

## Reviews

Julia Ward Howe, *The Hermaphrodite*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004 (In the series Legacies of Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers). 208 pages; ISBN: HB 080322415X; \$ 19.95

“I speak not as a moralist, but as an aesthetic philosopher”  
– Julia Ward Howe, *The Hermaphrodite*, 155.

The passage above speaks to one of the ways in which Julia Ward Howe’s manuscript, probably started in 1846–47 in Boston, and reconstructed and published for the first time in 2004 by Gary Williams as *The Hermaphrodite*, may have been “unlike anything of its time – or, in truth, of our own,” as Williams states on the book jacket. In terms of plot, it can be read as a melodramatic page-turner. In terms of characterization and the imaginative ways in which it integrates a variety of gendered discourses of its time (literary, historical, aesthetic, religious, and cultural), the text is surprisingly relevant to debates in our time around the relationships between gender, genre, literature, and lived experience.

Howe (1819–1910) is best remembered in the popular imagination for “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”<sup>1</sup> Known widely in her lifetime for her advocacy for race and gender equality, she was a prolific poet, public speaker, and essayist who wrote far more than she published.<sup>2</sup> The manuscript that comprises *The Hermaphrodite*, according to Williams, was most likely not intended for publication, and in Victorian America would have been unpublishable. Written during the early years of Howe’s marriage and motherhood, its function as a work in process, Williams argues, was likely a therapeutic one (Hungry Heart 99). During these years she struggled to define her identity apart from her husband, who showed considerably more devotion to philanthropic causes, and to his best friend Charles Sumner, than to her (xxi).<sup>3</sup> In his insightful and integrative introduction, “Speaking with the Voices of Others,” Williams argues that the tone and thematic focus of the Laurence manuscript reveals the tremendous creative energy Howe used to reconcile her conflicted emotions and thoughts about her marriage. The trope of the hermaphrodite provided the means for her to construct a “projection of both her husband and herself” (xxxvii), and writing the novel, suggests Williams, enabled her “to occupy a speculative region otherwise inaccessible in her historical moment, especially to American women” (xxxvii).

1. The poem was first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in February 1862. Mary Grant, *Private Woman, Public Person: An Account of the Life of Julia Ward Howe from 1819 to 1868* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1994) 139.

2. See Grant 248–250.

3. See also Grant 72.

Although hermaphroditic and androgynous figures are prominent in Renaissance and Romantic European literature, such was not the case in nineteenth-century America, where the phenomenon was primarily understood in medical and legal terms.<sup>4</sup> It therefore might come as a surprise to modern readers to find such a figure occupying so central a role in the writing of a young mother in Boston in the 1840s. Yet Howe found ways of developing her intellectual and aesthetic passions independently of the Victorian world represented by her husband's wishes for her behavior. As letters between Howe and her brother, Sam Ward, during the 1830s and 1840s indicate, the two supported each other intellectually. Ward brought her a number contemporary novels from his four-year European sojourn (xi) that addressed the issue of androgyny: various novels by George Sand, Honoré de Balzac's *Seraphita*, and Théophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and Alphonse de Lamartine's *Jocelyn* (xiii). Howe and her brother most likely discussed the copy of the well-known Greek statue, *The Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, on display in the Villa Borghese in Rome, as well as paintings by Buonvicini of Ovid's story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis (xxviii). All of these are likely sources for Howe's protagonist, Laurence.

Williams's project of integrating the materials housed at Harvard University's Houghton Library into a single continuous narrative derived from his belief that Howe intended to weave them together herself, even if she didn't intend to publish the book (xlv). He organizes her work to create the chronological and thematic coherence he discerns, but also to reflect the fragmentation, the discontinuities, and the in-progress state of the original manuscript. Reconstructed, the text consists of three parts with twenty-four untitled chapters. In places these break off in the middle of a paragraph, or even in the middle of a sentence, and Williams retains Howe's spelling errors. There are also two appendices with alternative versions of parts of the body of the text, and italicized commentary by Williams at the beginning of each of the three parts. The result is a novel which invites the reader to interact with the Laurence manuscript as a multilayered "writerly" work. Its discontinuities in time and place resemble the lack of narrative closure, and the nonchronological time sequences of modernist and postmodernist fiction. At the same time, the fragmentations in Howe's text do not detract from *The Hermaphrodite's* overall sense of coherence as a *Bildungsroman*.

Part I (3-89) describes and explores the cultural politics of the protagonist's ambiguous gender identity. For example, in the opening lines of the narrative the reader learns that patriarchal structures set the terms for his being baptized and named as a male: "[...] 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 [...]"(3). Laurence narrates his early life in Germany at a boarding school, his

4. Williams, *Hungry Heart: The Literary Emergence of Julia Ward Howe* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999) 95. Pulitzer Prize winning Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (New York: Picador, 2003) is a good example of the genetic and more directly sexual emphasis in twentieth and twenty-first century representations.

return to his family, and his troubled relationship with his father, gives a somewhat cryptic portrayal of his two sisters (one who married for money, the other for love), and a more sympathetic account of his first meeting with his younger brother. At boarding school Laurence distinguishes himself by his ability to write poetry, which he wins a school prize for, and his beautiful physical feature, which attract the attention of both women and men. Emotionally, however, he appears unapproachable. This makes him all the more enigmatic and attractive to Emma P, who is the first character to fall in love with Laurence. The affair ends tragically when she recognizes that the object of her affection and longing is only apparently a man. When Laurence returns home to his coldhearted father, he collects a small sum on which he plans to survive, and then embarks on a period of solitary wandering and soul-searching in the forest. He finds temporary refuge in a hermitage, then develops an intimate relationship with Ronald, a sixteen-year-old boy, and shuns the company of all women. The first part of the book ends as Ronald collapses to the floor, drunk and in love with Laurence, who once more is unable to give himself to the passion Ronald desires. As a whole in Part I, Howe characterizes the pain of Laurence's situation as a being who falls between conventional discourses, since it is Laurence's "otherness" that paradoxically makes him attractive to both women and men. Despite her melodramatic style and formulaic uses of sensational images of dark woods, castles, disenfranchised sons, and Roman noblemen, Howe uses this part of the narrative to explore her protagonist's interior pain as a subject whose ambiguous and ambivalent gender identity makes him at the same time a solitary, and a socially sought-after character.

In Part II (93-160) the narrator's critical stance toward patriarchal structures becomes more direct and nuanced. This section will be the most relevant for readers interested in Howe's critique of nineteenth-century American discourses of gender, and of the three sections in the text, it anticipates what Howe would later characterize as her "conversion" to women's rights activism in the 1860s.<sup>5</sup> For example, as Laurence is mentally preparing to take on his new identity as a woman (which he resists), he reflects:

Women, the adored of all, but trusted of none; women, the golden treasures, too easily lost or stolen, and therefore to be kept under lock and key, women, who cannot stay at home without surveillance, who cannot walk abroad without being interrogated at every turn by the sentinel of public opinion; women, I say, 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. (131)

In the events that follow, Howe develops comical images of cross-dressing which although set in Rome, closely resemble the situation for women in nineteenth-century Victorian America. At this point in the novel, Laurence not only has moved from Germany to Rome, he also has gained a new, older companion, the nobleman Berto (whom the reader learns is the nephew of the Count who built the hermitage where

5. Grant 95.

Laurence lived in the first part). Under Berto's apprenticeship, Laurence develops his own identity without the emotional demands and unrealizable expectations placed on him by both women and men in Part I. Most important to both the plot and theme, however, is the means through which Berto assumes responsibility for Laurence's education in life. The situation he prepares for Laurence is dramatic both in a literal and figurative sense, considering that the last close relationship Laurence had with a woman evidently killed her. Berto arranges for Laurence to dress and live as a woman with Berto's three sisters because, as Berto asserts, Laurence must learn "to see men as women see them, and no less [...] see women as they appear to each other, divested of the moral corset de précaution in which they always shew themselves to men" (133). In subsequent events, Laurence's relationships with Berto's three sisters are alternatively affectionate, critical, and comic. Perhaps most striking is the cultural commentary they enable the author to develop on various strategies used by nineteenth-century women to survive within the prevailing gender codes. For example, Laurence observes that

while Briseida valued chiefly the praise of those who were in sympathy with herself, and brought such honours as she received, as offerings to the altar of her love, the Gigia coldly counted up her gains, and calculated how each success should become the stepping stone to another (155).

The third sister, Nina is the least realistically portrayed of the three sisters, but also the most imaginative (and comic) parody of the male codes of chivalry. Of the three, she is "the only one of the trio who had loved, [and] was the only one whose solitude was unconsolated by the bodily presence of a lover" (150). Yet she is able to imagine in great detail the exact location and activities of her absent lover who, because of his "suspected liberal opinions," has been exiled to America (137). As such Nina perhaps represents best the power of the imagination to ensure survival through her attachment to illusions, and her character is also the most parodied representation of a woman who has internalized society's ideals for love and marriage.

Although all three parts of the book include embedded narratives, the story of Eva and Rafael, "Ashes of an angel's heart" in Part III (163-198) is the longest and most stylistically developed of these. It mirrors both Nina's story and the author's view of the ideal Laurence could represent in a utopian world where patience, self-sacrifice and devoted love might lead to a hope for love after death. (As numerous scholars of nineteenth-century women's fiction have demonstrated, death is the inevitable fate for women who refuse to achieve marriage and motherhood.) This hope is represented in the miraculous blooming of a purple flower on the grave of Eva's dead lover Rafael. Also in Part III, Berto reveals "Cecilia's" identity as Laurence to the sisters, who accept the new knowledge with humor and recognition. As Nina remarks when Berto asks her whether Cecilia is a woman, "Not altogether." – "is she a man?" – "almost." "How is that?" – "no man can feel as she feels, no woman can reason as she reasons" (189). Ronald reappears toward the end of the third section, confesses his still lingering affection for Laurence, but qualifies his devotion by saying that he

henceforth can agree to interact with Laurence during the day, but not at night. Laurence falls ill then, and the reader suspects that he dies of a broken heart. Yet his deathbed hallucinations provide him, Briseida, Berto, and the reader the occasion to reflect on the enigma of his identity. Briseida evidently speaks for Howe when she draws on Swedenborgian mysticism to characterize Laurence as 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 its brethren around it" (195-6).<sup>6</sup>

Williams's "Note on the Text" (xlv-xlvi) explains that the "Laurence manuscript" is actually several manuscripts written over about a decade. Williams previously discussed them in part of a chapter in his book *Hungry Heart*, a study which explored various gendered, historical and autobiographical contexts surrounding Howe's first published collection of poetry, *Passion Flowers*. In *Hungry Heart*, Williams devoted part of one chapter to the Laurence manuscript, describing the narrative and making a case for its status as an encoded autobiography.<sup>7</sup> His introduction to *The Hermaphrodite* reinforces and repeats parts of his earlier argument about the autobiographical impulses in the work, including its significant differences from the account given in her published autobiography, *Reminiscences* (1899) (xxiii). But Williams' introduction also significantly expands on his earlier discussion with a much more extensive analysis of the range of historical, theological, aesthetic, and literary historical discourses that shaped the novel.

Scholars, teachers, and students of American studies are fortunate that Williams has edited, published, and introduced contemporary readers to Julia Ward Howe's Laurence manuscripts. *The Hermaphrodite* opens new perspectives on Julia Ward Howe. In this novel we hear the voice of the author as an important intellectual, and an astute critique of American culture who would later gain acclaim as an exemplary advocate for the rights of African Americans and women. In short, the work suggests refreshingly new ways of thinking about the struggles of both women and men in nineteenth century America to ensure their survival within the ideological order Barbara Welter termed the "cult of true womanhood."<sup>8</sup>

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6. Williams includes two relevant sources for understanding American antebellum thinking about Emmanuel Swedenborg, J.J. Garth Wilkinson's *Emmanuel Swedenborg: A Biography* (Boston: Otis Clapp, 1849); and George Bush's *Statement of Reasons for Embracing the Doctrines and Disclosures of Emmanuel Swedenborg* (New York: John Allen, 1846), xIii. See also Grant 117-118.

7. Williams, *Hungry Heart* 80-105. Grant also discusses Howe's *Reminiscences* as a conventionally instructive nineteenth-century autobiography (241).

8. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151-174.