. . . .
In its entirety, the poem includes seven nine-line verses. The first verse, quoted above, could be Ronald’s: it calls out to the statue of a beautiful woman, asking it to awaken. The next verses speculate about the events that turned the sculpted person to stone, finally declaring, in the middle stanza quoted here, that Heaven soothed the beautiful youth to “wakeless sleep” because such perfect beauty could not be entombed. This verse, which subtly changes the statue’s gender to that of a more masculine “youth,” recalls Swinburne’s and Winckelmann’s musings on the unquiet sleep and ideal, impossible beauty of the hermaphrodite.

But what do we make of the last stanza? Howe seems to believe that eventually a thrilling voice will wake the statue from its unquiet sleep. Perhaps she means God, or perhaps at the poem’s close she is thinking of the husband whom she has never managed to fully arouse. Maybe she’s generously, if heartbreakingly, handing Samuel over to Sumner, his “deathless Love.”

As Ovid tells it, Hermaphroditus’s story is about a divine young man, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who rejects a beautiful female nymph—he is not interested in her, sexually. His punishment for the rejection is that when they swim together their bodies are melded, and, although he retains his male genitalia, his form and features grow feminine and his breasts swell into a female shape. After the transformation, Hermaphroditus is both male and female, but he is more a feminized male, and his feminization happens because of his lack of desire for a woman.

Insofar as Laurence and Ronald are stand-ins for Samuel Gridley Howe and Charles Sumner, Howe’s unfinished novel is a remarkably generous work

... Heaven wished to rescue from the tomb
A form so faultless; and its mandate high
Arrested thee in youth’s transcendent bloom,
Congealed in marble thy last parting sigh,
Soothed thee to wakeless sleep, nor suffered thee to die. . . .

... Sleep on in peace! Thou shalt not sleep forever:
Soon on thine echoing ear a voice shall thrill,
Whose well-known tone alone thy bonds may sever,
And bid thy spirit burst its cerements chill:
Thy frozen heart its pulses shall resume,
Thine eyes with glistening tears of rapture swell,
Thou shalt arise in never-fading bloom!
The voice of deathless love must break the spell:
Until that time shall come, sweet dreamer, fare thee well! (Griswold 323)
of empathy—in the Ronald and Laurence parts of the book (which are the most fully developed), Howe makes the possibility of homosexual love achingly desirable even if it is not quite possible.

VI. The Beautiful Monster: The Romance of the Unfinished Masterpiece

As far as we know, Julia Ward Howe never finished her manuscript. The surviving pages end with an encounter between Ronald and Laurence after a long separation. The two embrace and renounce each other, and then pull apart: “One long gaze of tearless anguish, one mute appeal to heaven, and Ronald was gone, and the beautiful monster sat as before on the heap of stones, in the ancient forum, himself as mute and dead as anything there” (Howe, H 193). Laurence, transformed by the kiss into a “beautiful monster,” falls unconscious. His friends stand near his unconscious form, discussing his puzzling nature and finally deciding that he is “the poetic dream of the ancient sculptor, more beautiful, though less human, than either man or woman” (Howe, H 194). They agree to bury him, since he seems to be dead. But in fact, Laurence is merely petrified:

My brain was now excited to a vivid consciousness of the horror of my fate, and I longed earnestly for the power of averting it by giving some token of life. At this moment, I hear another step, oh how well known. And then the falling of one upon his knees beside me. Silence, dead silence from all—oh that he might have spoken, that I might hear his voice once more! He knelt for . . . (Howe, H 198)

Mid-sentence, the manuscript ends. Howe must have finished the sentence—there must be pages missing. As readers, we know that the well-known footsteps must be Ronald’s. We hope that he will kiss Laurence and finally awaken him. In short, we hope for the same ending that Howe gave to her published poem about the beautiful statue:

Soon on thine echoing ear a voice shall thrill,  
Whose well-known tone alone thy bonds may sever,  
And bid thy spirit burst its cerements chill:  
Thy frozen heart its pulses shall resume,  
Thine eyes with glistening tears of rapture swell,  
Thou shalt arise in never-fading bloom!  
The voice of deathless love must break the spell. (Griswold 323)
But the manuscript does not end as neatly as the poem. Laurence remains suspended, both a beautiful monster and a poetic dream.

Unfinished artworks can be frustrating, but they can also be even more interesting than finished ones. In the nineteenth century, when serious people gave a lot of thought to sculpture, Michelangelo’s unfinished sculptures were often held up as the apotheosis of his genius. George Stillman Hillard, another member of the Howe circle who was fascinated by sculpture, explained in *Six Months in Italy* that the unfinished “statues of Michelangelo’s take us into a new world of genius. He is the Columbus of sculpture” (Hillard 86). For Hillard, as for many Romantic thinkers, the realm of the unfinished was “a new world of genius.” Hillard’s description of Michelangelo’s creative process recalls both the passions between Ronald and Laurence and Howe’s own passionate creative process:

His conceptions seized upon him with a sort of demoniac possession, and became a presence not to be put by. He labored to escape from their overmastering tyranny, and flung himself upon the marble with that fervor and passion with which love embraces and hatred grapples. But when the thirst of the soul began to be slaked and the vision to be realized,—when he had torn from the block the form which was concealed in its mass,—the divine ardor relaxed, and the frost of indifference fell upon the mind and the hand. The shortcomings of his labor—the chasm, which there will always be, in imaginative natures, between the forms of things unknown, and the shapes into which they are converted—chilled and repelled him.—He turned away in coldness from the block which had lost the morning beauty of hope and promise, to chase new visions, again to be disappointed. (Hillard 87)

I imagine that Julia Ward Howe’s relationship to her own manuscript echoed Michelangelo’s passions and disgusts. At some point, she stopped work on the project. But although her manuscript was not done, it has proved to be her greatest masterpiece, just as Michelangelo’s unfinished works were his greatest. Speaking of Michelangelo’s unfinished Lorenzo, Hillard wrote, “Its power is like a magician’s spell. . . . It is an entirely original work, and a distinct enlargement of the limits of art: such a work as would have been pronounced impossible to be executed in marble, had it not been done” (Hillard 86). The same can be said for Howe’s Laurence. It was impossible, and yet it was written. In writing it, Howe transformed herself into that most hermaphroditical of nineteenth-century beings: Howe made herself into a woman of genius.
Notes

1. Margaret Fuller’s sonnet on “Crawford’s Orpheus” reads:

   Each Orpheus must to the abyss descend,
   For only thus the poet can be wise;
   Must make the sad Persephone his friend,
   And buried love to second life arise;
   Again his love must lose, through too much love,
   Must lose his life by living life too true;
   For what he sought below has passed above;
   Already done, is all that he would do;
   Must tune all being with his single lyre;
   Must melt all rocks free from their primal pain;
   Must search all nature with his one soul’s fire;
   Must bind anew all forms in heavenly chain;
   If he already sees what he must do,
   Well may he shade his eyes from the far-shining view.
   (Fuller, “Crawford’s Orpheus,” 2:175–76)

2. See T. Walter Herbert’s related discussion of the scandal generated by the neoclassical bust of Nathaniel Hawthorne that Louisa Lander made when the Hawthornes visited Rome in 1857. Herbert makes the case that such sculptures were seen as provocatively sexual (Herbert 230–34).
In his 1768 exposition, *Conjugial Love*, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) sketches the prospect of heavenly marriage, detailing an extended quest for monogamous union in the afterlife. Swedenborg theorizes that husbands and wives meet again after death to test the staying power of their earthly bonds. If they prove incompatible, they divorce and search for new, more suitable partners. In Swedenborg’s heaven, the unattached spirit chases the transfigurative force of conjugal love, a force so strong that it ultimately collapses sexual difference and produces intersexed angels made one body through divine coupling. As he rhapsodizes about celestial unities, Swedenborg lets fly an acerbic critique of earthbound marriage, cataloging an ambitious list of legitimate causes for separation, including lunacy, intemperance, intractability, deception, indiscretion, impropriety, venereal disease, and impotence (Swedenborg, *CL* 258–59). Although Swedenborg maintains that adultery is the only justifiable reason for civil dissolution, he acknowledges that mortal unions are often contentious, sorrowful, and unsatisfying.

Swedenborg’s conceptions of love and sex reverberate throughout nineteenth-century spiritualist understandings of marriage. Following Swedenborg, spiritualists “viewed conjugal love as an exalted ideal and appropriate sexual feelings as part of the natural order that drew affinities together”
Technologies of intimacy in The Hermaphrodite

Ashworth, “Spiritualized Bodies and Posthuman Possibilities” - 187

... The free love movement turned the Swedenborgian doctrine of celestial attraction into a moral barometer, so that without the sanction of conjugal feeling, sex within marriage was judged illicit. If low or libidinal impulses propelled a partnership, free lovers argued that husband and wife should live platonically or divorce. Like Swedenborg, spiritualists prioritized soulful couplings and spiritual affections, deriding the power imbalances, pecuniary exploitation, and sexual violations that corrupted earthly marriage.

Julia Ward Howe—poet, abolitionist, suffragist, and one of Margaret Fuller’s first biographers—records her reading of Swedenborg in Reminiscences 1819–1899. Howe lists Conjugial Love among “the writings which interested [her] most” and says she “was much fascinated by his theories of spiritual life” (Howe, Rem 189, 209). Gary Williams notes that “her letters show she was already something of an authority on his work by 1847” (Williams, “Speaking” xxxiii). For Howe, Swedenborg’s depiction of divisive couplings would have resonated with a painful, proximate reality. Julia’s marriage to Samuel Gridley Howe was tumultuous and strained from its beginning. According to Williams, Samuel’s abiding romantic attachment to Charles Sumner immediately triangulated the marriage. Julia’s domestic inexperience, her isolation in their Boston home, and Samuel’s immersion in his work fueled tensions between them. Moreover, Samuel was chronically ambivalent about Julia’s literary efforts and infuriated by the 1854 publication of Passion-Flowers. Early on, Samuel told his wife he dreamed of marrying again, “some young girl who would love him supremely” and he took a mistress decades later (Williams, HH 174). In 1846, three years into the marriage, with two of her eventual six children just out of their infancy, Howe began writing the novel we now call The Hermaphrodite. Reading the text as an “encoded autobiography,” Williams argues that the closeted manuscript enabled Howe to process her volatile union (Williams, HH 100). Conceived as a first-person narrative, the novel chronicles the family history, education, and star-crossed romances of its intersexed protagonist, Laurence. Williams recognizes Swedenborgian influences on Howe’s construction of Laurence, suggesting that he might be “understood as an earthly incarnation of a Swedenborgian hermaphroditic angel” (Williams, “Speaking” xxxiv).

The manuscript stages Howe’s creative engagement with Swedenborg’s theories in other ways as well, especially in two interrelated love stories. Topically, this essay centers primarily on a section of the manuscript that details Laurence’s sojourn in Rome as the welcome guest of an aristocratic bachelor tutor, Berto, and his sisters, Briseida, Gigia, and Nina. In this interval, Laurence, masquerading as “Cecilia,” makes an ethnographic study of
Italian gender and grows increasingly fascinated with Berto's youngest sister, Nina. Nina exists in a lovelorn trance, psychically traveling through unsettled territories with her exiled fiancé, Gaetano. One evening, just before Nina's presumable death, Laurence (as “Cecilia”) reads a story titled “Ashes of an angel's heart” aloud to Briseida and Gigia. In it, a woeful woman named Eva grieves compulsively outside the tomb of her dead lover, Rafael. Eva talks to his spirit and other ethereal emissaries until she and Rafael become one angel in heaven. The text carefully establishes a formative sorority between Eva and Nina: Briseida notes that Berto read Eva's story to Nina “shortly before her separation from Gaetano” and suggests that the story's investment in “the idea of eternal and indivisible union” contributes to her spellbound obsession with him (Howe, H 164). Thus, Howe deliberately counterpoints Nina and Eva's romantic fixations and their numinous powers. According to Williams, the Nina–Eva story allowed Howe to “conceive a myth in which constancy is ultimately rewarded” (Williams, HH 105). For Valarie Ziegler, Eva's story in particular depicts “the path of single-minded devotion as the road to redemption” and “transfiguration” (Ziegler 68). Certainly, Nina and Eva love absent, inaccessible men, and certainly, they stand as icons of monogamous commitment.

Yet Swedenborgian plotlines also enabled Howe to creatively explore thorny questions of power, mobility, desire, and embodiment in romantic relationships, and those issues drive my analysis of the text. More specifically, I argue that Howe enacts spiritualist dreams of paranormal communication and connection with the Nina–Eva story. Her plotting reflects a larger fascination with spiritualist technologies of intimacy (trance, telepathy, mediumship, correspondence, and transfiguration), allowing her to imagine itinerant and insubordinate female subjects. Essentially, Nina and Eva become spirit-human amalgams, exceeding corporeal confines to travel disembodied byways. In the process, their stories showcase incorporeal freedoms and strange fissures of identity. Yet the material female body—the evacuated body, the sick body, the starving body, the abandoned body, and the dead body—haunts Howe's narrative. Through Nina and Eva, Howe grieves for the corporeal remnants that spiritualist technologies and physiologies leave behind.

To advance my argument—to make sense of the spiritualized bodies Howe imagines—I draw on critical studies of nineteenth-century spiritualism and theories of the posthuman, especially the work of Donna Haraway, Katharine Hayles, Elaine Graham, and Sherryl Vint. While historical and literary studies of Swedenborg and spiritualism situate my analysis in nineteenth-century contexts, posthumanism offers us a nuanced language
for investigating the techno-human hybrid that Howe imagines. Nineteenth-century spiritualism was indeed a technology: a mechanics articulated through a human medium. A number of scholars document the interstices between spiritualism and nineteenth-century technologies, including the principles of electricity, magnetism, physiology, medicine, telegraphy, and locomotion. Spiritualism inspired the invention of distinct motors and mechanisms: the “writing planchette”—a wooden apparatus designed to harness the body’s magnetic energy and translate messages from the spirit world; the “Super-Ray”—a machine for generating spiritualist wonders like levitation; the “New Motor”—a contraption (with its own soul) supposed to channel spiritual electricity; and “spirit photography”—photographic techniques that captured images of spirits and mystical fluids emanating from a medium’s body. Spiritualism also made a technology of the body itself. As Robert Cox documents, one medium channeled spirit wisdom through tremors in his left hand, tapping his fingers compulsively like a telegraph; another medium’s body served as an etching pad, with spirit-born words and images appearing as red lines inscribed into her flesh (Cox 20). Through such psychosomatic physics, spiritualism promised its practitioners paradoxically disembodied liberties and transcendent insights—the opportunity to defy mortal limitations, enter immaterial worlds, and commune with super intelligences. Similarly, Sherryl Vint notes that the posthuman often explores “the freedoms of disembodied subjectivity” in alternative or virtual realities; it revels in a body-as-prosthesis gestalt, a body experienced as “an infinitely malleable accessory”; it embraces dramas of human augmentation, modification, and transformation, extolling variations that trouble the distinction between the human and the nonhuman; and it envisions “differently embodied humans and perhaps super-intelligent ones” (Vint 23, 172). As William S. Haney summarizes, “Posthumanism is defined as a human-technology symbiosis” (Haney 2). It challenges “the immutability of boundaries” between species, tools, machines, and bodies (Graham, *Representations* 1). In short, posthumanism thinks the relationship between science and subjectivity, technology and the body, in succinct and salient terms. Nina and Eva represent a kindred investment in disembodied freedoms, virtual lives, and extrahuman aptitudes. Their textual and cultural presence reminds us that the posthuman subject has discursive precursors and antecedents. Elaine Graham notes that “the western imagination” (its religions, sciences, philosophies, and fictions) overflows “with fantastical . . . beings whose ambivalent or liminal status bears witness to a perennial fascination with both the outer limits of human identity and the ultimate potential of human creativity” (Graham, “Cyborgs” 421). Nina and Eva are an incarnation of that techno-
mythic fascination. As such, they reflect persistent questions about human bodies and boundaries.

Technologies of Mobility and Intimacy

Swedenborg and the spiritualists who followed him spoke the language of other worlds and believed that they received staggering posthumous confidences. A Swedish scientist turned mystic and theologian, until his late fifties. Swedenborg’s work focused on physics, chemistry, biology, geology, physiology, and mathematics. In 1743, he heard the voices of angels and began to penetrate the mysteries of life after death, producing an extensive catalog of theo-philosophical writings. “I have . . . been granted almost constant converse with spirits and angels for a good many years now,” Swedenborg said (Swedenborg, UH 53). As a result, Swedenborg claimed a graphic and expansive knowledge of the afterlife. He charted the structure of heaven; described the clothes, houses, and bodies of its inhabitants; guided novitiate spirits; and debated the province of the soul with the undead. Educated as a scientist, Swedenborg sought empirical evidence of the soul’s immortality, aiming “to make spirit comprehensible to the external senses.” His scientific investigation of the ethereal effaced “the distinction between spirit and matter” and opened the human mind to an exhilarating torrent of celestial wisdom (Cox 12). By the 1840s, Swedenborg’s inductions—his geography of heaven, his study of spirit matter, and his concept of spirit mediation—suffused spiritualist discourses.8

In posthuman terms, Swedenborgian cosmologies reiterate the ideals and aspirations of “technochantment,” a theoretical stance that invests scientific progress with a sacred and sublime significance. In Designer Evolution, for example, Simon Young passionately advocates for a posthuman “belief in overcoming human limitation through reason, science, and technology.” Although Young acknowledges that this ideology does not affirm “the existence of supernatural phenomena (such as God, heaven and hell, soul and spirit),” he allows that it might be considered a “religion”—or a “devotional adherence to [certain] beliefs, values, and practices”—and he insists that “Superbiology” and technology will eventually connect us all to “an evolving global brain” or “cybermind” (Young 15, 22, 44). Technochantment sees cyberspace as a place of redemption and phoenix-like potential. As Graham summarizes, proponents of “technochantment” view technology as an “opportunity to construct the celestial habitats that previously only existed in the imagination,” and they define digital technology as “a portal into a
sacred realm,” one that enables us to access “a group mind never before expe-
rienced” (Graham, *Representations* 170). For Spiritualists, the trance was
likewise a technological byway to divine worlds and an immense intelligence.
In trance-states, Swedenborg toured celestial palaces and spoke with philo-
sophical and biblical icons (including Aristotle and Jesus). In 1847, Andrew
Jackson Davis—an iconic Spiritualist prophet and healer—claimed Galen and
Swedenborg as his guides, detailing trance-enabled encounters with the dead
pedagogues. Medium Isaac Post disseminated the posthumous messages of
an impressive range of historical actors and thinkers, including Benjamin
Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, George Fox, William Penn,
and Margaret Fuller. Post had such resolute faith in the pervasive impact of
Spiritualist intelligence that he declared: “let no man claim that he has made
great improvements in the arts and sciences unassisted by spirit friends”
(Post xiii). Fueled by “technochanted” aspirations, Spiritualists developed
increasingly sophisticated mechanisms of celestial communication. Spirits
sounded out words and sentences with successive raps (from one to twenty-
six) that corresponded to letters of the alphabet or tapped affirmatively as
people called out letters of the alphabet (Goldsmith 31). Inventive gadgets,
like alphabet wheels and planchettes, further enhanced spiritual revelation.
The planchette, for example, was “a heart-shaped piece of wood mounted
on three casters.” Animated by magnetic forces that coursed through fingers
resting lightly on its surface, the planchette could point to letters on a scripted
alphabet and spell out words, or it could write out whole missives with a penci
inserted into its frame (Braude 24). By the 1850s, the wonders of “auto-
matic writing” turned the body into a spirit’s writing instrument. Post, one of
the century’s most prolific writing mediums, said that when a spirit controls
a transcription “the hand writes what the mind does not dictate” (Post xii).
With posthuman portents, Spiritualists imagined a world nurtured and trans-
formed by psychic technologies, innovations, and information.

As we shall see, Howe’s manuscript emphasizes the *relational* implications
of spirit communication. Holistically, the Nina–Eva story evinces a palpable
fascination with spiritual communication and the technologies of intimacy
and mobility it promised. With kindred mystical aptitudes, Eva and Nina
exhibit an extraordinary ability to commune with the dead or physically
absent. Nina’s character manifests a magnetic capacity for constant contact
with her exiled fiancé, Gaetano, and Eva’s character exhibits a spirit-medium’s
faculties for connecting with her dead beloved and other celestial envoys.
Howe’s depiction of sentient femininity reflects nineteenth-century technolo-
gies of paranormal association and the latent desires that churned through
them. With Nina’s somnambulism, Howe turns mesmerism into a vehicle
of psychic travel, chronicling a dream of expansive movement and mobility. With Eva’s mediumship, Howe turns preternatural speech into a love language, enacting a fantasy of unobstructed communication. In the process, the novel explores the mechanics of spiritual locomotion and techno-human fusion.

Eva possesses a spirit-medium’s capacity for intuitive understanding and psychic translation of a romantic counterpart. Although her dead lover, Rafael, communicates in the incomprehensible “language of another world,” Eva understands him (Howe, H 166). In an otherworldly idiom, Rafael affirms his love for Eva and tells her that a series of spirits will seek her out, but she should heed only the “angel of consolation” (Howe, H 166). As the story unfolds, Eva communicates fluently with diverse spirit life, and she sustains a death-defying connection to Rafael: she can hear him, translate him, speak to him. Her mystical acumen mirrors Swedenborg’s own relationships with the afterlife. Swedenborg said he talked with the celestial order “in their own language,” growing fluent in a lexicon of “light and shade,” emotional “shifts,” and pictorial displays (Swedenborg, UH 53, 51). As Swedenborg represents it, the language of spirits is highly specialized and nonverbal. The more sophisticated spirits (angels) spoke to him “by ideas alone”—by “representing from internal sight”—so that thought was both seen and felt (quoted in Toksvig 227). Thus, angelic communication was incredibly immediate, inward, and psychically tangible. As Leigh Eric Schmidt remarks, the language of angels surged with a spontaneous, subrational completeness: “There were no gaps, no slippages, no broken signs, no arbitrary conventions” (Schmidt 210). Consequently, extrasensory dialogue represented a revolutionary mode of human association, transforming the way an interpersonal other was perceived, sensed, and understood. Sheri Weinstein suggests that “spiritualism offered an economy of human relationships and knowledge that was deliberately oriented toward intuition” (Weinstein 126). Eva’s spiritual literacies, then, privilege invisible intimacies, felt knowledges, and an instinctive grasp of otherworldly messages.

Described as “magnetic” and “clairvoy[ant],” Nina’s paranormal relational skills operate on a more earthly and spatial scale (Howe, H 158, 159). “I have made the whole journey with him,” she confides to her brother (Howe, H 139). “[D]o you not see our bark canoe, and the Canadian guides? at night, we draw the canoe on shore, light our fire, and sleep there—early in the morning, we rise and pursue our way” (Howe, H 139). Though an ocean stretches between them, Nina adventures with her beloved, seeing what he sees, experiencing what he experiences. Thus, she magnetically delivers on her prophetic pledge to give Gaetano constant, soulful companionship.
son Winter’s history of Victorian mesmerism notes that like Nina, magnetized persons “displayed amazing new feats of perception and cognition.” Like Nina, they exhibited an incredible aptitude for interconnection and intimacy: in symbiotic rapport with a mesmerist, a patient could “speak his thoughts, taste the food in his mouth, move her limbs in a physical echo of his.” And like Nina, the magnetic subject had an expansive perceptual field: in deeper stages of the sleep, individuals could see “events occurring in the future, inside the body, in distant lands, and even in the heavens” (Winter 3). Clairvoyant aptitudes liberated the medium from the body so that they “could explore at will any location, no matter how distant or hidden” (Crabtree 174). As a result, mesmerized subjects described events far removed from their social location and testified to an out-of-body presence in other geographies.

In Swedenborg’s vocabulary, Nina achieves an earthly form of “adjunction” or “spiritual cohabitation” (Swedenborg, CL 178). Swedenborg postulated that “the souls and minds of men are not in space as their bodies are,” and that “affinities of love” determine distance and presence in the spiritual world (Swedenborg, CL 177). Thus, two minds and souls could become one even if bodies remained apart. Nina’s presence in Gaetano’s world—the proximity between them despite bodily separation—reflects the spatial logic of conjugial bonds. Distances in conjugial milieus were emotional and intellectual, determined by sympathy and antipathy, not material circumstances. Hence, conjugial love enables Nina to adjoin with her lover Gaetano and live with him in a phantasmal mode. Swedenborg called this merger “adjunction,” arguing that it was a form of “spiritual cohabitation” maintained by conjugials “who tenderly love each other, however distant they are in body” (Swedenborg, CL 178). For Swedenborg, conjugial love created a metaphysical joint household, a psychic or spiritual occupation of the other. Spiritualist thought adopted a similar emphasis on discarnate unities. As Cox explains, mystical channels facilitated an “all-encompassing reciprocity of selves”—one that obliterated geographic or physical space. “In connecting spirits freed of the physical body,” Cox summarizes, “[spiritualism] promoted an intense fusion,” closing distances between subjects with the velocity of a thought or impulse (Cox 88). Hence, Spiritualism promised transcendent and immediate intimacies.

Howe’s plotting—the affinity between Nina’s mesmerism and Eva’s mediumship—reflects a productive interplay between the paranormal and nineteenth-century technologies of connection. Mesmerism and spiritualism emerged in a historical interval that saw the rapid proliferation of communication and transportation media: the railroad, the telegraph, and the daguerreotype. Weinstein posits an inextricable relationship between
mechanical innovations and American spiritualist “technologies” (spirit-rapping, writing planchettes, séances, magnetic trances, etc.). Collectively, both spiritual and industrial progress enabled “human beings to be transported in mystifying, immeasurable, and excitingly infinite ways.” As Weinstein recognizes, spiritualism and industrialism reorganized time and space. Psychic and industrial advances shortened distances and dismantled communication barriers (Weinstein 133). In 1852, Isaac Post postulated that a “spiritual telegraph” mediated communication between the living and the dead (Stuart 39). This socio-industrial framework defined the human body itself as a technology—a conductor, a conduit, a byway, a carrier.

Provocatively, that corporeality resonates with posthuman notions of the body and human–machine symbiosis. As Katharine Hayles explains, “[T]he posthuman view configures [the] human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines” (Hayles 3). Similarly, Howe posits a human subject that can be seamlessly articulated with spiritual mechanisms: angels, telepathy, and trance. To borrow select paradigms of cybernetic subjectivity, one could argue that Nina and Eva are human-technology hybrids: “spiritborgs” or “spiritnetic” organisms. Andy Clark sees the cyborg as a signifier for a more expansive “ability to enter into deep and complex relationships with nonbiological constructs, props, and aids,” arguing that techno-soma “mergers may be consummated without the intrusion of silicon and wire into flesh and blood, as anyone who has felt himself thinking via the act of writing already knows” (Clark 5). Nina and Eva invoke the technologized subjectivity Clark describes: a body open to diffuse alliances with technological paraphernalia. As such, they also represent the capacity for intimacy and translation that Donna Haraway extends to the cyborg. Like the cyborg, the spiritborg appears where boundaries are transgressed, signaling a “disturbingly and pleasurably tight coupling.” And like the cyborg, the spiritborg is a “communication devic[e]”—medium and messenger—a conduit of strange and powerful unities (Haraway 10, 35). As spiritnetic life forms, Nina and Eva are amalgams, hybrid beings that unsettle the distinctions between presence and absence, subject and object.

(Im)materialisms

Yet the disembodied utility of Howe’s heroines raises vexing issues. While Nina and Eva love in ways typically reserved for angels, their spiritualized ideality leaves the body in a state of abstention and neglect. Before Gaetano leaves, Nina assures him that “my soul goes forth with your soul, and wher-
ever you may be, I shall stand beside you’” (Howe, H 137). Lapsing into a catatonic, trance-like state, Nina’s interior self travels with Gaetano up the Mississippi River, through Louisiana, and north to Canada. As Nina psychologically journeys with Gaetano, she manifests an unsettling disassociation with the body, growing indifferent to hunger cues and her immediate surroundings. Likened to a clay figurine, Nina abnegates residency in her physical self, living in a transatlantic elsewhere. She eats only when food is brought to her; she mechanically allows herself to be dressed and undressed, and she spends her days insensible on a couch or chair. As the narrative details, she becomes “strangely inanimate,” shows “no perception of external things,” and has “no thought beyond the dream life in which she dwells, with her phantom lover” (Howe, H 138, 140). Nina’s indifference to the body reifies her elsewhere-existence. She is awake and perfunctorily responsive—sitting, eating, breathing, and speaking—but she is not of or in the body. Similarly, while Eva keeps vigil by Rafael’s graveside, she also dissociates from the body. Singing, praying, and speaking to Rafael all night, she sees “no more the moon, the stars, or the grave” and “of herself she knew nothing until the first rays of sun recalled her to herself” (Howe, H 175). Nourished solely by wild honey, Eva refuses to leave the burial place for days. She acknowledges only angels and spirits, completely ignoring a whole series of embodied contacts: a group of religious pilgrims, an enamored prince, the king’s priests, his soldiers, and the king himself. Zealously focused on another reality, “she spake not, looked not, but ever sang, and prayed, and poured out her soul to Rafael and to God” (Howe, H 176). Eva assumes such immaterial proportions that her face exudes an “unchernely light” and the prince mistakes her for a spirit when he first sees her (Howe, H 175). Like Nina, Eva exhibits an amazing faculty for hypnotic, fanatical attachment to a displaced lover. And like Nina, she seems to live solely in the spirit—outside or beyond the body.

With unsettling implications, such characterizations reify the renunciations of the body that shadow the history of Western philosophy and a salient critique of posthumanism. According to Elizabeth Grosz, prevailing philosophic traditions render the body a subordinate term: not mind, not spirit, “[the body] is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgment, merely incidental.” Western thinking typically ghettoizes the body, sending it to the dingy corners of human subjectivity. Grosz succinctly identifies the foundational assumptions that pervade such judgments, arguing that dominant ideologies see the body “as an intrusion on or interference with the operation of mind, a brute givenness which requires overcoming, a connection with animality and nature that needs transcendence” (Grosz 3–4). In a Western philosophical mind-set, the body is baggage or impedi-
ment, dilemma or difficulty. Similarly, Sheryl Vint notes that the posthuman often “equate[s] self with only the mind” and reinscribes a “desire to transcend the limitations of the body through technology or genetic redesign” (Vint 11, 8). These paradigms can fuel gender-specific forms of oppression. Governing cultural discourses often reduce women to the body, reserving the more transcendent, purified realms of mind and spirit for men. That process denies femininity cultural legibility and liberty. As Vint puts it, “So long as the free individual is equivalent to the unmarked, non-embodied mind,” some subjects can claim neither freedom nor personhood (Vint 90). Historically, the body is troubled terrain for women. When Nina and Eva wrest being from the body, they arguably seize a patriarchal privilege, accessing a transcendence traditionally reserved for masculinity. But they also reify patriarchal dogma and a posthuman quagmire, as if the body is an expendable, subsidiary concern.

Swedenborg’s vision of human identity and evolution fortifies this philosophically fraught relationship to the corporeal self. Swedenborg saw an earthly human subject weighted and inhibited by the body. “As long as we live in this body,” he wrote, “we sense and perceive very little of the spiritual” (Swedenborg, UH 39). Gregory Johnson observes that Swedenborg lauded the rare individual who could decode the “influxes from the spirit world” and “gain the knowledge available to their spiritual selves” (Gregory Johnson 31). Swedenborg also argued that earthly citizens could not discern or sustain true conjugal love. Because we live “enveloped in a gross body, which dulls and absorbs” our insight—and because we think love “from the flesh, lasciviously”—conjugal partnership remains an exclusively celestial phenomenon (Swedenborg, CL 189). Swedenborg believed that the body numbed the ability to recognize and experience conjugal affinities. Nevertheless, Swedenborg allowed that the messier, dirtier facets of physical existence could be distilled or expunged from the self over a lifespan. As the individual weds itself to abstractions—love, reason, wisdom, goodness, understanding—s/he grows increasingly incorporeal. Swedenborg argued that although humankind gestates in the “corporeal” or the “natural,” we can become progressively more “rational” and “spiritual” (Swedenborg, CL 115). By extension, Swedenborg held that conjugal love also originates in bodily attractions and appetites, but it “successively becomes more and more pure, thus chaste” (Swedenborg, CL 158). Hence, Swedenborg distinguished spotless, sanitized conjugal love from “scortatory love,” an excessively embodied state synonymous with “lusts,” “wantonnesses,” “sensuous allurements,” “lascivious delights,” “the uncleanness of hell,” “excrements and mire,” “stences and noisesome vapors” (Swedenborg, CL 421, 423). While Swedenborg’s angels have “sex” of
a sort, their couplings are clean and uncorrupted, suffused with boundless joy and charged with a mind-expanding impact. When Swedenborg relegates the body to lower orders of being, he fragments the human subject: mind and spirit function as ascendant terms and the body seethes in the self’s visceral depths.

The posthuman raises equally knotty questions of corporeality. Katherine Hayles notes the posthuman tendency to efface the body, hearing Platonic echoes in its willingness to prioritize abstraction and minimize “the importance of material instantiation.” With “its emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment,” and its sense that the nexus of identity “lies in the mind, not the body,” the posthuman reignites an enduring philosophical fascination with the immaterial self. Hayles links the posthuman erasure of embodiment to theo-philosophical fantasies of unchecked freedom, transcendence, and immortality (Hayles 13, 5). Indeed, Graham sees “a resurgence of a kind of spirituality”—a revival of a Judeo-Christian emphasis on “detachment, omniscience, immutability, and incorporeality”—in posthuman visions of the future (Graham, “Post/Human” 23, 24). Vint likewise notes that an “abstraction from the body” persists in posthumanist thought, resulting in social distortions, disparities, and exclusions (Vint 11).

Arguably, Eva and Nina follow this evolutionary trajectory, growing increasingly idealized and omniscient as they move beyond the body. Reunited with Rafael in heaven, Eva realizes the monumental rewards of transfiguration: “the problems of life solved themselves before her eyes—the instincts of her heart explained themselves to her” (Howe, H 180). Altered in the afterlife, Eva realizes an apex of perception and understanding, penetrating the puzzles of her worldly existence. The narrative also celebrates Nina’s extrahuman acuities: she is described as “far-seeing and intelligent of soul” (Howe, H 158). Taken together, Nina and Eva see, move, and merge in exceptional ways, representing romanticized yet deeply problematic discarnate potentials.

Left uncomplicated, however, that characterization elides the materialism of both spiritualist and posthuman immaterialisms. Swedenborg proffered a “mechanical interpretation of life” and human consciousness, theorizing that thought itself was both motion and matter and that the soul had material, mechanic properties. For Swedenborg, the spiritual and the corporeal are different forms of matter. The soul, like the body, is a “spatially extended substance,” composed of a “spiritual fluid” (Benz 119, 129, 134). Moreover, Swedenborg likened the afterlife’s course of “spiritual purification” to chemical and biological processes: “defecation, rectification, castigation, cohabitation, acuition, decantation, [and] sublimation” (Swedenborg, CL 158). In the nine-
teenth century, Swedenborg’s emphasis on empirical knowledge and spiritual physiologies continued to inform spiritualist discourses. As Cox details, “Spiritualists eschewed the mystical in favor of the empirical and invested the spiritual world with a range of material, technological marvels” (Cox 87). Likewise, Weinstein notes that spiritualists “adopted a particularly materialist vocabulary to validate ethereality,” borrowing the scientific principles of electricity, physiology, and engineering (Weinstein 130). Though posthumanists do not speak of spirit bodies or soul matter, their conception of human consciousness is also corporeal: thought, awareness, and intelligence have material situations and implications. Posthumanism recognizes “an embodied or embedded intelligence,” an intelligence “spread throughout the body” (Haney 25). Thinkers like Hayles, Haraway, Graham, and Vint argue forcefully for a posthumanism that conscientiously attends to the situated, material body. Thus, spirit-centered retreats from the body do not necessarily mean that Nina and Eva are entirely disembodied.

Just as important, their female physiology does not mean they are entirely disempowered. Anne Braude explains, “Spiritualism made the delicate constitution and nervous excitability commonly attributed to femininity a virtue” (Braude 83). The anatomy of nineteenth-century womanhood brought the female medium into voice and power. As John J. Kucich affirms, gendered norms and ideals rendered women “exquisitely sensitive, preternaturally passive, the very apotheosis of spirituality.” Mediumship turned a womanly constitution into a vehicle of agency and subjectivity. For women, “the radical impact of spiritualism” lay in a “canny manipulation and exaggeration of nineteenth-century conventions of womanhood” (Kucich 11). Both Braude and Kucich credit the cultural connotations of female spiritualism with the extension of women’s rights, suffrage, and marital equality. Strict dichotomies between the material and the immaterial (freedom and constraint, power and subordination) cannot neatly or completely explain the spiritualist conception of the body and Howe’s creative relationship to it.

This tension resonates with larger interpretive conflicts in the study of nineteenth-century spiritualism and contemporary posthumanism. Both spiritualism and posthumanism percolate in cultural arenas that endow technology with the power to liberate or destroy the human subject. Advocates of posthuman progressions trumpet a “technologization” of the body that enriches human life, ends illness and affliction, and marshals “in the unlimited flourishing of human potential.” Such thinking heralds the “digital and biotechnological age as ... a period of human empowerment and evolution—even divinization.” And yet as Graham details, technophobias and tyrannies also plague posthuman frameworks; for some, technology
alienates, fragments, and dehumanizes, eroding a psychosomatic province of self-determination (Graham, *Representations* 5–8). Kindred ambivalences dog scholarly understandings of spiritualist technologies. Emphasizing the synapses between spiritualist thought and antebellum reform movements (including abolition, temperance, free love, and proto-feminism), some critics see spiritualism as a technology of cultural revolution and change. Cox notes that for many scholars, spiritualism enacts “the popular mechanics of radical social resistance.” Other researchers, however, argue that “mediumship can be as limiting as it is liberating,” that spiritualism “may reinforce the ordinary relations of power,” and that it may be “both conservative and radical at the same time” (Cox 18–19). This paradoxical heterogeneity—the multiplicity of meanings that surge through the study of spiritualism and posthumanism—also constitutes a locus of scholarly inquiry. The ambiguities signal that these discourses might be privileged sites of incongruity, an arena where the intricacies of personal and cultural power—of the body and embodiment—can be substantively considered. For the moment, then, the questions become: What impact do spiritualist technologies have on subjectivity? What happens to identity and agency as the body interfaces with mechanisms that can alternately empower or eradicate the subject?

**Correspondences and Extended Embodiment**

Swedenborg’s bodies do not completely dematerialize: his angels have a corporeal form, his souls have substance, and his spirits have a material essence. Swedenborg saw something spiritually orienting in bodily structures; he said that spirits and angels retain “normal faces and bodies, organs and limbs,” because they are accustomed to the body and its senses (*Swedenborg, UH* 73). While spirits are no longer limited or constrained by the body, they remain substantial and visibly “human” in a corporeal sense. Nineteenth-century spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis once witnessed the birth of the spiritual body, seeing an ethereal human form emerge from the head of a dying woman (Laderman 62). In addition, Swedenborg held that every natural entity (animals, plants, parts of the body, and so on) has a celestial and sacred complement, so that nothing is just itself. As Benz puts it, “every speck of dust preaches the mysteries of heaven,” and every part of the body pulses with similar spiritual significance. The material world is an epistemological reality and a “shadow” of the spiritual and the divine (Benz 352–53). Nineteenth-century spiritualists embraced Swedenborg’s “correspondential geography,” warming to the belief that every material entity had an ethereal,
ephemeral counterpart (Cox 12). In the process, the reach and range of body, mind, and spirit are reconfigured.

Posthumanism likewise reimagines traditionally static and fixed boundaries, especially the body’s borders. Implants, synthetic drugs, prosthetics, assisted reproduction, cloning, organ transplants, artificial life systems, digital media, high-tech instruments, and other innovations extend the body’s provinces and remap its limits. As Graham summarizes, “Technologies are not so much an . . . appendage to the human body, but are incorporated, assimilated into its very structures. The contours of human bodies are redrawn: they no longer end at the skin” (Graham, Representations 4). Similarly, Hayles explains, “The posthuman subject is a . . . material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles 3). And Vint writes, “technologies of body modification offer the chance to reshape bodies . . . subjects and the social world we make” (Vint 19). Posthumanism recognizes a formative, mutually authoring correspondence between the body and the technologies it adopts, integrates, or deploys. It sees a body changing, expanding, and contracting in consort with its technologized capacities and contexts. Howe’s depiction of Rafael’s beautiful corpse—and the “botanical Eva” that germinates from his chest—resonates with Swedenborgian laws of correspondence and this diffuse, radically interconnected posthuman materiality. More specifically, Eva’s story underscores the adhesive and transformative properties of a correspondent physicality, rendering it another “technology” of intimacy, mobility, and change. With Eva’s hybridity—with the intersections, symbioses, and mutations she embodies—Howe explores an embodied ontology of openness, flow, and gender-bending amalgamation.

Reflecting Swedenborg’s faith in an ethereal physicality and spirit–matter fusions, Rafael’s body resists decomposition and change, and it also catalyzes conspicuous fissures of identity. His gorgeous, unchanging corpse renders the connection between an earthly Rafael and a heavenly one concrete and enduring. “The face was lovely and calm, as in a dream of peace, but it was sealed, it would change no more. The dark locks lay lovingly upon the white forehead, but, had they been cast in bronze, they could not have been more immovable” (Howe, H 167). Even after death, Rafael’s body persists and remains recognizably Rafael. In other words, his body not only achieves its own immortality, it also sustains and preserves his identity. Provocatively, Rafael’s body becomes a locus of Eva’s selfhood as well. When the angel of consolation visits Eva, he tells her that a plant will grow out of Rafael’s chest “until it shall burst the tomb” and blossom (Howe, H 173). The angel charges Eva with the plant’s safekeeping, promising her a heavenly reunion with Rafael provided she
plucks the flower the instant it blooms. In response, Eva pledges her fidelity to the plant, nurturing it with tears, prayers, and song. When the plant finally fractures the crystal vault and a “starlike purple flower” opens at its top, Eva is “transfigured” (Howe, H 178). The instant she touches it, the plant shoots up to heaven, carrying an ethereal Eva with it, “while the lifeless form that had been Eva, sank upon the ground” (Howe, H 178). The plant, then, is an organic metonym for Eva’s earthly existence and her heavenly evolution. Its growth depends on Eva’s physical presence and embodied offerings (tears, chants, song), and Eva’s immortal life depends on the plant’s survival and progeny.

The correspondence between Eva and the plant reflects a fundamental law of a Swedenborgian universe. Swedenborg argued that “everything in the human body has a correspondence with something in heaven”; that distinct angelic populations “belong” to each region of the body; and that our bodies respond to heavenly surges and stimuli (Swedenborg, UH 40, 69, 71). As his philosophy re-members corporeality, Swedenborg posits a body without borders, a body that corresponds to organic and spiritual entities and forces. With such theorizing, Swedenborg embraces a porous and interconnected body, a subject constantly experiencing a “process of unconscious translation,” and a human entity “always in vital contact with others” in any phase of existence (Spalding 187). In such a configuration, bodies and boundaries exist, but the connection, transgression, and dissolution that Eva experiences are primal, formative dramas in the self’s journey.

Eva’s botanical counterpart also abounds with interpersonal and intersexed significance, corresponding to Eva’s conjugal bond with Rafael and the “one angel” it creates. When Howe imagines a botanical Eva budding from Rafael’s “bosom,” she places it at the corporeal center of affection, commitment, and belief (Howe, H 173). Swedenborg described the bosom as “a place of assembly” and “the seat” of conjugal love; he held that the full force of a conjugal love “flows into [the] bosom,” thus igniting the drive for “conjunction.” At the bosom, the “two ways” of each consort congregate (Swedenborg, CL 190). Thus, Howe situates the flora-Eva at the bodily hub of conjugal marriage, at the very core of its construction. The plant, then, gives their love material life, dimension, and impact. In addition, the more androgynous or intersexed dimensions of the plant’s bodily situation register Swedenborg’s faith in a dually sexed conjugal being. Swedenborg prized a divine androgyne, an archetypal first human that “embraces both the male and female principle within himself.” Historically, such ideologies held that the Edenic human subject was intersexed—created in the image of a more perfect wholeness. Within this theological trajectory, the partition of
the sexes occurred after the Fall, reinforcing humankind’s alienation from God’s “androgynous unity” (Benz 407). Although Swedenborg disavowed a hermaphroditic Alpha-human—believing instead that men and women were created sexually distinct—he idealized a celestial, intersexed totality. For Swedenborg, conjugal love (not genesis) fueled a sacred sexual fusion. So “that from two [men and women] may become as one man, or one flesh” (Swedenborg, *CL* 43). Swedenborg believed that the sincerest, most authentic form of love rendered us intersexed in heaven: “two married partners are not called two but one angel” (Swedenborg, *CL* 60). Tellingly, that unity had a bodily effect. “[T]his phenomenon,” Swedenborg counseled, “is felt in their flesh” (Swedenborg, *CL* 189). Swedenborg argued any union of “soul and mind with a married partner is felt in the body as one flesh” (Swedenborg, *CL* 190). With the plant, Eva and Rafael likewise become “one flesh” and Howe’s story dramatizes an incremental form of conjugal androgyny. When Eva is finally transfigured and taken to heaven in the arms of the plant, she and Rafael become Swedenborg’s one angel: “two forms locked in one fervent embrace, so that they seemed no longer two, but one” (Howe, *H* 181). Thus, Eva and Rafael fuse into a singular conjugal formation, embodying a marriage of mind, soul, and soma.

In gendered terms, spiritualism nurtured an abundant range of transmorphologies. Mediums regularly channeled “differently gendered bodies” and trance-speaking connoted a “purifying transfiguration and release from the earthly, gendered body” (McGarry 154). Moreover, spiritualism worked through a mechanics of gender parity and reciprocity. As Braude elucidates, guides to the practice recommended that séance circles include “equal numbers of men and women” or a balance of “masculine” and “feminine” participants. “Spiritualists used the language of electricity . . . to describe the relative positions of men and women in spirit communication. Women were ‘negative,’ and men were ‘positive’” (Braude 23). But a spirit medium’s gendered energy did not always correspond to biological sex. Spiritualists recognized that anatomy aside, individuals could exude a “feminine” (open, responsive, and emotive) or “masculine” (assertive, forceful, rational) charge. Hence, Molly McGarry concludes that spiritualism “reimag[ed] the corporeal,” “offer[ed] new forms of embodiment,” and “produced another way of being in the world” (McGarry 158, 154). Eva’s shifting subjectivity—earthly woman, spirit medium, plant-symbiote, conjugal angel—enacts a series of spiritualist metamorphoses. When a corresponding “Eva” emanates from Rafael’s body, the corpse takes on gender-bending, border-crossing, and species-twisting properties, becoming part-Rafael and part-Eva, part-male and part-female, part-plant and part-human, part-living and part-dead. Such
intersections reiterate Swedenborg’s interest in dissolution and interconnection: in a permeable subjectivity that exists in constitutive dialogue with organic and spiritual correlatives. This gravitation to disintegration and reconstitution suffused nineteenth-century spiritualism and Howe’s conception of Eva’s subjectivity. As McGarry notes, “Crossing the boundary of life itself worked to unsettle a whole series of earthly boundaries”: age, sex, class, genus, corporeality, and humanness (McGarry 160–61). Spiritualist thinking renders the body a plastic term and extends the self an ability to morph and move beyond its corporeal or earthly confines. As a Swedenborgian subject, Eva is a perceiving, knowing being contained but not completely constrained by her physicality. Indeed, Swedenborgian correspondences create what Robert Pepperell might term a “radically extended” posthuman self: “an embodied being whose experience . . . is potentially boundless” (Pepperell 31). Frequently associated with the alien, the monstrous, the queer—with catachresis, paradox, and impossibility—that extended subjectivity challenges the “neat distinctions” that organize and classify identity. “Driven . . . by the double impossibility and prerequisite to become other and become itself,” Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston expound, “the posthuman body intrigues” (Halberstam and Livingston 11, 14). Eva “intrigues” in that sense, animated by technologies and associations that make her simultaneously other and self.

**Melancholic Bodies: Grief, Fear, and Monogamy**

For Howe, then, the “spiritnetic” body becomes a site of radical insubordination and provocative potential. Howe’s spiritualized bodies resist and confound intelligibility, categorization, and social placement. Townspeople call Eva a “witch” and assume her prayers are “evil incantations” (Howe, H 177). She faces religious, political, and military censure (in the form of priests, soldiers, and the king himself), and yet she defies “reason” and “threat” remaining steadfast and inscrutable by Rafael’s grave (Howe, H 177). Nina likewise befuddles efforts to explain her spiritualized condition:

> Whether she was cataleptic and insane, whether she was clairvoyante [sic], and if so, whether the facts open to her knowledge had their place in the material or the spiritual world, were all subjects of doubt and dissension among the more intelligent of Nina’s friends. The more ignorant supposed her possessed of a dumb devil, like some of the demoniacs of the New Testament. (Howe, H 158)
Judged mad, magnetic, and possessed, Nina bewilders attempts to diagnose, exorcise, and rechannel her. When Laurence tries to turn her revelatory talents to the enigmas of "the unseen world," Nina refuses, saying "that she had no knowledge of these things," and she asks that Laurence "relinquish the attempt to give a new direction to her powers" (Howe, H 159). Associated with the alien, the demonic, and the insane, Nina and Eva flummox taxonomies and teleologies. In corporeal respects, their characters push the edges of feasibility and viability.

As such, they represent subversive and novel possibilities. Not legally wed, their conjugal partnerships are extramarital, thriving outside the confines of judicial or religious sanction. Eva’s sustained connection to Rafael defies physical death, social censure, and the threat of divine correction: "Thy love was partly sensual, and partly selfish," says a dark spirit, "and God will judge both thee and it" (Howe, H 171). Similarly, Nina’s attachment to Gaetano flouts natural laws, bodily separation, political exile, and her brother’s refusal to permit a speedy marriage. Analyzed through this trajectory, Nina and Eva seem unbound and un governable. They see, move, and merge in exceptional ways. Haraway’s understanding of the cyborg emphasizes the emancipatory kinetics of boundary-crossings and extrahuman amalgamation, reinforcing the seditious potential of Nina and Eva’s spiritnetic status. According to Haraway, the cyborg represents idealized and liberatory potentials. In mythical terms, the cyborg “is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities.” As a result, Haraway says, a cyborg world can be a resource in a sociopolitical struggle against domination (Haraway 12–13). Similarly, Nina and Eva signify a subjectivity that exceeds the skin—an identity of intersection and interconnection, of transgression and transformation. They are animated by technologies that render them pliant and oppositional. Thus, Howe imagines life forms that challenge natural laws and social convention.

But Nina and Eva suffer enormously to sustain their paranormal communions. Enrapt in her spiritual odyssey, Nina looks “bloodless” and radiates “an icy cold to the atmosphere around her” (Howe, H 140). Physicians determine that she suffers from a “disease . . . in the brain and nervous system” that cannot be treated, and she lives each day “in the same abnormal condition” (Howe, H 139). Eva persists in a state of unrelenting sorrow and physical deprivation (resolved that “[m]y tears shall be my meat day and night”), and the climax of her story ends a “fearful martyrdom” (Howe, H 175, 178). Such textual details elicit unsettling subtexts and stir challenging questions: What does the spiritualized body actually experience? What costs do paranormal technologies and embodied correspondences exact? What are the
risks of an elsewhere existence? And what fears or anxieties lie beneath the discarnate devotion to a dead or absent lover?

Even as it embraces spiritualist technologies and physiologies, Howe’s fiction remains acutely concerned with their bodily remainders, with the problems of embodiment that Swedenborg’s metaphysics create. As Hayles explains it, embodiment never neatly or precisely aligns with “the body”: embodiment is always “enmeshed,” tangled in the specificities of “place, time, physiology, and culture.” While the body can disappear into its ideological construct, embodiment cannot—because embodiment is anchored to location and situation. When confronted with an “ideology of dematerialization,” Hayles urges us to examine the “embodied circumstances” that such an ideology might obscure (Hayles 193, 196–97). When we encounter a discursive context—literary or philosophical—where the body seems to recede or atrophy, Hayles asks us to consider the material realities and effects of that recession. And so does Julia Ward Howe.

United with Rafael and mentored by love, Eva stands as an icon of loyalty and faith. Beneath the surface of that characterization, however, lie pain, sacrifice, and fear. Processing her immediate earthly past, Eva recognizes that it was “necessary that I should give myself up to the one thought and idea of [Rafael], and abandon all that others deem good and beautiful on earth” (Howe, H 179). That necessity smacks of monomania, loss, and earthly death. “Living for one in heaven, she had died to the world,” the narrative reads, “seeking a spiritual and immaterial good, she had learned to sacrifice, with less and less of pain, every material and sensual enjoyment” (Howe, H 180). As Williams notes, Eva earns redemption because she gives “her full emotional self to Rafael, distracted neither by another suitor nor by any inclination toward self-fulfillment” (Williams, HH 104). Eva’s graveside vigil inures her to hurt and bodily need. Howe’s romantic heroine represents a fanatical (albeit glorified) form of renunciation and denial. The empty body she leaves behind—“the lifeless form that had been Eva”—stands as the story’s most tangible symbol of a punishing repudiation (Howe, H 178). Eva’s immaterial quest costs her a mortal existence; her physical body cannot bear her metaphysical attachment to Rafael, and she must die to consummate her conjugal partnership.

In uniformly disturbing strokes, the story also suggests that Eva cannot afford to prize self-fulfillment or any form of gratification outside the bounds of her relationship. Not without losing Rafael. An “unkind spirit” reminds her that Rafael is “not bound to thee”; in heaven “he is free to choose from those around him an angel higher in grace, and fairer in the beauty of holiness than thou” (Howe, H 172). Swedenborg theorized that
heavenly sexual subjects—virgin, husband, wife, widow, widower, monk, celibate, eunuch—reassess their capacity for conjugal partnership in heaven. Even the most abstinent or unsexed individuals gain “the liberty of their desires.” Swedenborg’s sexual citizens are “released and allowed to go free” in a world that promises them perfect, symmetrical erotic synthesis (Swedenborg, CL 63). All romantic contracts are renegotiated in the Swedenborgian afterlife. Thus, Rafael may, in fact, recouple in the spiritual sphere.

In response, Eva’s story dramatizes intense anxieties about infidelity, sexual plurality, and abandonment. The prospect of Rafael’s heavenly romantic options debilitates Eva: “so deadly was the thought that Rafael might forget her,” she has difficulty seeing and breathing (Howe, H 172). Throughout the tale, other spiritual agents continually remind Eva of the inherent instability of their bond. Even the angel of consolation, the messenger who offers her the most comfort and ease, affirms the tenuousness of their love. “’[T]here are many . . . ,’” he says, “’who forget their love in heaven, and seek to themselves other mates on earth’” (Howe, H 174). The plant likewise represents the potent possibility of eternal loss and fracture: if anyone but Eva gathers the vital flower, she will “be placed in a heaven where Rafael is not” (Howe, H 173). Fear—as much as love and longing—motivates Eva’s tireless surveillance. Indeed, she promises never to leave the plant out of “’fear of losing the blessed flower!’” (Howe, H 175). Thus, Eva carries an omnipresent dread: fear of loss, fear of betrayal, and fear of rejection.

Such apprehensions percolate through Swedenborg’s understanding of gender, a nomenclature that reifies erotic and emotional imbalances between the sexes. Swedenborg theorized that the essence of woman was volitional and affective: that women are “born loves,” defined by an inexhaustible “will” to conjoin (Swedenborg, CL 178). According to Swedenborg, “the inclination to unite the man to herself is constant and perpetual with the wife” because “love cannot do otherwise than love” (Swedenborg, CL 187). Man, in contrast, “is born to become understanding” and his inclination to marriage “is inconstant and alternating” (Swedenborg, CL 178). For Swedenborg, man is “only a recipient of love” and his openness to love fluctuates, influenced by shifts in mental “heat,” worldly obligations, and bodily “powers” (Swedenborg, CL 178, 179). Swedenborg argued that “with men there is nothing of conjugal love, nor even the love of the sex, but only with the wives and women” (Swedenborg, CL 180, 179). Swedenborg’s women are the vessels and vehicles of erotic devotion. So much so that when married partners meet each other after death, the “husbands rarely recognize their wives, but . . . wives readily recognize their husbands” (Swedenborg, CL 58). To illustrate the veracity of this supposition, Swedenborg shares a piece of spirit lore, explaining that the
men-spirits were once temporarily isolated from women in heaven, left in “an altogether strange state” (Swedenborg, CL 179). Separation from women made men forgetful of sexual difference, love, sex, and marriage. When the women came back, their men did not recognize them: “What is this? What is a woman?” they asked, “What is a wife?” (Swedenborg, CL 179). Conjugal awareness and gendered understanding returned only when the women began “to weep” (Swedenborg, CL 179). In this exemplary case study, the presence of women—and the bodily display of female grief—sustain both heterosexual and marital drives. Women not only possess the prerequisites to monogamy (desire, affection, fidelity), but without their constant care, monogamous gendered constructs collapse.

Hence, Evा’s perpetual sorrow and her nurturing proximity to Rafael’s body betray a fundamental instability. Beneath Eva’s transcendent aptitudes, beneath her “radically extended” corporeality, lies a body in bondage. When Eva seeks to further understand the forces that affix her to Rafael, he shows her a ship tossed by merciless seas, but “bound by a strong cord to an anchor sunken in the sand” (Howe, H 180). The story idealizes the cord as the god-given “anchor of the soul,” the “gracious power” that fastened Eva to Rafael. But as Eva herself observes, the ship does not “flee before the winds” nor “follow the current of the waves”: she cannot escape or ride the seas. Similarly, Swedenborg defined conjugal love as a fiercely and increasingly anchoring state: “those who are in love truly conjugal” become “more and more” one, yearning to “become one life” (Swedenborg, CL 189, 226).

Conjugal partnerships grew ever more monogamous, singular, and unifying over time. In other words, their capacity to anchor their subjects enhanced as they endured. Only disingenuous forms of love left their partners in a perpetual state of “two”—a chronic “disunion”—and therefore vulnerable to a full range of marital “colds, separations, and divorces” (Swedenborg, CL 227, 246). Rafael dramatizes these ideas most pointedly when he presents the celestial Eva with an instructive portrait of the conjugal woman:

[Eva] looked and saw one who sat at the feet of her master, a man noble and beautiful to behold. And her eyes waited upon his look, her ear upon his bidding, her heart upon his love; and he poured into her lap her wages, which were of pure gold, and of the coinage of heaven. As he did so, she heard his voice, saying: “one thing only is needful.” (Howe, H 180)

The conjugal woman sits obediently at the feet of a benevolent master, engrossed in her lover’s needs and dependent on his attention. She earns erotic and heavenly favor through an obsessive focus on “one thing.” As
Rafael explains the image to Eva, he says “one love only is possible, and in that I was that love to thee, thou couldst only, in seeking other things, have lost it. Thank God, therefore, that thine eye was single” (Howe, H 180). Conjugal fulfillment depends on Eva’s tunnel vision and resolute abnegation. Eva achieves a heavenly reunion with Rafael only because she refuses to see other realities or yearn for other bounties, and only because the singularity of her vision keeps Rafael tethered to her—mindful of their attachment and indifferent to other romantic options.

The specters of infidelity and sexual apprehension also shadow Nina’s fixation on Gaetano. Just before she promises him unwavering companionship, she warns him against any act of betrayal. “Do not then dare to be unfaithful to me,” she says (Howe, H 137). In light of that challenge, Nina’s story, like Eva’s, can be read as a parable of jealousy, insecurity, and romantic surveillance. Swedenborg insisted that jealousy was an integral component of the conjugal experience. He said jealousy was “the zeal” or “the fire” of conjugal love, and he saw the more compulsive, consuming dimensions of love as evidence of its sincerity (Swedenborg, CL 367). Jealousy registers the dual-sexed angel’s “horrid fear” of fracture and separation (Swedenborg, CL 373). For Swedenborg, jealousy was a romantic inevitability because fear and grief are “inherent in conjugal love”: “fear lest it be divided, and grief lest it perish” (Swedenborg, CL 374). Associated with rupture and death, jealousy serves as an emotional avowal of an irresolvable and enduring instability. The threat of loss and division persist in the conjugal sphere, and thus, jealousy “is likewise a protection against adultery”—a “fire flaming against violation; and defending against it” (Swedenborg, CL 374). When Nina becomes Gaetano’s “guardian angel”—a spiritual sentinel “intently watching and protecting the fortunes of a mortal beloved”—she exhibits a lover’s covetous zeal (Howe, H 158). She also implicitly guards against an irrevocable separation, achieving the steady scrutiny and closeness necessary to sustain conjugal feeling and fidelity.

Indeed, within a Swedenborgian system, more than simply a partnership’s survival is at stake in the Nina–Eva story. According to Swedenborg, a heavenly life and being depend on successful marriage and conjunction. In other words, Nina and Eva also protect their own fortunes with their fanatical watchfulness. To lose Rafael or Gaetano would leave them splintered, cut off from vital elements of self. Swedenborg held that the conjugal drive and the “love of sex” did not die with the body, and he considered marriage essential to entrance into the most privileged spheres of heaven. The celibate and the solitary—“those who choose a life outside of the conjugal”—are relegated to “the sides of heaven” and “they become sad and troubled” in
their isolation (Swedenborg, CL 164, 165). “In celibacy,” Swedenborg writes, “all things are wanting” (Swedenborg, CL 165). For women, Swedenborg’s conception of desire resonates with an especially concentrated significance. Caught in an unremitting state of desire “the wife is constantly thinking about the inclination of the man to herself” (Swedenborg, CL 183). Even in conjugal bliss, a woman’s “love continually employs its thoughts about conjoining the man to herself” (Swedenborg, CL 186). Swedenborg positioned womanhood within an obsessively cloying psychosomatic space. More pointedly, he declared that “chaste wives” want to be “bound more and more closely with their husbands” and that to turn from that desire “would be to recede from their very selves” (Swedenborg, CL 228). Swedenborg’s theories make steadfast loyalty and devotion synonymous with whole, authentic womanhood. As a result, Nina and Eva retreat from a spiritual adjunction at their own risk. Because the most viable Swedenborgian female self is a self-in-relation—a conjoined, dual being—breaking from a connubial union constitutes an act of self-harm. Of course, men are also entangled in Swedenborg’s marital dyads, but amalgamation infringes less on their autonomy and identity. Indeed, the husband’s self ultimately overscores his wife’s: “something of the husband is continually transcribed into the wife, and is inscribed upon her as her own” (Swedenborg, CL 186). In other words, women organize their identities around coupling with such comprehensive verve that “an image of the husband is formed in the wife,” and through that image, she “perceives, sees, and feels within herself the things that are in her husband, and thence as it were, herself in him” (Swedenborg, CL 186). Swedenborg’s women yearn so intensely for erotic union and ruminate so continuously on a husband’s answering desire that eventually they become more other than self.

Where Swedenborg rhapsodizes about woman’s other-centered penchants, Howe records that body’s pain and sorrow. Her fiction suggests that to embody an incessant and ever increasing desire is to embody an infinite emptiness. “‘We are wedded, oh yes!’” Nina says of her bond to Gaetano, “‘we have been wed for years, and I have no heart but to love him, no hands but to labour [sic] for him, and yet, look at these, and she held up her arms, ‘somehow they are always empty’” (Howe, H 142). Nina’s barren arms register the physical and psychic vacuum that womanhood occupies in a spiritualized gestalt, and her story exposes the violence and sorrow latent in the image. “What depth of woe was in those words,” Laurence asserts, “It was the voice of murdered nature crying upwards from the ground” (Howe, H 142). In Howe’s fictional world, when Berto asks Nina to endure sustained romantic alienation he commits an unintended crime against her nature, an assassination of her life force. “Love was so built in with the structure of her whole life
and being,” the narrative explains, “that the one could only perish with the other” (Howe, H 142). Drawing on Swedenborg’s anatomies, Howe depicts a heroine whose very essence is love. In Swedenborg’s terms, love is the “heat” of Nina’s existence or her “vital heat” (Swedenborg, CL 42). Yet unlike Swedenborg, Howe meticulously and perceptively chronicles the acute suffering that gender anatomy makes inevitable. Separated from Gaetano, Nina embodies stunted growth, thwarted conception, and pregnant death: she is “the maiden bud, frost nipt and doomed to die, but bearing painfully in itself the germ and the essence of the flower and the fruit” (Howe, H 142). With this image, Howe’s manuscript explores what it means to know incessant and insatiable desire. Swedenborg constructed a womanhood conceived in wanting; his women want the conjugal partner they have not found or more of the man they already possess. Thus, they live a perpetual state of grief, forever mourning absent or inconstant love “objects”: unknown soul mates, forgetful husbands, or the intimacies they have yet to realize. In that sense, they are blighted “maiden bud[s],” seeded with the unquenchable.

Cox acknowledges that spiritualism itself was intricately allied with the unquenchable—with a profusion of nineteenth-century desires and despairs. According to Cox, spiritualism registers pervasive cultural hungers: a hunger to collapse geographic and psychological distances with metaphysical travel; to recover the lost bodies of industry, capitalism, and death with spiritual reconnaissance; to solve the riddles of being; to build the world anew. And yet its progressive longings were “coupled Janus-like with the recognition that the future too often failed to materialize” so that “desire and its discontents were intertwined” (Cox 70). Howe’s novel gives voice to the “discontents” and their grievances, mourning the body left to a painful craving. As Laurence puts it, “to bear lifelong in one’s bosom a wild deep longing of Nature ungratified, that is perilous” (Howe, H 142). The danger lies in deprivation:

For then the infinite towards which we tend casts its shadow all too darkly upon us. The sense of it may sink to Melancholy, rise to Inspiration, or wander to madness, but in either case its glories will be fantastic, fatal, and its revelations will be as unlike to truth, as is the shedding of blood to the flowing of water. (142)

Howe sees something violent and terrible in the “shadow” of the “infinite.” The surging awareness of ungratified longing may be “fantastic,” but it is also “fatal.” Although Nina’s mind “turned inward upon itself, was fed with
pleasing dreams,” her body suffers acutely: “the poor flesh and blood would sometimes speak, impatient of dragging on along its dumb agony” (Howe, H 142). Nina might be “half angel” within a Swedenborgian gestalt, but as Howe’s fiction acknowledges, she is also “half corpse” (Howe, H 158).

The corpse stands as a palpable symbol of social alienation, violation, and recrimination. In nineteenth-century contexts, the haunting carcass—the shadowy subject on the margins of citizenship and representation—persists as “a powerful metaphor for the kinds of social, ethical, and political injustices that characterize and permeate U.S. history” (Bridget Bennett 14). Russ Castronovo’s theory of nineteenth-century American “necro citizenship” links the historical fascination with “séances, ghostly mediums, animal magnetism, and spirit-rappings” to an “ideal of citizenship supposedly free of material considerations.” Castronovo indicts a spiritualist democracy that extended the individual “the freedom to be unconscious of material inequality” and that allowed “trauma and disturbance to pass unnoticed” (Castronovo 104, 106, 112). Similarly, Howe’s narrative asks us to heed the traumas and disturbances of the abstracted body, and it is the material that haunts her specters.

Posthumanism voices analogous cautions against the violence and abjection that a techno-science of transcendence perpetuates. As Graham recognizes, “Technologies are important vehicles for human creativity and redemption, but it is necessary to question the assumption that spiritual enlightenment comes at the cost of physicality and corporeality.” Ideologies that valorize a technologized, immaterial body can reify a punishing disdain for the lived, felt body. Graham underscores the fear at the core of technophilic desires, arguing that the “uncritical embrace of technological omnipotence, omniscience, and immortality betrays not so much a love of life as, paradoxically, a pathological fear of death, vulnerability and finitude” (Graham, Representations 219–20, 230). In addition, Hayles contends that an indiscriminate celebration of discarnate technologized subjectivity “fears, above all, dropping back into the ‘meat’ of the body” and the inertia it represents (Hayles 290). Graham and Hayles encourage us to be wary of the prolific relationship between fear and techno-scientific ideals.

With posthumanist overtones, Howe’s manuscript likewise questions a fear-driven pursuit of spiritnetic ascendancy and intimacy, one that starves or vacates the immanent, material body. Howe wrote The Hermaphrodite in the early years of her marriage, cloistered in a small house in Boston near the Perkins Institution for the Blind, where Samuel was director. With two of her eventual six children toddling at her feet, Julia was careworn and work worn:
I sleep with the baby, nurse her all night, get up, hurry through breakfast, take care of her . . . , then wash and dress her, put her to sleep, drag her out in the wagon, amuse Dudie, kiss, love, & scold her etc etc. . . . I have not been ten minutes, this whole day, without holding one or other of the children, and it was not until six o’clock this evening, that I got a chance to clean my teeth . . . (quoted in Williams, HH 75–76)13

Overburdened and alone, Howe struggled against postpartum exhaustion and lovelorn estrangement. In such circumstances, she wrote about women in spiritualized flight; women exiting the body through trance technologies; women living virtual lives far removed from domestic labor and marital discord. At one point, the narrative depicts Nina in a bona fide state of spiritual liberation, saying that her soul is “enfranchised and soaring free,” emancipated from “its human prison” (Howe, H 141). Such freedom must have been a heady prospect for a frustrated poet and a reluctant housewife. In letters to her sister, Howe sketched the anatomy of her despondency, describing herself in desolate, deadened terms: In 1846 she says, “I still live the same subdued, buried kind of life which I used to live when you were with me . . . ”; later that year, she describes her marital state as a “dimness, nothingness, and living death” (quoted in Williams, HH 75, 77).14 Like Nina, Howe may have longed to escape her “human prison” and travel beyond kitchen, bedroom, and nursery, and yet she also understood that a “zombie” existence would be no life at all. As Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry suggest, the zombie manifests a “twofold terror”: the fear of losing consciousness, and the fear of the evacuated body (Lauro and Embry 89). Howe’s manuscript registers both horrors, interrogating spiritualist affinities that hollowed out the female body and abducted female consciousness. In the process, Howe proffers what Hayles might deem a more nuanced posthumanism, one “that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power,” one that recognizes “finitude as a condition of human being,” and one that refuses to efface what the spiritborg experiences when she loses her body (Hayles 5). Vint calls that an “embodied and ethical posthumanism” (Vint 183). While The Hermaphrodite revels in a spiritnetic capacity for intimacy, mobility, and transformation, it also re-members the spiritualized body, writing its pain and deprivation.

Notes

1. As Michael Stanley explains, “In adding an ‘i’ to the old legal term ‘conjugal,’
Swedenborg coined a new word—‘conjugial.’ This is the word that he uses to describe the quality of love that unites a couple as one in heart and mind and life” (Stanley 134).

2. Williams’s source here is an unfinished letter Howe wrote to her sister, Louisa, in July 1854. Unless otherwise noted, the letters Williams cites are part of the Samuel Gridley and Julia Ward Howe Papers at Houghton Library, Harvard University.

3. The novel’s investment in Swedenborgian ideas is not limited to the Nina–Eva plotline. In a pivotal chapter, for example, Howe sends her protagonist to a remote woodland cottage where he will read feverishly and quest for metaphysical truth. With a spiritualist interest in material and immaterial realities, Laurence studies the “visions of [Emmanuel] Swedenborg” (Howe, H 39) and feels attuned to “unseen influences” and a “superhuman authority” (Howe, H 44). He reads, prays,fasts, mortifies the flesh, and his body consciousness recedes until “the spirit was now lord absolute” (Howe, H 46). Ultimately, Laurence lapses into a spiritualized trance, commune with angels, sees the threshold of heaven, and awakens to the ministrations of Ronald, a sixteen-year-old boy who will become his student and almost-lover. While my study centers on Nina, Eva, and their Swedenborgian partnerships, this sequence foreshadows the enthralled-yet-dubious relationship with Spiritualism that the Nina–Eva story dramatizes, implicating Laurence’s trance in an “unnatural mode of life,” “madness,” and an “utterly defective” religion (Howe, H 48, 46, 44).

4. Mary H. Grant, while she does not address the Nina–Eva plotline explicitly, provides a brief summary and explication of the manuscript (Grant 121–25).


6. Braude 24; Weinstein 129; Goldsmith 129. For more on the history of spirit photography see Jolly.

7. I do not mean to imply an uncomplicated continuity between Swedenborg, spiritualism, and posthumanism. Carroll documents historical variances and ideological tensions within spiritualist interpretations of Swedenborg (Carroll 21–34). In addition, theories of the posthuman often interrogate an essential, enduring humanness that Swedenborg and nineteenth-century spiritualists assume. Thus, my study borrows selectively from posthuman conceptions of hybridity, including technologized bodies, extended corporealities, and discarnate mobilities.

8. Robert S. Cox credits Swedenborg with providing the “cosmic seeds” of American spiritualism (Cox 12). Spiritualists gravitated to Swedenborg’s faith in the plausibility of spirit mediation, the empirical basis of the soul’s immortality, and the formative “correspondences” between the sacred and the sensate world. For more on Swedenborg’s iconic presence in spiritualist constructs and beliefs, see Carroll, Spiritualism in Antebellum America 16–34 and Cox 10–16.

9. Jane Bennett uses the term “technochantment” to name the “animate forces, dynamic trajectories, intricate patterns, and protean ideas” manifest in the “magic of biotechnological hybrids.” According to Bennett, technochantment can “transfix our bodies, quicken our senses, and provoke our joyful and wary apprehension” (Jane Bennett 17–18).

10. As Adam Crabtree explains, the eighteenth-century physician, Franz Anton Mesmer, invented a diagnostic and therapeutic system he called “animal magnetism.” Mesmer believed that magnetic connections between a doctor and patient had curative properties. Mesmer’s student, the marquis de Puységur, discerned and elucidated the components of a trance state he termed “magnetic somnambulism” or “magnetic sleep” in 1784, defining
it as “a sleep-waking kind of consciousness,” a ‘rapport’ or special connection with the magnetizer, suggestibility, and amnesia in the waking state” (Crabtree 39).

11. Howe’s juxtaposition of magnetic and mystical intimacies in the Nina–Eva plotline reifies a more pervasive discursive affinity. Formative parallels between mesmerism and Swedenborg’s metaphysics were first articulated in 1789 when the Exegetic and Philanthropic Society of Stockholm argued that mesmerism enabled spirits to take possession of the human body or speak through a human subject (Crabtree 71). In 1844, the spirit of Swedenborg himself visited Andrew Jackson Davis—a prophet of modern spiritualism—during a magnetic trance. In 1847, George Bush’s Mesmer and Swedenborg defined mesmerism “as concrete, physical proof” of Swedenborgian ideas (Crabtree 229). Eventually, many pundits considered mesmerism a lesser phase of spiritualism (Cox 75).

12. When Swedenborg detailed different ways of seeing into netherworlds, he described a form of sight that was acutely real and yet paradoxically discarnate: a wakeful, sensate experience of being immersed in ethereal community (Jones and Fernyhough 21). In that state, Swedenborg said he was “‘separated from the body and in the spirit’”—a “‘spirit among spirits’” (quoted in Toksvig 221, 222). Servants close to him testified that when Swedenborg was “in the spirit,” he would occasionally retreat to bed for three to four days at a time, with only a basin of water beside him, and somehow emerge flush and strong (Toksvig 222).

13. Williams quotes a letter to Louisa here; the letter is undated, but likely written in November or December 1845.

14. The first citation is from a letter dated January 1847 (#449). The second is dated 15 February 1846 (#450).
A few pages into Julia Ward Howe’s *The Hermaphrodite*, the novel’s ambiguously sexed narrator, Laurence, reflects on what he terms the “negative happiness of early youth.” In retrospect, he observes, childhood appears to us “happy and golden,” but we experience it otherwise as we live it: “[A]t the time, I was conscious of little more than a vague bien être, sometimes interrupted by deepest melancholy, and a hope of something far brighter and better, which methought time must soon bring me, but for which I am waiting still” (Howe, *H* 6). Laurence’s reflection indexes the two conventional attitudes toward the time of modernity that dominated the nineteenth century: the optimistic looking-forward of a sturdily Victorian faith in progress and the rueful backward glance of a Romantic nostalgia, the sense that the best of times is always already behind us. Contradictory as they might seem, the two attitudes actually complement one another, establishing time as irrevocably linear and the future as its irrefutable guiding principle; even the nostalgic perspective concedes the victory of time’s arrow, the necessity of its incessant movement away from the cherished recollection.¹ Regardless of how one feels about it, time marches on as it surely must. Yet at the same time, Laurence’s consistent expectation of “something far brighter and better” hints at the queer time that suffuses *The Hermaphrodite*. 
The future expected, in this vision, may not be a stable repetition (albeit with steady improvements) of the lives one’s parents have already lived, but a radically different one, one not yet imagined, scarcely imaginable; and it is one that Laurence, now grown and, presumably, beyond the wildness of childish dreams, continues to await.

I would like, in this essay, to think through the time that Laurence’s selves—both recollected and present—cannot imagine, a time in which one’s relation to the historical is not predicated on membership in a regularly reproduced family. Jacques Derrida has described the unanticipated future as “necessarily monstrous” insofar as its “surprising” arrival, for which we “are not prepared . . . is heralded by a species of monsters” (Derrida, “Passages” 386–87). Laurence is described as a “monster” both by himself and by his would-be lover Emma on account of his ambiguous sex, which he sees as rendering him ineligible for marriage, unable to “become the half of another” (Howe, H 3) and hence outside the normative family.² He is not, however, alone in this position of temporal ex-centricity, as his friend Berto suggests: “It has always been a mania of yours, caro ti, to imagine that everything befalling you is quite peculiar and individual to yourself—you will not perhaps believe that there are a hundred families in Rome, each of which has some one member at least in the same relative position as yourself” (Howe, H 130). Though he is as yet unaware of the precise cause of Laurence’s alienation from his family, Berto nevertheless identifies the way his friend’s putatively exceptional situation comes to appear, in this novel, almost typical, as Laurence’s exile from the family leads him instead toward a series of alliances that collectively falsify the fantasized coherence of gender and desire in the emergent sexual order, and with it, the strategies of temporal transcendence centered around succession and reproduction. Throughout the strange, untimely world of The Hermaphrodite, a persistent denaturalization of both traditional and “modern” modes of temporal self-perpetuation suggests that another way of being in time may lurk beyond the horizon, called into play by the ruination of the family. Yet that other way of being is never, finally, actualized: rather, it is left, in ghostly form, to haunt the corners of Laurence’s story.

The early-twenty-first-century publication of Howe’s novel coincided with a noteworthy increase of inquiry into the question of time in and around the literary text. In American studies, for instance, a new attention to time has accompanied and fueled a revised understanding of space, a resistance to the distorting sense of historical and geological autonomy that congeals around the habit of studying “national” literary traditions, in favor of a recognition that, as Wai Chee Dimock phrases it, “what we nominate as ‘American literature’ is simply an effect of that nomination” (Dimock, “Planet” 4). A “plan-
etary,” rather than national/period-bound, approach to literary analysis helps us to account for the otherwise surprising production, by a woman living in mid-nineteenth-century Boston, of a narrative that resembled, at once, classical mythology and contemporary French fiction (Williams, *HH* 95). The planetary perspective, that is, enables us to see this type of literary wandering across historical and national borders as something other than Howe’s imaginative escape from a stifling life; rather, we may view it as a cognitive challenge to the (stifling) habit of “framing vast syntagmatic signifying networks within boxes of time” (Charnes). The corporeal and erotic dimension of this intellectual journey demands, as well, that we devote sustained attention to the role of the sexual in reproducing our conceptions of time, and vice versa. Recent scholarship in queer studies, drawing on and extending the postcolonial critical decentering of Western historical narratives, emphasizes the ways the sexual and the temporal are bound up together—the extent to which being in sync with one’s culture consists of fidelity to its sexual norms. As contemporary queer theorists have shown, the ability to “count” as a contributing member of one’s social world, to signify as part of history, is dependent, in the modern West, upon one’s ability to situate oneself according to developmental, sexual, and affective timelines structured around desire for, participation in, and perpetuation of a nuclear family conceived as both emotionally nurturing and heterosexually reproductive. This new attention to the sexual politics of time helps us to trace the way that peregrinations like Laurence’s force the histories of the family to reveal themselves as such, dismantling the mutually reinforcing and supposedly natural links between identity positions and familial relations. They suggest, moreover, how an aimless exile may function as something other than a waste of time, how the untimely existences of Laurence and his queer kin might help us to bend temporality itself, including the time frame in which we can understand *The Hermaphrodite.*

I will open this discussion by using the uncertainty of time in *The Hermaphrodite* and the temporal complexity of its eponymous mythical figure to inquire into the temporality of literary analysis and its capacity for unsettling our understanding of the relations between past and present. I will then move into a consideration of how Laurence’s exile from the line of succession in his father’s estate illuminates a crucial transitional period in the history of sexuality between aristocratic and democratic family forms, the epochal shift that Michel Foucault tracks under the rubrics of *alliance* and sexuality, respectively. In a significant departure from the mid-century domestic-sentimental ideal, however, *The Hermaphrodite* fails to embrace the middle-class family of nurture, declining to pin its understanding of the future on the reproductive
imperative. The novel instead foregrounds a Romantic ideal of hetero-sexual intimate transcendence at the same time as it insistently exposes the fissures in that time scheme, particularly the displeasure created by a continuing difference in the social power possessed by each sex, which leaves women perpetually falling behind. The transcendent teleology of the romance is thus, to use Laurence's term, unrealized both in and by the novel. In the space left open by this unrealization, *The Hermaphrodite* explores other, queerer, forms of relation and self-arrangement, forms that also remain unrealized, but whose suggestive resonance may propose to us other possibilities for charting the futures of sex.

1. History of a Strange Being: The Time(s) of *The Hermaphrodite*

A few problems arise when one tries, as “responsible” literary scholars generally do, to historicize Howe's novel. Some of these are common to any unpublished work and many a published one as well. It's not clear when, exactly, Howe composed the pieces of the manuscript that have been published as *The Hermaphrodite*, though the novel's editor and Howe's biographer Gary Williams dates them with reasonable confidence around 1847. Furthermore, it isn’t known whether Howe ever completed the novel (nor whether she would have called it such; Williams cites an 1843 letter that refers to a “stranded wreck of a novel, or rather story” that concerned “the history of a strange being” (quoted in Williams, *HH* 81)), or even whether she intended the fragments to comprise one story or two (Williams, “Speaking” x). Even when we identify this work as a novel composed in the mid-nineteenth century, the work of historicizing is complicated by the difficulty of determining precisely how time in the novel relates to the time of the novel. Though *The Hermaphrodite* maps Laurence's spatial locations with some degree of clarity, it is vague and contradictory on the matter of time. It flirts with the category of the historical romance, as it seems to take place in an Old World, a patriarchal Europe not overly disturbed by the glimmerings of modernity, its nonspecific anteriority at once a comforting invocation of tradition and a stiflingly archaic atmosphere reminiscent of Poe's stories. Despite this uncertain atmosphere of “beforeness,” however, the story ultimately seems to be set after Howe's birth: the 1820s. A somewhat dislocating moment of location occurs during a crowd scene in Rome, where two passing references to passersby made by Berto identify them obliquely as the Prince Giovanni Torlonia (1755–1829) and Charles Lucien Bonaparte (1803–1857). Berto's observation
that the latter has “some reputation as an author and a naturalist” suggests
that this scene takes place sometime in the late 1820s, after Bonaparte has
begun to publish his work on American ornithology (1825–33) but before the
death of Torlonia (Howe, H 123).

Yet in the very space where the story establishes its time as historically
adjacent to that of its author, the novel’s temporal register also vastly expands,
taking on a historical depth suggestive of the ruins of empire. A crucial, trauma-
matic scene, in which Laurence encounters and is renounced by his former
companion and would-be lover, Ronald, is situated within the Coliseum; the
bereft Laurence, who subsequently falls into a deathlike coma, ends the scene
as a “beautiful monster [sitting] as before upon the heap of stones, in the
ancient forum, himself as cold and dead as anything there” (Howe, H 193).
This enfolding of a present-tense singularity within the vast historical scale of
the “ancient forum” demonstrates the novel’s ability to serve as a kind of tem-
poral sponge that, as Dimock asserts, surpasses the modern spatiotemporal
frame of the nation. Dimock reads a similar situation of novelistic suffering,
also located in Rome, within Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady as con-
tradiciting Benedict Anderson’s assessment of the nineteenth-century novel,
alongside the nation and the newspaper, as an instrument of the modern
regulation of time. Anderson, Dimock observes,
cannot be more wrong about the novel; there is no standardized timetable
here, no “clock and calendar” to dictate a flat, synchronized surface. On the
contrary, it is because novelistic time is not synchronized, not flat, because
it is spongelike, with dimensions sunken and curled up, that it has a geo-
metry different from Euclid’s, and different from the plane geometry of the
nation. (Dimock, Continents 88)6

The experience of reading a novel is nothing like the serial simultaneity of
the newspaper; it is, rather, like walking in a city whose history spans mil-
ennia (and indeed, it is no accident that the novel brings Laurence from a
small Swiss canton, site of his father’s vehement appeal to a putatively stable
tradition, to Rome, the eternal city, where the fantasy of “tradition” in the
singular becomes laughable). One is constantly brushing up against pasts that
were memorialized, repressed, or simply abandoned—against futures we now
know as “history,” and others that simply never came to be.

For Dimock, part of the novel’s fractal capacity is its ability to absorb
and transform epic poetry, so that the “archaic” genre, in modern literature,
is retained as an uneven survival, manifested “in percentages, as grains and
lumps” (Dimock, Continents 86, 87). These pieces of pastness swirling around
Howe’s novel include the classical myths that carry forward the figure of the hermaphrodite, which, like the Coliseum setting, bring to the novel a deep historical dimension. The myth of the hermaphrodite provides the novel with temporal as well as historical grain, furnishing not only the idea of Laurence’s ambiguous sex but also the narrative structures that enable it to use the figure of the hermaphrodite to denaturalize sexual sequencing. The story of Hermaphroditus, as adapted from Ovid, is precisely that, a story: not simply an account of a being who possesses two sexes, it is rather a narrative of transformation, of a being who is first one thing, then another. Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, is pursued by the nymph Salmacis, to whom he is unresponsive; as she watches him bathe in a pool, she prays to the gods that they never be separated, to which they respond by fusing the two bodies. The mournful Hermaphroditus, “weakened” by the addition of femininity, then asks that any man bathing in the pool be similarly transformed. Sharply distinguished from fantasies of the androgyne as originary figure and/or heterosexual Romantic telos, the untimely figure of the hermaphrodite, a creature whose vexed history of desire and shame is marked in the flesh, calls a culture’s sexual arrangements into question.7

The classical period, however, is not the only anterior era referenced by Howe’s citation of the hermaphrodite, as the way in which Laurence’s ambiguous sex is first identified in the novel makes clear. At a college reception where Laurence, having won a prize, is the center of attention, he overhears an Italian stranger searching for a classical analogue to his “antique” beauty. Rejecting comparisons to Antinoüs, Mercury, and Apollo, the Italian detects “a striking resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Howe, H 16). Upon hearing these words, Laurence, left uninformed by his parents about the particulars of his ambiguous sex, experiences a shock of recognition and flees to his room, where he is terrorized by “mocking spectres” as he imagines that “the very walls had eyes to spy out my secret, and tongues to betray it” (Howe, H 17). It is crucial here that Laurence is not identified directly as a hermaphrodite (he is later described by a physician as a “very extraordinary case . . . [of] anomalous humanity” [Howe, H 194]) but by means of a hermaphrodite, and a very specifically located one. The reference to the Villa Borghese, where the statue to which the Italian refers is preserved in a room that also contains a series of paintings depicting scenes from Ovid’s Hermaphroditus, points us in the direction of Rome, where the narrative is eventually headed;8 it also enfolds the time of the Cardinal Scipione Borghese (1576–1633) with that of the hermaphrodite, thus adding to the frame of gender anomalousness both a general notion of early modern aesthetic innovation (Borghese was a collector of Caravaggio and Bernini) and a
particular history of sexual deviance: that of Borghese, whose attachment to a male lover was so well known as to merit papal intervention and so strong as to cause him to fall into a deep depression after their separation.9

The grains and lumps of other times, other narratives, thus complicate the gender and sexual arrangements of the fictional world in which Laurence moves as well as the historical world his story moves against. But we must pause, at this point, to ask precisely which historical world, which culture’s arrangements, we are talking about here: Howe’s or our own? For if, as I above observed, time in the novel is difficult to pin down, the time of the novel is a no less complex matter. Thus far I have been discussing the ways that the novel opens itself outward and backward, as it were, to incorporate traces of cultures other than and prior to Howe’s own. Yet this particular text also constitutes a compelling example of the way literary texts open themselves forward, generating what we might understand, in Linda Charnes’s terms, as “worm-holes to the future.” The question of the time of The Hermaphrodite differs, in this sense, from the questions about how to date and classify the manuscript to which I referred above. Though a “common-sense” historicism would tell us that what we have here is a mid-nineteenth-century novel that just happens to have been published for the first time in 2004, I maintain that the latter fact is more than incidental to our reading. For one thing, as Williams explains, the fragmentary manuscript itself required significant deciphering and arranging before it could be understood as telling anything like a coherent story; his arrangement of the existent fragments in what seems like a solid approximation of chronological order is based, as he observes, not on a historically purist claim of Howe’s original intent but a pragmatic sense of what constitutes a “readable text,” a judgment necessarily made from our present tense (Williams, “Speaking” xlv). The way that readable story is framed by the University of Nebraska Press also says much about our own contemporary generation of a sense of sexual pastness, from the sepia-toned image of an androgynous nude, adapted from a turn-of-the-century photograph, that appears on the dust cover, to the selection of The Hermaphrodite (a word that, when applied to human beings, now registers as archaic) as the title.10 These eroticized signs are recognizable enough to the contemporary reader to generate a sense of connection and different enough to refuse full identification—a seductive mixture of intimacy and distance that resembles the alternating stances of presentism and alterism that, as Carolyn Dinshaw shows in her groundbreaking queer historiography Getting Medieval (1999), characterize contemporary accounts of the sexual past. Viewed from this perspective, The Hermaphrodite is not a mid-nineteenth-century novel that happened to be published in the twenty-first century; it is, rather, a contem-
porary projection of a moment in the nineteenth-century literary history of sexuality.

My intent here is not to condemn either the press or the novel’s editor for the crime of sullying a “pure” past with the grubby fingerprints of our own present. On the contrary, the retroprojection that is The Hermaphrodite affords us an important occasion for rethinking the way we think about time in both literary history and the history of sexuality, for remembering, as Charnes observes, “to keep pressing the question [of what another historiography might look like]—to acknowledge the inherent limitations of the cognitive framework that continues to organize our ideological relationship to time” (Charnes). If the fragmented state of Howe’s manuscript generates, for the published novel, more than the usual number of what Charnes calls “crash sites,” places where we can see the future make contact with the historical text, this serves but to remind us that all histories are projections. The jumbled and fractal temporalities of The Hermaphrodite, alongside the suggestive transtemporal dialogue created by our collision with Howe’s text, disable the fantasy of a singular, linear history and, consequently, posit the possibility of other ways of being in, and thinking about, time. And this reminds us, in turn, to try to unlearn habits of mapping the history of sexuality as if we ourselves, our contemporary forms of sexual identity and relation, were its endpoint. As Foucault reminds us, our sexual present tense is no less a projection than the past, and its future is not yet given. Rather than using the past as a unifying mirror to reflect back a coherent self-image, then, a queer historiography would seek to multiply the possible points of contact between them and the kinds of futures that that contact might enliven. The intensities of Laurence’s erotically charged relation with Ronald, for instance, may prompt a reading of hermaphrodisms as figuring homosexuality avant la lettre—but that understanding need not exhaust the forms of being and modes of attachment this coupling can be made to figure, just as the hetero/homosexual binary ought not to exhaust thinking about sexuality in our own time. To read Howe’s novel as breaking apart its present, employing various modes of pastness, and, importantly, scrabbling around for other possible futures, is also to remind ourselves of the necessity of doing the same.

2. The Time of Relations

As I noted above, the novel identifies its diegetic present only within a seemingly unimportant, passing comment about passersby, a move that suggests its less-than-primary status in relation to the multiplicity of times in the nar-
rative. Yet it is noteworthy that that passing historical present also coincides with a key moment within a history of passage, or transition, between family forms. If we accept Berto’s insistence, earlier cited, on Laurence’s typical rather than exceptional status, then the most crucial moment in his history is not the discovery of his ambiguous sex, but his radical break with the family as a result. Intriguingly, the novel structures this break according to a historical transition that, according to Michel Foucault, characterizes modernity itself: the move from a sociality ordered by blood to one ordered by sex. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault pinpoints the nineteenth century as the crucial period for this transformation in the dominant rubrics of power. The rubric of blood—in which power was channeled through “systems of alliance, the political form of the sovereign, the differentiation into orders and castes, and the value of descent lines”—characterizes the old world, whereas in the new world, the “themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body” identify sexuality as the target of a power concerned with the management of life (Foucault, *History* 147). Though Foucault’s account does not center on the importance of temporality to modernity’s rearrangement of power, these themes, suggesting the centrality of normative rhythms of life and above all of reproduction in the new world, indicate the extent to which the proliferation of power under the apparatus of sexuality depends upon the timing of life around the reproductive imperative, structuring all life narratives in relation to the “future of the species.”12 It is crucial here that sexuality, for Foucault, signifies not simply those behaviors that we usually regard as “sexual,” but more generally, an intensification of the body’s social meanings, which may include affective as well as physical dimensions. Hence the emotional arrangements of the reproductive family were also important to the timing of life.

Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, takes up the question of the temporal implications of modernizing the family form much more directly. Tocqueville notes that families mark both space and time differently in aristocracy and in modernity. Aristocratic families “remain for centuries in the same condition, often on the same spot,” producing a kind of “contemporaneous[ness]” across generations that bonds members. But in democratic nations, Tocqueville argues, that stability is lacking, as “new families are constantly springing up, others are constantly falling away, and all that remain change their condition” (Tocqueville, vol. 2, 98–99).13 The language of isolation and anxiety that Tocqueville employs to describe the spatiotemporal situation of humans in modernity, contrasted with the language of stability in which he narrates the time of the aristocratic bloodline, suggests the extent to which, as Foucault observes, this historical shift “did not come
about . . . without overlappings, interactions, and echoes.” Insofar as mod-
ernity continues to be “haunted” by a “preoccupation with blood and the law,”
Foucault argues, some compensation for the loss of temporal stability, what
Tocqueville referred to as a repeated rupturing of the “woof of time,” was
sought (Foucault, History 149; Tocqueville, vol. 2, 99). The intense affections
of the emergent model of middle-class domesticity, which remade the family
in the sentimental mode, served in part, as Tocqueville suggests, to compens-
sate for the spatiotemporal drift that results from democracy’s flux. Though
the “contemporaneousness” with the distant past experienced by the aristoc-
ocratic family eroded in modernity, the new form of the affectionate family,
with its increasing emphasis on the home as a place for the care of children,
orereded an optimistic link to a progressive future in the form of the child. The
love that binds the domestic/sentimental family thus plays an important role
in the modern deployment of sexuality.

The question of love comes to the fore in the argument that causes Lau-
rence’s break with his father’s family. Laurence’s titled father commands his
family as absolutely as he rules over the two “princely estates” combined in
his marriage (Howe, H 23). When Laurence returns from college, he remarks
his father’s power to synchronize the movements of the entire household
around his will, intimating a corresponding absence, in these clockwork fig-
ures, of the “natural” warmth of the family:

Paternus seemed to be the Evil Genius, the master magician of the feast, and
one could have dreamed that the other figures around the table had been so
many automata, animated only by his will. When he ate, the company ate,
their very knives and forks keeping time with his. When he spoke, they lis-
tened and replied—when his voice ceased, they subsided into sympathetic
silence. The dessert having been got through with, my health having been
formally proposed and mechanically drunk, I wondered whether he would
leave them rooted in their places until the next day, at the same hour; but
he gave the signal of command, and they rose in concert, and marched like
well-drilled soldiers back to the drawing room. (Howe, H 24)

For Laurence’s father (whom he mockingly dubs Paternus, the Latinization
evoking the Roman structure of patria potestas, which seems to have survived
in his household) the transmission of bloodlines is so important that it has
literally constructed Laurence’s sex. A show of independence from Laurence
provokes Paternus to threaten that he can “‘hold up [Laurence’s] assumed
manhood to the scorn of society’” (Howe, H 28). The father explains that
Laurence’s birth coincided with an illness that left him anxious to secure a
male heir; having only daughters, he “‘deemed it most expedient’” to pronounce Laurence male at birth so that he could secure the estate’s succession across time (Howe, H 29). This explanation conflicts significantly with the one Laurence has previously given: that his parents hoped, in designating him male, to give him the protection of masculinity, “which would at least permit me to choose my own terms in associating with the world, and secure to me an independence of position most desirable for one who could never hope to become the half of another” (Howe, H 3). While both of these accounts align social power with maleness, Paternus’s version designates his household as one in which the patriarch’s law and the continuity of bloodlines remain the overarching concerns, rather than such affectively centered notions as the “welfare of the child,” implicit in Laurence’s account. Laurence discovers, moreover, that his father is willing to offer this information only because he now wishes to insure a more integral succession through Laurence’s younger brother Philip, born while Laurence was away at school.

As his version of the decision behind the designation of his sex indicates, Laurence holds a very different understanding of both power and the family form. He maintains that his father’s power is not limitless, promising that he will consult both legal and medical authorities to counter any attempt to disinherit him by disproving his manhood, revealing a thoroughly modern understanding of the power of science to speak the truth of the body. Nevertheless, Laurence is willing to place himself out of the line of succession, though this willingness comes from an understanding of his father’s manhood, rather than his own, as lacking. Paternus is, in Laurence’s view, a “domestic iceberg,” and he marvels that two such affectionate beings as himself and Philip could descend from such a father (Howe, H 26). During their argument, in response to Paternus’s insistence on the “‘respect due to a father,’” Laurence insists on “‘the kindness—the humanity due to a son’” (Howe, H 28). His father’s inhumanity “degrade[s]” the succession in Laurence’s eyes, as he affirms: “I had not ambition to represent him” (Howe, H 29–30). When his father offers to settle a smaller fortune on Laurence if he will agree to renounce the patrimony to Philip, Laurence readily agrees, recasting the decision as motivated not by his father’s potential legal power over him but by his failure to love him as a father should: “He did not injure me, he had not power to do so, but the evil intention in a father’s heart—ah! It made an orphan of me once and forever” (Howe, H 27). In fact, Laurence will only agree to contract the matter with Philip directly, preferring the affectionate child to the titled “iceberg.”

We can see in this father–son conflict an impress of the historical transformation of family forms outlined above: Laurence’s father’s ancient vision of
family as controlled by father-right above all, versus his own modern image of the family as an affectionate assemblage ruled by the “heart” and hedged round by professional authority. Ironically, Laurence manages, by conceding to his father the right to order the patrilinear succession as he sees fit, to bring his own model of family into being in the very act of renunciation; his insistence on accepting his renegotiated inheritance from Philip rather than Paternus forces law to follow love. Philip, for his part, shows signs of being the very type of relation for which Laurence longs; Laurence observes that “the child’s heart already pined for sympathy and affection,” and he cries out for Laurence to take him along as he prepares to depart (Howe, H 31). Years later, Philip will prove his fidelity to Laurence’s model of the family, as he chooses for his lover not a titled woman but a peasant’s daughter, the dancer Rösli. He follows Rösli to Rome and proposes marriage, insisting that he will locate Laurence and restore to his “dearly loved” brother the right of succession, instead taking up residence in a small rural cottage on the estate, confident that the affectionate Laurence will shelter them (Howe, H 118). In contrast, Laurence’s father views the succession agreement as a mere matter of expediency, just as he understood Laurence’s sex. When Philip dies shortly after fleeing to Rome, the father confronts Laurence at his graveside, hailing him publicly as Viscount and demanding that he return home to resume his place as heir. When Laurence refuses, he bribes officials to have his son declared insane and committed to an institution, a fate Laurence manages to escape only by going into hiding as an Englishwoman named Cecilia. The institutional power of the father thus continues to threaten the affectionate model Laurence embraces. Though Laurence insists on narrating his own story according to a desire to will into being a world ordered by voluntary, affinitive bonds rather than hereditary obligation, when voluntary contracts and promises (to say nothing of medical authority) can be simply voided by power, he is forced to realize that his father’s world still refuses to cede the historical stage.

3. Hetero-sexual Sequences\textsuperscript{14}

Laurence’s father’s concern for the succession reflects not only a historically distinct conception of the purpose of family but, consequently, a different apprehension of time. The aristocratic family, as Tocqueville depicts it, is balanced in the middle of distant ancestors and descendants, contemporaneous with all generations. In the middle-class sentimental-domestic vision of the family that emerged in the nineteenth century—one in which the presence
of affectionate bonds, rather than noble bloodlines, conveys the value of a household—transtemporal connection is, rather, sustained through the figure of the child. In this shift, reproduction is necessitated by a future whose demands pressure the present, rather than a line of descent that demands maintenance. As a result, the time of the family becomes “progressive,” forward-moving, and more or less linear. The very possibility of that progress, however, mandates that the family be ideologically structured to place limitations on temporal flux; the brighter future toward which the affectionate family, in time with the democratic nation, optimistically launches its children should differ only in degree, not in kind, from the life-stories of the parents. The promise of futurity compensates for the loss or lack of ancestral lineage; not everyone can possess that type of past, but people willing to dedicate themselves to the proper family form can master this way of living on indefinitely. Yet while the shape of the past differs in the modern family, it is not wholly absent; the extensive bloodline of the aristocratic family is replaced by the timelessness of familial, and specifically maternal, affection, a nurture authorized by nature, and centered around the child, who requires this affectionate “heritage” in order to thrive. As a result, the conception of the child and the notion of futurity have become so intertwined that, as some queer theorists have recently argued, the future itself is unimaginable outside the structures of generational reproduction. As Michael Warner observes: “Whether we bear children or not, our lives converge on a future that continues to be imagined not as the activity of other adults like ourselves, but as the inheritance of children—our donatees, our surrogates, our redeemers, our alibi” (Warner 777).15

Given the centrality of what Warner dubs “repronarrative” to the modern conception of time, an identity that has been ideologically central since the mid-nineteenth century, its absence from the fragments that comprise The Hermaphrodite is noteworthy (Warner 786). Alongside Laurence’s faith in the nurturant family, a nostalgic relation to childhood is clearly manifested throughout the work: within Laurence’s recollection of his own childhood (before his “fall” into an awareness of the complexity created by his ambiguous sex), in the depiction of the affectionate Philip, and in Laurence’s reflections on Ronald’s youth, though these last are complicated by his own obvious attraction to Ronald. Yet this marked affection for childhood is accompanied by no evident desire to reproduce these charming figures. Occasionally, one of the male characters appeals to the sacred duty of childbearing, yet even they depict it only as that which women, by nature, crave. In Berto’s account of his relationship with Eleonora, a young Swiss girl, he seeks—unsuccessfully—to check her desire to enter a Roman convent by insisting: “‘[Women]
love, they are loved, they will marry, and rear up blooming families, while you are withering in your lonely cloister. They are following their true vocation, derived from Nature and from God, while yours dates only from your own imagination and the wrongly exerted influence of others” (Howe, H 104–5). Similarly, when Berto’s mad sister Nina, rhapsodizing about her adventures in America with Gaetano, the banished former lover to whom she imagines herself married, pauses to hold up her arms and lament, “‘somehow, they are always empty,’” Berto and Laurence ascribe this interruption to the speech of a woman’s nature through the flesh of the female body, occasionally intruding into Nina’s dream-life to remind her to lament the children she will never bear (Howe, H 142).

Despite these laments, however, the absence of the reproductive family from the plot of the novel does not function to underscore its importance, as the death or absence of the mother worked, in mid-century sentimental novels, to enshrine the cultural centrality of that figure. Rather, both of the examples I have cited here operate to underscore the ideological, rather than biological, origin of the marital-reproductive imperative. Childbearing appears to be what men want women to want, whereas neither Eleonora nor Nina seems especially bothered by the absence of progeny in their lives. Despite Berto’s insistence that Eleonora emulate, rather than adore, the mother of Christ, her passion for the conventual life is so strong that at her induction she swoons in the arms of the Abbess and “die[s] a momentary death, under the too keen sword of the spirit” (Howe, H 107). Nina, for her part, neglects to incorporate children into her fantasy union with Gaetano; despite Laurence’s insistence that she “weep[s] for the children that are not, and have never been,” the arms whose emptiness she laments appear to be extended only toward her absent lover (Howe, H 142). The maternal instinct is appealed to, in the novel, whenever women’s desire for passionate union with an immaterial beloved becomes too palpably erotic, threatening to reveal itself as desire, without the reproductive imperative as its alibi.

In place of the aforementioned forms of familial transtemporal connection—maintaining a succession for its own sake and in embracing the future through the figure of the child—The Hermaphrodite, instead, puts forth a vision of temporal transcendence in the form of the intimate opposite-sex couple. The (hetero) couple, imagined as perfectly complementary, becomes a self-sufficient unit—indeed, a new form of self—that moves directly from time into eternity on the basis of its mutual devotion, rather than its production of progeny. The intimate transcendence of the couple recalls accounts of the androgyne as figuring the unity of the two sexes in marriage, an image that marked early Christian, Gnostic, and Neoplatonic thought (Long 7–12;
Gilbert 11–19). This image surfaced periodically in early modern and post-Enlightenment accounts of love, as, for example, in the 1590 ending to Book Three of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, when the lovers Amoret and Scudamour, embracing after a long separation, seem to have morphed into a single bisexed being.\(^{17}\) It also marks the ending Howe provides for the only fully “realized” opposite-sex romance to take place in the pages of the novel—the story of Eva and Rafael, which is contained in an old manuscript given Berto by his uncle, the mysterious Count______. The manuscript, the work of an unknown German mystic, is given to Laurence by Berto before the latter leaves him, as Cecilia, to stay with his sisters, because Berto believes it contains some connection to his sister Nina’s madness; as Cecilia, Laurence reads it aloud to the eldest sister, Briseida, and her would-be lover Pepino. The narrative begins as Eva, refusing all consolation after the death of her lover Rafael, resolves to preserve her love until she can be reunited with his spirit in the afterlife, a devotion from which neither the advice of angels nor the attentions of a prince can deter her. In a quasi-Gnostic twist, Eva’s constant and prolonged mourning—which the angels initially present, in accordance with the dictates of nineteenth-century Christian consolation culture, as outright defiance of God’s will—is eventually revealed to be a sacred trust. Having proved her worthiness by refusing all earthly consolation, she is rewarded by the planting of a vine on Rafael’s grave, which, when it blooms, carries her to heaven where she rejoins her beloved. The “instincts of [Eva’s] heart,” the tale’s narrator avers, set into motion a chain of behaviors that facilitate her transcendence: “from [her heart] she had learned love, love had taught her constancy, constancy had taught her undying hope, and hope for the future had taught her renunciation in the present” (Howe, \(H\ 180\)). What appears here as a natural impulse toward affection provides the launching point for a narrative of feminine constancy culminating in a vision of eternal union, as in heaven the pair finally “seem[s] to be no longer two, but one” (Howe, \(H\ 181\)), at which point the narrative breaks off. Eva’s entire dedication to Love furnishes the proper telos for the romance: true lovers transcend both time and the flesh to remain united, literally, happily ever after.

This vision of romantic hetero-sexual complementarity negotiates the problem of time by generating something other than the future-borne child: it produces, rather, a new being which rises, literally, above time. In this sense, the Eva/Rafael romance parallels certain retellings of the myth of the androgyne, the originary symbol of two sexes fused. (Though Aristophanes’s account of this figure in Plato’s *Symposium* does not idealize the figure of the androgyne—it is both too bawdy and too cynical to operate as a True Romance—that did not prevent Neoplatonic thinkers from embracing the
figure as such.) In this account, in which the separation of the sexes becomes a traumatic fall into time, the (re)union of the two halves in marriage serves to repair the trauma and return the lovers to eternity. For some of Howe's readers, the transcendent telos of the Eva/Rafael manuscript challenges the gendered norms that shaped the reproductive family as well. For instance, Valarie Ziegler reads the vision of eternal union at the close of the manuscript as a kind of feminist statement, an “ecstatic transfiguration that disrupted the carefully defined gender spheres of the Victorian age.” In Ziegler's reading, true (hetero-sexual) romance becomes a “transformative spirituality” that challenges earthly gender hierarchies (Ziegler 70). Yet the “transformative” telos of this romance is predicated on a particular sequence that incorporates a noteworthy temporal gap between the two sexes: the story begins after Rafael has entered eternity, and Eva is left to suffer for an extended period of time before she can, in effect, catch up with him. Rafael possesses the ability to see all events from the perspective of eternity and hence to foresee Eva's future, as indicated when he instructs her to wait for the angel of consolation. Eva believes this is merely conventional insistence on the spiritual necessity for the bereaved to return to everyday life and insists that she will not receive the angel when he comes; in the end, however, it is this angel who facilitates her apotheosis. The distance between the two lovers here is not merely a matter of accident, the fact that Rafael happened to die first. Rather, it is linked to a specifically gendered time-lag that informed nineteenth-century sentimental culture at every level. Rafael embodies Knowledge, as his ability to predict the future and his pedagogical treatment of Eva in heaven alike suggest, whereas Eva embodies Love, whose lessons come from within. Understood as fundamental to human nature, the notion of love is enshrined at, and in effect as, the origin of the human in sentimental thought, but in this romance it lags behind, and must catch up to, a masculinized knowledge greater than itself.

Another incident on the way to the final, harmonious union further extends the manuscript's implicit commentary on the temporal dissonance associated with the two lovers' gendered positions in time. Shortly after Eva's ascent to heaven, she notices that Rafael now bears a scar upon his forehead, which he tells her is the mark of “a deadly sin which I did once commit”; the scar, however, has earned him divine compassion and consolation, and he asserts that over time it will “become an ornament upon my brow” (Howe, H 179). Rafael insists that no shame attaches to him from this scar, as many of the angels are similarly scarred or deformed, “even mutilated to the extent of a limb or an eye,” and this corporeal marking reminds the divine of “the sufferings of man upon earth, for that he had borne them in
his own body” (Howe, *H* 179). In this sentimental theology, to be human is to remain ever vulnerable to being wounded, and thus woundedness itself manifests humanity; it is in this sense that wounds, viewed from a certain perspective, carry within them their own redemptive power, as Rafael suggests. Though Rafael is the only one to bear a physical scar, Eva and Rafael both function[ed] in life as wounded subjects: Rafael as imperfect and Eva as incomplete, awaiting the posthumous reunion that will complete her. Whereas this mutual woundedness seemingly marks the symmetry that orders the heterosexual couple’s complementarity, the many tales of frustrated opposite-sex romance in the novel insinuate a causality that throws this mirroring off-balance. It is not simply that men are flawed and women are wounded; women are wounded chiefly because men are flawed.

The time-lag between the sexes that surfaces in the Eva and Rafael story and throughout *The Hermaphrodite* points toward what we might understand as sentimental disphasure, a precursor of the disphasure that Freud would later describe as constitutive of heterosexual coupling. For Freud, men’s and women’s desire remains “a phase apart psychologically”: men desire women as maternal substitutes, whereas women desire (male) children as compensation for their own castration (Freud, *Lectures* 166). Howe’s novel, while sidestepping the repronormativity that orders Freud’s thinking here, nevertheless maintains a similar sense that the sexes are out of sync, that the gendered difference between the rational and the emotional becomes reified as temporal distance. Another mid-nineteenth-century account of sentimental disphasure as a lack of full synchronicity in the marital couple appears in Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s discussions of the unevenly gendered nature of power in the affectionate home. Although the middle-class domestic household understood itself to be ruled by “the law of love,” to which all were equally subject, it nevertheless remained structured by men’s legal and civic privilege, disrupting fantasies of mutuality and complementarity. Beecher and Stowe, in *The American Women’s Home*, represented this state of affairs as at once a social fact and an unfortunate survival that would eventually wither away, abolished by the evolution of love as a regulatory principle. They acknowledged that the husband was indeed the legal head of the household and that the wife was required by the laws of church and state to submit to his will. But this only mattered, they observed, in homes where love was absent. Where the domestic affections were present, as by nature they should be, they asserted, love would ensure harmony between husband and wife, rendering any resort to legal privilege unnecessary. Beecher and Stowe identify the growth of love as a regulatory principle with the progress of “Christian”
civilization, though even here, they observe, this progress is notably uneven, as more emphasis has been given to women’s submission than to men’s need to learn the law of love. However, they predict that the growth of women’s education will eventually render women self-sufficient, so that they will no longer marry out of need, but will only enter into the marital state “by that love for which there is no need of law” (Beecher and Stowe 156). In this way, the family of love mapped itself over the family of law in a position of immanence, at once asserting itself as ever-present truth and deferring its full manifestation to the future.

In this domestic-sentimental account, a gap in the history of sexuality, manifested as a time-lag between the sexes, will be healed, over time, as the growth of women’s self-sufficiency will bring about the full manifestation of the time of love. Yet Howe’s novel maintains a more pessimistic relation to this idealized telos, emphasizing the way that the ideal of sexual complementarity seems always to be thrown out of sync by the emergence of divergence in the sequencing of gendered powers. This is the case in the story of Nina, the most direct effect of the Eva/Rafael manuscript in the time of the novel. Berto reads the manuscript to Nina in an attempt to console her after Gaetano’s departure. Nina is fascinated by the “idea of [the] eternal and indivisible union of loving spirits,” which becomes, as Briseida reports, “first a desire, then a conviction, then, a madness’” (Howe, H 164). Though the romantically-minded Briseida admires the “sublime” nature of the madness to which her sister’s obsession with eternal union has driven her, their more worldly sister Gigia laments that women should throw their lives away for the sake of undeserving men. In her illness, Nina will speak only when spoken to of Gaetano, and otherwise appears inanimate, almost lifeless; she is not so much fused with Gaetano as fantastically absorbed into him. Just as Eva, in the story, trails in the wake of Rafael, Nina, in her hallucinations, trails after Gaetano in his forced exile from Italy, waiting in camp while he hunts bear with the Indians in order to sing him to sleep. The “radical” telos of “true romance” in the time of the novel, then, tends more to reaffirm than to unsettle existing gender hierarchies; in order to achieve love-union, women must dedicate their entire being to following where their male lovers lead. Viewed in this light, the telos of the Eva and Rafael story recalls the myth of Hermaphroditus, a less optimistic account of how bisexed beings came to be than that of the androgyne. In that account, as we saw earlier, hermaphroditism is the outcome not of a timeless ideal but of a distinctly ill-timed relation between the sexes. Howe’s novel updates this myth to underscore the impossibility of hetero-sexuality as idealized love-union under existing historical conditions, since men’s disproportion-
ate power across both public and private spheres perpetually threw this fusion out of joint.

4. Unrealized Moments

Laurence’s response to the Eva and Rafael story is divided over time. As a character (and as Cecilia), he responds by praising it as a “mystery, but one of those which light, and not darkness, veils from us” (Howe, H 183). His later narratorial assessment, however, is less decisive, as he questions whether “health or sickness” characterizes the mind that crafted the manuscript. This dual response is also conveyed by the way in which he reports the group’s dumbstruck reaction to the story; he observes, “We were all, for the moment, unrealized” (Howe, H 183). The uncertainty of the term “unrealized”—which can mean either “not realized,” left incomplete or unactualized, or else “made unreal,” rendered fictional, deprived of reality—imbues Laurence’s comment with an odd temporality that accurately captures the novel’s relation to the question of sexual synchronicity. On one view, the characters have simply not achieved the marital and reproductive norms that nevertheless remain the shape of a truly realized life. They could be understood as arrested in their developmental trajectories, thwarted by tragedy or personal idiosyncracies; or, more critically, they may appear as blocked by history’s failure to arrive at the necessary conditions for fulfillment, as Beecher and Stowe’s discussion of the delayed arrival of the family of love suggests. This reading is supported by Briseida’s critique of Italian marital practices. Explaining her refusal to marry, Briseida informs Laurence-as-Cecilia: “In this country, love and marriage are, so to speak, in a state of divorce” (Howe, H 154). Marriage is entirely an arrangement of convenience, and women’s limited cultural capital means that they usually get the worst end of the bargain. Accordingly, she declares, she has decided instead on a “modest [single] life, embellished only by literature and by friendship” (Howe, H 155). Briseida’s disdain for marriage ties in with the novel’s other depictions of Italy as behind the times, held back by the corruption of high society and by a (Catholic) Church that is “ignorant and superstitious” (Howe, H 144). She could, accordingly, be read, in a vein sympathetic to the (Protestant) convictions espoused by Beecher and Stowe, as a forward-thinking woman, in advance of a culture that may yet progress toward the kind of familial ideal she merits.

In other ways, however, the novel’s failure to reproduce the idealized familial and sexual forms of the mid-nineteenth century exposes these forms
themselves as unreal, as fictions produced to regulate both desire and time. The dislocated and dislocating effect of the Eva and Rafael manuscript points toward this possibility; though the manuscript is described as old and difficult to read, the story itself is undated, floating free of historical time just as the lovers, in the final union, transcend time itself. Briseida’s romantic embrace of the story as “a dream of heavenly truth” (Howe, H 183) similarly places the story beyond history, just as her admiration of Laurence’s bisexed condition, when she discovers it, as “a heavenly superhuman mystery, one undivided, integral soul, needing not to seek on earth its other moiety” places her friend above the sufferings born of living in time (Howe, H 193–94). In this, however, she is dramatically mistaken, as Laurence has spent most of the novel suffering on behalf of others and is, even as she speaks, lying in the death-like coma brought on by his despair at Ronald’s departure, tormented by dream-visions in which he is visited by two lovers and “utterly torn asunder by the love I bare to both of them, the woman and the man” (Howe, H 196). Briseida’s tendency to embrace visions of heterosexual union as “heavenly” without noticing the signs of trauma, damage, and disphasure they contain might suggest to us that she is not, in fact, the forward-thinking emblem of an eventually-realized future. That the novel displays to us the damage that the characters overlook, or cannot see, conveys its capacity to unrealize the teleological couplings Briseida idealizes in the second sense—to expose their fictionality and their insufficiency and thus to make possible a renegotiation of the field of sexuality altogether. What is needed, in this view, is not to realize the sexual forms that the culture already idealizes, but rather, in the wake of the shattering of these romantic fictions, to generate new forms altogether—forms that might take our conceptions of identity and sexuality into terrain hitherto unimagined.

I want to close, then, by considering the extent to which The Hermaphrodite gestures beyond the exposure of reprosexuality as a fiction to hypothesize alternate ways of being in relation to others across time. A starting point for these might be the explicit renunciation of reproductivity in favor of the moment of pleasure that Laurence’s two would-be lovers, the older widow Emma von. P and the slightly younger viscount Ronald, alike avow. Although both Emma and Ronald address Laurence as the opposite sex in their would-be sexual encounters with him (Emma, whom he meets while he is at college, knows him as a man, whereas Ronald, who also knows Laurence as a man, nevertheless implores him to be a woman), their desire is queer insofar as neither expects a romantic, much less a marital/reproductive, future with him. Rather, each embraces sexual pleasure as a thing of the moment—not because of Laurence’s ostensible inability to reproduce but
because the marital/reproductive fantasy is irrelevant to the present tense of their desire. Emma embraces sex as its own fulfillment; bent on seducing Laurence, she visits his rooms in the middle of the night and assures him she is not looking for a marriage proposal: “‘Give me but this one night, but this one hour—do you ask where I shall be tomorrow? I can die tomorrow—I shall have been happy’” (Howe, H 17–18). Ronald, likewise, throws himself at Laurence with an abandon that refuses to see beyond the present. After jealously dueling with another student over the question of Laurence’s sex, Ronald goes to Laurence’s room, wounded and drunk, to insist that the blood he has shed in the duel gives him the right to possess his companion. When Laurence, pretending to comply, pours him a drink, Ronald toasts him with the exclamation, “‘Here is to love, a past without a reckoning—a present without a future!’” (Howe, H 88). The sheer force of desire in each of these attempted seduction scenes cancels the possibility of the conventional romance’s sequential progression, even according to those narrative obstacles (boy meets girl, boy loses girl, etc.) that necessarily delay the happily-ever-after ending; this desire calculates, rather violently, on the moment alone.

Yet despite their rejection of a reproductive future in favor of the presence of desire, both Emma and Ronald are eventually recuperated into normalized and generative gender positions. Laurence, who is traveling away from his father’s estate, discovers Emma’s death as his carriage crosses paths with her funeral; he manages to spend a night alone with her corpse, during which he fantasizes that her soul ministers to him. The posthumous completion of the night alone that Emma had sought replaces erotic desire with necrotic redemption in Laurence’s imagination, substituting sexual exchange with the purifying act of mutual sacrifice and allowing him to fantasize that he is emancipated from “the burthen of [his] humanity” (Howe, H 34)—although subsequent events prove him wrong. Emma is thus converted by death into the ministering angel whose purity redeems the sins of men, a posthumous extension of maternity and perhaps the most conventional ideological role for a nineteenth-century woman. And while Ronald, tortured by memory, wanders the world in a mad frenzy seeking Laurence’s spectralized (and feminized) presence, he is recalled to sanity and tradition by his father’s imminent death, or, as he puts it, “‘the divine right of nature and of blood’” (Howe, H 191). His father persuades him that he must not refuse the succession of his estate, for the sake of his subjects; accordingly, after he inherits the throne, he decides to play it straight, and renounces his pursuit of Laurence. Notwithstanding their abandonment of the familial future, then, both characters end up in quasi-parental positions, serving as the benevolent figures who ensure the growth and continued well-being of others. The queer-
ness of a desire that rejects the familial future for the now of fulfillment is depicted in the novel as itself evanescent, an alluring gesture but ultimately one unable to withstand the discipline of the reproductive imperative.

There remain, however, other ways of being proposed in the novel, ones whose relation to that discipline—and even to what we know as sexuality—is less clear. We may trace these through the transverse, and not a little perverse, rays that emanate from the figure of the eccentric Count______, proprietor of a rural hermitage that Laurence happens upon during his travels, original owner of the Eva and Rafael manuscript, and the uncle and tutor of Berto. Two accounts of the Count’s history are offered Laurence in the novel. At first, he is told that “the village priest . . . [believed] that the noble Count would have enjoyed a longer life, and would have made a more edifying death, if he had married a wife, gone to mass, and settled the affairs of his soul with a jolly confessor over a flask of Rhenish, instead of choosing to settle them alone with the devil as (he opined) had been the case” (Howe, H 37). Countering the picture of the demonic madman who, the villagers insist, still haunts the hermitage, the guide hired by Laurence to show him around the hermitage insists that they simply misunderstand the Count’s approach to living, which was guided by a “scrupulous and exact division of his time and his duties” (Howe, H 38). This account transforms the irregular, unmarried Count of the villagers into a model modern citizen, deft practitioner of the temporal discipline and self-control urged upon the nineteenth-century subject by countless advice books. Yet a third possibility emerges in the repetition and transformation of the Count’s time-consciousness by his nephew and heir, Berto. Similarly unmarried and childless, Berto also devotes his life to a self-devised time scheme, in which he divides the branches of knowledge into twelve, pursuing each for a month at a time; he lauds this scheme as enabling a new consciousness, opposed to “‘onesidedness, fixed idea[s], and all the insanities of the learned’” (Howe, H 95). Berto’s celebration of his time scheme downplays the productivity and good citizenship emphasized in the admiring villager’s account of the Count’s, instead underscoring his own personal pleasure in this alternative approach, which permits him such activities as a month in Naples passing as one of the lazzeroni. Inventing “his own crazy way,” Berto manages to become, as his sister calls him, “‘un originale’” (Howe, H 155), holding himself apart from the pressure to conform to a recognizable life narrative that ends up straightening out Ronald—though this originality stops at the question of sex; he remains entirely capable of exercising his patriarchal authority over his sisters, denying the artist Gigia her request to join him in the South and refusing to allow Nina to go with Gaetano to America. Even as it sketches new possibilities for living, then, the
The novel insistently highlights the time-lag that prevents women from taking advantage of them. While Berto’s sisters are to some extent free to arrange their time just as he has, the spatial constraints placed on women continue to limit the ways they may take in life.

While Berto’s continuation of the Count’s legacy defers a generational reproductive schedule in favor of one that is calendrical and intellectual in nature, Laurence’s encounter with that legacy bends time almost to the breaking point. Laurence falls under the spell of the Count as he takes up residence in the hermitage that the Count had reserved for one month out of each twelve, which the admiring villager describes as his “yearly Ramadan” (Howe, H 39). Laurence, however, stays longer, until he himself has generated another legend among the villagers, who believe he is either a sorcerer or a saint, thus confirming their contention that the specter of the Count yet haunts this space. The villagers’ tales are in part justified, as, spurred on by the removed nature of the space and by the collection of theological and philosophical books in the Count’s library, Laurence enters into a period of spiritual masochism, whose content or duration he cannot later recollect: “It is marked in my remembrance by states, rather than by days; and its light and darkness were other than that of the evening and the morning” (Howe, H 44). This ecstatic retreat generates ideas and thoughts far enough beyond the ordinary framework that they cannot be articulated in Laurence’s own language, and which he views as fragments of divine knowledge. And though he later renounces the self-destructive tendency that marks this period and flees the “phantom voices” (Howe, H 50) of the hermitage, he cannot do so without lingering regret for this time of “rapture . . . and inspiration” (Howe, H 65).

The mixed feelings with which Laurence recollects his life in the hermitage reflect the difficulty of thinking outside conventional forms of identity that depend on and demand familial reproduction. Laurence’s ecstatic period resembles what Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit describe as the effect of traumatized perception: the shattering of “realised psychic and social identities” and the becoming-visible of “every body’s limitless extensibility in space and time,” replacing selective transcendence—for those who fit into the “officially sanctioned connections that confirm such identities as husband, or mother”—with universal immanence (Bersani and Dutoit 9, 8). Bersani and Dutoit acknowledge, however, that the prospect of moving on from fixed identities (and the reproductive arrangements that confirm and perpetuate them) to new relational regimes that we can, as yet, scarcely imagine, much less articulate, generates both exhilaration and melancholy, the pain of loss as well as the exciting possibility of being otherwise (Bersani and Dutoit 9). The
ambivalence of this prospect, the difficulty of surrendering the “identitarian myths” that have “richly nourished” us, accounts, I propose, for the sense of melancholy that suffuses this novel. Though other critics have read the manuscript as ultimately advocating a reluctant acceptance of conformity to social and relational norms by dramatizing the suffering that lies in wait for those who do not or cannot fit in, I would assess the tone of *The Hermaphrodite* as a gesture toward a realization almost opposite to this. Its melancholy, that is, marks not the mournful necessity of a reluctant return to norms, but the reluctance that accompanies recognition of the necessary impossibility of that return.

**The strange** temporality of Laurence’s stay in the hermitage is noteworthy for one final thing: its generation by the erotics of the library. The allure of the Count’s library, a promiscuous collection of theological and philosophical tracts, plays a substantial part in Laurence’s attraction to the hermitage; he is intrigued by the historical and theological breadth of the collection, in which radically divergent and even anathemic texts are shelved next to one another in “flagrant contradiction” (Howe, *H* 39). The books rise out of their own times to touch others, pointing various roads to redemption and the allure thereof, suggesting numerous ways of living time as felt, as filled, as anything but “empty [and] homogenous.” Laurence imagines the Count talking himself into creating such a capacious collection, a first step toward his willingness to put himself in the Count’s place. He goes on to fantasize that the Count’s books are now talking to him:

Methought too that these silent Saints all had a voice, and that each spake to me, and all invited me to come and dwell there, and be acquainted with them, and all promised me that I should find peace and comfort in so doing. The mystic said: “I will teach thee how to believe—” the reformer said: “I will teach thee how to reason—” the sublime heathen and the God-like Nazarene said: “I will teach thee to suffer, to love, and to forgive.” And I replied to each and all of them: “I will come.” (Howe, *H* 40)

The seductive call of the books to Laurence partially resembles the generation of a “touch across time” that Carolyn Dinshaw describes as queer historiographic method. Dinshaw figures such touches, transcending the distance of an alterist historical approach, not as moments of identification between past and present, a collapse into presentism, but of a mutually enlivening partial connection, a means of making contact across “all kinds of differ-
ences” (Dinshaw 21). Laurence, in this scene, is drawn to the promise of “peace and comfort” as a means of consolation for loss, but the contact he makes with the perverse chronology of the Count’s library does not simply fill holes or heal wounds in the subject; instead, it leads him to a sustained period of meditation that generates unexpected, unpredictable forms of thought whose vibrations continue to move him long afterward. And this, I propose, is the kind of connection to which The Hermaphrodite ultimately lends itself. The novel extends an invitation across an uncertain span of time (since it is and is not of our own moment) not precisely in order to redress a lack in the history of sexuality, but to take the measure of its forms and multiply its possibilities. We would, I think, be well advised to prolong our contact with it.

Notes

1. For discussions of the history of time in the nineteenth century, see Buckley, Gilmour, Chapman, and Bowler.

2. I have chosen, in this essay, to use the term “ambiguously sexed” to describe Laurence, instead of either “hermaphroditic” or the contemporary term “intersexed,” both because of the novel’s own complex deployment of the former in terms of its cultural and mythical histories, which I will later discuss, and because the use of the latter to describe Laurence’s overdetermined but underdescribed condition would undermine what contemporary activists rightly identify as the need to de-mythologize intersex identity. For more on present-day intersex issues, see Dreger, Intersex in the Age of Ethics, and Kessler.

3. For important works in postcolonial studies that take this approach, see especially Chakrabarty and Bhabha. My understanding of sexual “synchronicity” here draws upon Ernst Bloch’s account of the non-synchronicities of contemporary capitalism. For Bloch, non-synchronous populations are those which are held apart, globally and locally, from the norms of modernity by structures that prevent the accumulation of capital—as one can see in the division of the globe into so-called developed and developing regions, or the First, Second, and Third Worlds. The question of sexual synchronicity extends Bloch’s framework to encompass the future-projected familial models of generationality by means of which a capitalist modernity has made itself at home.

4. Here, see especially Freeman, Time Binds, and Freeman, ed., special issue on Queer Temporality, GLQ (2007).

5. Judith Halberstam defines queer time as “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety and inheritance” (Halberstam 6). I would, however, resist Halberstam’s specification of queer time as postmodern, if by postmodern we indicate a historical period rather than a relationship to historicity, insofar as that distinction problematically reifies the past as a site of stasis which we (post)moderns have transcended.

6. For Benedict Anderson’s assessment of the times of the nation and the novel, see his Imagined Communities (1991).
7. Writing on the early modern obsession with the hermaphrodite, Kathleen P. Long, in *Hermaphrodites in Renaissance Europe* (2006), observes, “It is the perfect figure for troubled times.” Long proposes that the figure captured the early modern imagination insofar as its ability to highlight and gesture beyond the culture’s epistemologies made this figure a useful one for a transitional period, “a symbol of the end of an order, an era, and of the beginning of a new era” (Long 27). The idealized version of the androgyne to which I refer here departs, as I will later discuss, from the satirical tone with which this figure is located at the origin of love by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*, although, as Long points out, it was embraced by neo-Platonists as an image of sexual harmony (Long 9–10).

8. Gary Williams describes this room and notes that Howe would have visited this site when in Rome (Williams, *HH* 95–96).

9. As Francis Haskell notes in *Patrons and Painters* (1963), Borghese’s “villa . . . was the centre of the most hedonistic society that Rome had known since the Renaissance” (Haskell 29; quoted in O’Quinn 117).


11. See Halperin; also Menon.

12. I make this argument at greater length in *Arranging Grief* (2007).

13. See also Michael Warner’s discussion of this passage in his essay “Irving’s Posterity” (2000), to which my thinking here and elsewhere is much indebted.

14. Here and elsewhere in this essay I use “hetero-sexual[ity]” to indicate opposite-sex romantic/sexual couplings; this variant spelling is intended not simply to recall the nonexistence of the word “heterosexuality” itself at the time Howe wrote, but, more important, its distance from what Warner identifies as “modern heterosexuality,” which “presents itself as a relation between equals.” Though the hetero-sexual romance in this novel points toward the emergent ideal that Warner describes (it is likewise “distinguished from reproduction” and “grounded in love and sexuality”), the novel insistently underscores the material and ideological inequalities between the sexes that cause opposite-sex pairings to lag behind this idealized self-presentation (Warner 776). See also Katz.

15. See also Lee Edelman’s discussion of reproductive futurism in *No Future* (2004).

16. See Dever; also Cherniavsky.

17. For an extended discussion of this passage as signifying “a general representation of a particular perfection in love,” see Cirillo.

18. On the centrality of wounding to the sentimental understanding of the subject, see Noble.


20. Here I invoke the sense in which “queer” signifies something outside heteronormative, rather than merely hetero-sexual, practice. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner observe that “queer,” in this sense, signals a “radically anticipatory stance” (Berlant and Warner 344).

21. For discussions of the cultural work done by dead women in the nineteenth century, see Bronfen, Dever, and Cherniavsky.

22. It must also be noted here that the violence accompanying the abandonment of the future is directed at that which is figured as *feminine* in each scenario. Emma, who represents herself as entirely in Laurence’s power, offers to die for her irregular desire—and, indirectly, she does; already wrought up to a feverish pitch, she goes into hysterics when
she recognizes Laurence’s ambiguous sex and shortly afterward dies of brain-fever. Ronald, conversely, threatens to violate and even to kill Laurence if he does not comply with his demand to “be a man to all the world, if you will, but a woman, a sweet, warm, living woman to me” (Howe, H 86). Ronald’s plea for Laurence to “be a woman to me” might be read as a piece of subversive role-playing that undermines the hierarchical relation of the sexes and obligatory heterosexuality, but his violent attempt to make Laurence a woman reifies them again.

23. For an important overview of the turn to clock-discipline in capitalist culture, see Thompson.

24. For instance, Mary H. Grant argues that “[Howe] saw in store for the ordinary mortal whose sexuality was ambiguous nothing but loneliness, misunderstanding, and pain. The ultimate lesson, reinforced by everything around her, was that gender defined role. Without a clear gender definition, a person had no place in society” (Grant 123). And while Ziegler sees the figure of Laurence as interrogating Victorian sexual norms, she also asserts that the novel views him with “ambivalence” because of his inability to fit in (Ziegler 69).

25. The phrase belongs to Walter Benjamin’s characterization of the way the modern historiographer imagines time. See Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”
Afterword

Howe Now?

ELIZABETH YOUNG

Now that Julia Ward Howe’s Hermaphrodite has been recovered, how should we reread the words for which she became famous, “Battle Hymn of the Republic”? What, in turn, is the legacy of Howe’s writing, across genres, for contemporary America? Juxtaposing “Battle Hymn of the Republic” with The Hermaphrodite, this Afterword offers a brief commentary on the dissonance between these works and on their resonances in American culture today. Written some fifteen years apart, novel and poem seem to exist in different worlds. It is not only that the startling and incomplete fragments of the manuscript that we now call The Hermaphrodite (ca. 1847) were unpublished in Howe’s lifetime, while the poem “Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1862) was featured in the Atlantic Monthly and then, adapted into song, became the rallying cry of the Union army. More fundamentally, the novel and poem—which I will abbreviate as Her and “Hymn”—offer very different visions of embodiment, nationalism, and vision. At the same time, I will suggest, these works implicitly complicate and transform each other, suggesting new ways of seeing the tensions in Howe’s America as well as the battles of today’s republic.

“Hymn” establishes a world of absolutes, at once religious, political, and visual. The five stanzas of the poem move from the assertion that “Mine eyes
have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” to the exhortation, “As [Christ] died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” Motored by Christian faith, the movement of the poem is relentlessly forward; each stanza ends with “God, His Truth,” or “His day” “marching on.” This piety is grounded, in turn, on visual certitude. “Mine eyes have seen the glory” is only the first of several assertions based on vision, including “I have seen Him in the watchfires of a hundred circling camps” and “I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps.” Throughout, the speaker of the poem stresses the confidence of vision, whether seeing or reading, and whether in the present (“can read”) or in the past and, simultaneously, the prophetic future (“have seen”). The words “Northern” and “Union” do not appear, but a poem entitled “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” written during the first year of the Civil War and published in the most well-known of Northern literary institutions, unambiguously affiliates itself with the Union cause. “Hymn” offers a Christian vision tied to a political view, and a political view grounded in viewing itself.

This foundational faith in visibility is underscored by Howe’s later account, in her memoirs, of the origin of the poem:

The passage narrates the genesis of “Hymn” as a series of visual challenges and triumphs. The room is dim, and Howe must write without being able to see her words, but she triumphantly overcomes these impediments: she can see the words in her mind and then, for a crucial day afterward, read them on the page. The poem’s visibility increased with its publication placement: the entire front page of the February 1862 *Atlantic*. From an author who must write “without looking at the paper,” the poem was reproduced in print on many pieces of paper, “legible” to a wide readership. Finally, in its transmission into song, the “Hymn” became so well known that it presumably no longer needed to be legible on the page at all.
This passage also suggests the extent to which vision, for Howe, was intertwined with gender. Although the gender of the poem’s spectator is not named, Howe was particularly concerned with the role of women during wartime. When the Civil War began, she lamented that “I could not leave my nursery to follow the march of our armies” (Howe, Rem 273). But the origin story of “Hymn” remedies this distance. The mother who literally stays in the dark so as not “to wake the baby”—one of Howe’s six children—nonetheless finds a form of military service in poetry, waging “attacks of versification . . . in the night” with “an old stump of a pen,” a phrase that suggests both an aging weapon and a post-battle war wound. The resulting poem was so effective that it made women supremely powerful in, rather than disempowered from, the waging of war. Howe’s success, which echoes that of Harriet Beecher Stowe a decade earlier, linked little women to great wars; allegedly, upon first hearing the “Hymn,” Lincoln was so enthralled that he called out, “Sing it again” (quoted in Venet 96). In her postwar career, Howe was an original sponsor of “Mother’s Day,” and she situated motherhood as the moral foundation for political activism. In her origin story of “Hymn,” the mind’s eye of the mother makes a song so powerful that the American commander-in-chief—like a child delighted by a lullaby—asks to have it repeated.

By contrast, The Hermaphrodite offers far less unified accounts of embodiment, gender, and vision. The novel’s focus on ambiguities stands in stark contrast to the certitudes that organize “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” “I know not how an impartial judge would have decided the doubtful question of my being” (Howe, H 4), laments Laurence at the outset, and on another occasion, declares, “I am no man, no woman, nothing” (Howe, H 22). Such comments inaugurate a narrative of ambiguity that never approaches—indeed could not imagine—the forward-moving certitude of an idea like “His truth is marching on.”

As for the organizing axis of vision in “Hymn,” it is shattered in Her into partial, occluded, and frightening accounts of viewing. The word “hermaphrodite” is introduced into the novel when Laurence, still in his initial identification as a young man, overhears two people describing him: “Do you not see a striking resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese?” (Howe, H 16). This reference is probably to the Greek statue known as “The Sleeping Hermaphrodite,” and it functions, as Renée Bergland shows elsewhere in this volume, as one of many important references to sculpture in the novel. These references, in turn, are frequently linked to instances of occluded vision, from the installation of “The Sleeping Hermaphrodite”—it was turned to the wall, precluding a clear view of the genitals—to sculptures of Laura Bridgman, the blind and deaf woman whom Howe’s husband,
Samuel Gridley Howe, famously taught to read and write. In the novel, the reference to “the lovely hermaphrodite” prompts a profound crisis of identity, which Laurence represents as a crisis of vision: “I hurried hither and thither to escape the scrutiny of mocking spectres, who, all unseen, were yet present to me, and with hideous laughter followed me every where” (Howe, H 17). In her origin story for “Hymn” in the Reminiscences, Howe established a nighttime setting but drained it of its gothic potential; here, by contrast, the figure of the “hermaphrodite” prompts a gothic vocabulary in which the narrator cannot see the “mocking spectres” but is nonetheless subject to their “scrutiny.”

When Laurence does see, sight brings horror: “The boy . . . led me to a mirror that hung upon the wall. I was terrified at my own appearance . . . I looked a woman” (Howe, H 51). The horror of self-scrutiny extends to other women: “I could not bear the sight of a woman. . . . The presence even of the maid occasioned in me that feeling of faintness and malaise which is felt by some individuals at the approach of a cat” (Howe, H 68). This misogyny recedes when, later in the novel, Laurence dresses as a woman and reflects sympathetically that “women . . . are very naturally glad now and then to throw off their chains with their petticoats, and to assume for a time the right to go where they please, and the power of doing as they please” (Howe, H 131). But the languages of visual fear and fracture remain until the end. Feverish, the narrator sees “vivid glowing spectres” and then awakens to a trance in which “My eyes became rigidly fixed upon a single point of vision” (Howe, H 197). This language looks toward “Hymn,” but while the speaker of the poem knows that “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” the protagonist of Her has feverish, secular visions filled with “vivid glowing spectres.”

When we juxtapose “Hymn” and Her, then, we get two extremely different texts: one organizing the unambiguous path of the body politic and one fragmentedly narrating a story of bodily ambiguity; one focused on visual certitude and one on plots in which things either cannot be seen or are not what they seem. These contrasts translate, in turn, into divergent political legacies. Affiliated with the Union cause, “Hymn” became, after the war, synecdochal for “the republic” as a reconstructed whole and has often continued to be sung in a nationalist frame. For example, in September 2001, “Hymn” was played in the official national memorial service to the victims of 9/11. Then-president George W. Bush presided at this service, and Howe’s metaphors are continuous with the language of patriotism, both religious and militaristic, that he employed to describe the nation. In this case, a language exhorting violence was used to mourn the victims of violence, an irony noticed by some
at the time. One commentator decried the use of a song “urging . . . Christians to fight and kill” for a memorial service, while another wrote polemically, “Today, if voiced by Islam, we would plainly call [“Battle Hymn of the Republic”] a Jihad and denounce and condemn it as uncivilized” (Easterbrook, Bray).

As these comments underscore, Howe’s “Hymn” was strikingly congruent with the rhetoric of the war that Bush would subsequently launch against Iraq. The continuity between “Hymn” and Iraq War rhetoric inheres not only in the shared rhetoric of a self-righteously militaristic America, but also in their shared vocabulary of visibility. The Bush White House consistently focused on seeing what it wanted to see, from a connection between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein to the presence of dangerous weapons in Iraq. The logic of visual certainty that prompted “Mine eyes have seen the glory” reappeared in the official commitment to seeing weapons of mass destruction that were not, in fact, there. “Hymn,” as one scholar has summarized, is “a warrior’s cry and call to arms. Its vivid portrait of sacred violence captures how Americans fight wars, from the minié balls of the Civil War to the shock and awe of Iraq” (Tierney). Julia Ward Howe herself later became a peace activist; she is surely not responsible for the specific uses to which her song has been put. Nonetheless, her hymn has resonated in the decade since 9/11 with an American militarism whose rhetoric is authorized, as was hers, by religious and visual certitude.

Conversely, the contemporary political resonances of Her seem very different. The period in which Howe drafted The Hermaphrodite was one in which this figure was undergoing a shift in its cultural construction, from being condemned as a demonic “monster” to being scrutinized as a medical problem. Hermaphrodites were increasingly seen as the purview of doctors, who codified this figure, later in the century, in punitive ways related to the simultaneous codification of “the homosexual.” In the twentieth century, people identified as hermaphrodites were often subjected to surgery whose goal was to produce normatively heterosexual as well as sexed persons. Since the early 1990s, however, there has been a radical challenge to this approach, with the emergence of a new identity-politics movement. Rejecting the term “hermaphrodite,” individuals who identify as “intersex” speak for themselves, and they reject being seen as corporeal problems to which there are inevitably surgical solutions. Alice Domurat Dreger characterizes this transformation as “intersex in the age of ethics,” while Cheryl Chase, founder of the Intersex Society of North America, reclaims the older term in the form of “hermaphrodites with attitude.” This political movement continues to develop—in the last few years, the term “intersex” has itself been challenged—but the political
and ethical resistance to the long-standing demonization of the hermaphrodite remains firm.3

In this context, Howe's novel offers an early expression of this resistance, particularly in its focus on the theme of vision. Historically, the movement to identify and then surgically “fix” hermaphrodites was closely tied to visual technologies. Their bodies were sketched, exhibited, and, especially, photographed in a variety of dehumanizing ways: for example, sometimes the genitals of intersexed people were photographed, with hands that held the genitals for maximum display clearly visible in the photograph; sometimes bodies were photographed naked, with a black band obscuring the eyes, a tactic that was presumably intended to protect anonymity but that made it impossible for the person to gaze back.4 These photographs were, in turn, part of a continuum of coercive one-way gazes on “extraordinary bodies” in nineteenth-century America, from the commodified voyeurism of the freak show to the triumphant pedagogy of illumination—close to home for Julia Ward Howe—whereby Dr. Samuel Howe made visible, reshaped, and displayed the mind and soul of his blind female student, Laura Bridgman.5 Julia Ward Howe's Her captures the violations imposed by vision for the extraordinary body of the intersexed person, rendering those violations in the vocabulary of monstrosity: “[Emma] saw [my] bearded lip and earnest brow, but she saw also the falling shoulders, slender neck, and rounded bosom . . . [and] she murmured: “monster!” (Howe, H 19). The novel's gothic language recognizes that to the intersexed person, vision may be violence. In its critique of the policing power of the gaze of others, the novel as a whole looks toward an era in which persons termed hermaphrodites would be the self-represented and self-voiced subjects of their own stories.

One political path from Howe's writing, then, seems to lead to Iraq and another to intersex—or, to put it another way, one seems to lead to the militarism of a fixed body politic and another to the radicalism of a movement for unfixed bodies. But this dichotomy is too sharp, for several reasons. One is that Howe's novel does not address itself to intersex as a lived experience; its concern is in the figure of the hermaphrodite as literary metaphor, trope, or conceit. The use of the hermaphrodite as a literary metaphor has its own history and its own contemporary popularity. The best-known contemporary literary hermaphrodite is the protagonist of Jeffrey Eugenides's novel Middlesex, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2002 and was selected by Oprah Winfrey for her book club in 2007. This novel uses its intersexed woman protagonist as a metaphor for other themes, such as the changeable fate of the immigrant in America. The protagonist is less an intersexed person than a male novelist's idea of a woman with a twist, as Eugenides himself has sug-
gested: “I don’t think women are mysterious, or at least I don’t want them to be. That was the whole ‘Star Trek’ idea behind my ‘hermaphroditic’ narrator in the first place. To go where no man has gone before” (quoted in Garner 26). This remark reduces intersexed person to “‘hermaphroditic’ narrator,” and both to a flippant exercise of science-fiction exploration in which the goal is “to go”—to boldly go, in the famous split infinitive of Star Trek—“where no man has gone before.” If the violations of surgery are no longer seen as automatic for intersex in the age of ethics, then these remarks suggest the continuing need for novelists to rethink the ethics of representation, intersexual and otherwise, in their fiction.6

Howe did not, of course, make such proto-Star Trek claims. Her is self-conscious in stressing the hermaphrodite as an artistic representation, as in the introductory reference to the sculptural “‘hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese.’”7 There was, moreover, no public community of intersexed individuals at the time for her to ignore in writing her novel, as Eugenides did in writing his. But like Eugenides, she too participates in a tradition of viewing the figure of the hermaphrodite from outside, rather than inside, and as figure, rather than ground. It seems important, in bringing Howe’s hermaphrodite up to the age of intersex, to register the distance—and potentially the tension—between Howe’s novel and the lived experience of ambiguously sexed persons in the era in which she wrote, as well as today.

At the same time, it is possible to bring Howe’s “Hymn” closer to a tradition of political dissent. Howe was an abolitionist, and “Hymn” was written in opposition to slavery, as in the line “As [Christ] died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” The song, moreover, combined the lyrics of Howe’s poem with the melody of “John Brown’s Body,” a song whose commemoration of the radical antislavery activist intrinsically evoked racial struggle. The song’s link to this struggle has been recovered in a variety of ways, most famously in Martin Luther King’s 1965 speech, “Our God is Marching On.” Dr. King ended this speech by directly quoting the opening verse of “Hymn,” as an answer to his famous question “How long? Not long, ’cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” Moving forward by looking back, King turned Howe into “How long,” and adapted the idea of truth “marching on” to the civil rights activists literally walking, that week, from Montgomery to Selma.8

There is also a more unfixed cultural history of “Hymn,” one in which its words are subjected to the radical revisions of parody. The “Hymn” has been rewritten many times. For example, Mark Twain parodied it to express his opposition to U.S. imperialism in the Philippines. His version, entitled “The Battle Hymn of the Republic (Brought Down to Date),” begins:
Mine eyes have seen the orgy of the launching of the Sword; 
He is searching out the hoardings where the stranger’s wealth is stored; 
He has loosed his fateful lightnings, and with woe and death has scored; 
His lust is marching on. (Twain 474)

Twain uses Howe’s “Hymn” to condemn U.S. imperialism as capitalist greed; military intervention is a matter of “Sword” and “stranger’s wealth,” its “lust” for money and power. Elsewhere in the parody, Twain reinforces this critique by changing the refrain to “Lo, Greed is marching on,” and he ends, “As Christ died to make men holy, let men die to make us rich— / Our god is marching on.” The force of the parody derives not only from the overt irreverence of Twain’s content, but also, in formal terms, by his inversions of Howe’s well-known rhythms. The echo of “Lord” in “Sword,” for example, deepens Twain’s critique of militarism as a form of blasphemy, while “orgy” gains in satirical force from its shocking resemblance to “glory.”

Not all parodies of “Hymn” have such identifiably radical goals. For example, one version of the schoolchild’s parody of “Hymn” begins, “My eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school: / We have tortured every teacher, we have broken every rule. / We have thrown away our homework and we hanged the principal. / Our school is burning down.” The anti-authoritarian fantasies of this parody are playful, but they may seem chilling in a twenty-first century world after Columbine, Virginia Tech, and other American episodes of gun violence committed by young people in school settings. Another version of this child’s parody makes its gunplay more disturbingly explicit: “Glory, glory hallelujah, / Teacher hit me with a ruler. / I met her at the door / With a loaded .44 / And she ain’t my teacher no more.” Whatever their divergent political effects, however, parodies of “Hymn” suggest the effectiveness of inverting a song so grounded in certitude thematically and so well-known formally. Parody, suggests Linda Hutcheon, is “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (Hutcheon 6). Parodies of “Hymn” imitate through ironic inversion, strengthening as they transform the terms and cadences of Howe’s text.

These parodic vocabularies seem distant from the world of Howe. But we may see several aspects of The Hermaphrodite, I suggest, as contributing to the destabilization of “Battle Hymn of the Republic” effected more overtly in parodies. The grafting of Howe’s lyrics onto the melody of “John Brown’s Body” itself effects a form of gender duality: a song about the dead body of a male radical—“John Brown’s body lies a-moulderin’ in the grave”—becomes the live body, and especially the seeing eyes, of the viewer who is at least poten-
tially female. The earlier novel thus supplies a name—“hermaphrodite”—for the combination of male and female bodies inscribed in the form of the song.

The hermaphrodite theme also has strong symbolic connections to the idea of parody. Contemporary cultural theory links the performance of gender to the operations of parody, but there are also more historically grounded ways to make this connection as well. In 1840s America, hermaphrodites were associated not only with monstrosity and medical error but with duplicity; the person whose gender could not be read reliably was an exaggerated version of that paradigmatically untrustworthy figure, the confidence man (Reis 30–36). To the extent that others are puzzled, deceived, or misled by Laurence, the novel enters into the terrain of the confidence man. In this context, The Hermaphrodite is representative of the uncertainties and shiftiness of the new republic; it is closer to Twain’s later parody than Howe’s own piety.

Finally, although The Hermaphrodite has a vaguely European setting, when America does appear in the novel, it does so in a way that disorients the straightforward coordinates of “Hymn.” Late in the novel, Count Berto’s sister, Nina, who has gone insane missing her lover, Gaetano, fantasizes to Laurence that Gaetano is exploring North America. “He is on the Mississippi today,” she would say, or on another occasion: ‘something tells me that he is this moment looking on the Niagara’” (Howe, H 138). Nina locates herself in this fantasy, telling Laurence, “I have made the whole journey with him . . . do you not see our bark canoe, and the Canadian guides?” (Howe, H 139). In such passages, Howe represents a blurry North America, topographically organized by features like rivers, rather than the political borders of the United States. Like the speaker of “Hymn,” Nina sees this space clearly, but her visual certitude is born not of piety but of madness; this is a world in which a woman asks, “do you not see our bark canoe[?]” rather than declaring, “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” Gaetano is “marching on,” but his march is unmoored from either piety or logic: “She has, apparently, no knowledge of external facts, no thought beyond the dream life in which she dwells, with her phantom lover” (Howe, H 140). This is America as “dream life,” a psychic space without fixed meanings, subject to constant, lovesick reinvention.

Like parodies of “Hymn,” then, these passages from Her engage in ironic inversions of America. To put it another way, as a predecessor of “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” The Hermaphrodite offers its own anticipatory parody. In this as in other ways, Her points us toward the complexity of “Hymn,” of Howe, and of the republic for which Julia Ward Howe has come to stand. The question of how to view Howe now, after The Hermaphrodite, remains
open. Its answers will be inseparable from the unfolding exploration of what the body and the body politic were like in Howe's era, as well as of how they are—and will be—in ours.

Notes

1. The poem first appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1862. It was published without a named author but quickly became identified with Howe. For discussions of the poem and song, see Grant 136–39; Nudelman 165–68; Randall, “A Censorship of Forgetting”; Williams, *IH* 207–12; Ziegler 97–100; and Faith Barrett, “To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave”: *American Poetry and the Civil War* (U Massachusetts Pr, forthcoming).


3. Dreger, *Intersex in the Age of Ethics*; Chase, “Hermaphrodites with Attitude.” The term “intersex” has been supplanted, for some, by “Disorders of Sex Development” (DSD); for recent discussions of the term and other intersex political issues, see Morland, ed., *Intersex and After* and Holmes, ed., *Critical Intersex*. On the history of the figure of the hermaphrodite and of intersex, see Dreger, *Hermaphrodites and the Medical Invention of Sex*, and Reis.

4. On photographs that included hands, see Dreger, *Hermaphrodites* 51–78; on photographs with eyes blocked out, see Sharon E. Preves 68–72.

5. On freak shows, see Garland-Thomson, ed., *Freakery* (1996), and Adams; on Bridgman, see Bergland, “Cold Stone: Sex and Sculpture in *The Hermaphrodite*” (in this volume), and Freeberg.

6. For a critique of *Middlesex*, see Rachel Carroll. For a more positive assessment, see Dreger and Herndon, “Progress and Politics in the Intersex Rights Movement” 207.

7. For a discussion of the symbolic dimensions of the hermaphrodite in this image, and in the work's title, see Luciano's essay in this volume, “Unrealized: The Queer Time of *The Hermaphrodite*.”


10. Both versions are included in Sherman and Weisskop 103, 104.

11. For analyses of the relationship between the two songs, see Nudelman 165–68 and Randall.

12. For a complementary discussion of the imagery of America in the novel, see Klimasmith's essay in this volume, “Never the Half of Another’: Figuring and Foreclosing Marriage in *The Hermaphrodite*.”
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