**Out of Place: Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite* in Nineteenth-century Literature**

"…then only did I learn all that I was, and was not, and this fearful lesson has occupied my whole life," Julia Ward Howe, *The Hermaphrodite* (1846).

Anyone who knows me can testify to my penchant for queer literature and queer theory. In my initial quest to find the root of queer literature within American literature, I was surprised to stumble upon *The Hermaphrodite* by Julia Howe Ward (sometimes referred to as the Laurence Manuscript). I was even more surprised to find that it was discussed little in the lexicon of queer American literature. Thought to be written in 1846, lost for over a hundred years, and finally published in 2004, *The Hermaphrodite* seemed to me markedly out of place, which is likely why Howe didn't publish it at the time. Many a scholar has contemplated the unfinished manuscripts meaning, attempting to untangle the twisted themes and thoughts and bodies. Throughout my research, I found several patterns in the scholarship which has helped me understand just what *The Hermaphrodite* was doing in the 19th century, as well as explain the text and its purpose as a whole. Some of the patterns or typical discussions I found included: (a) historical discussions on hermaphrodism and 19th-century American thoughts on hermaphrodism, (b) the idea that, to love the hermaphrodite meant losing oneself, (c) that sexual desires and attraction are what makes someone a person, (d) that the main character, Laurence, was not neither genders, but rather both genders, (e) that Laurence was representative of a divine, complete, and whole being as he was both genders, (f) that Laurence is asexual, (g) that Laurence is a savior/Christ figure, along with other religious motifs.

**The Historical Hermaphrodite**

A proper and complete historical account of how people were feeling about intersex individuals seems impossible to craft, but I will attempt to surmise it from a variety of sources for a complete view. Gary Williams, the novel's eventual publisher, felt that the text could provide "a basis for new speculation about the nineteenth century's understanding of gender assignment" (Bergland). The term "hermaphrodite" was used in 19th-century discourse to describe a variety of things, including "the transcendence of sex and gender, the zenith of heterosexual love, a primordial human body, sexual voyeurism, lesbianism, homosexuality, deformity, deviance, deception, and debauchery," (Ashworth). It was used often for an assortment of meanings, making narrowing down its place in 19th-century literature tricky. Suzanne Ashworth discusses the medical discourse of the 19th century regarding hermaphroditic bodies in her piece ""No Man, No Woman, Nothing": Desire And Subjectivity In Julia Ward Howe's the Hermaphrodite." She, along with other scholars, discuss how proper, complete, and sure assignment of sex was important at this time. Doctors could not leave the sex/gender ambiguous. It was necessary for people to fit into the binary. Even going so far as to conduct "interventionist surgeries" to correct any uncertainty (Ashworth). This was partially driven by the prospect of a suitable and acceptable marriage that could be properly consummated, and in which the woman could perform her principal purpose of the time, baring children.

Ashworth adds that, as the century progressed, physicians put greater emphasis on the patient's sexual desire and preference in order to medically determine "true sex" and later "surgical correction" (Ashworth). "To avoid marital blunders and sexual failure, specialists encouraged parents to raise intersex children as male, arguing that puberty would reveal the

body's erotic penchants, faculties, and marriageability before a "No Man, No Woman, Nothing" thwarted wedding night" (Bodies 48, as cited in Ashworth). This could explain Howe's choice to have her main character be raised as a man if it was the common recommendation of the time. In addition, being raised a man would afford Laurence more opportunities and options in his life, as he wouldn't be confined to the domestic sphere of womanhood and would have the autonomy to make his own choices.

Later on in the piece, Ashworth cites Reis' "Hermaphrodites" that early American's believed "that hermaphrodites were really women with insatiable sexual appetites and enlarged clitorises." In line with this type of thinking, as women and men were confined to specific social spheres, women who stepped out of those bounds—typically female writers or others who broke from the cult of true womanhood—were frequently labeled unwomanly, unfeminine, and often garnered the term hermaphrodite or said to have hermaphroditic tendencies/qualities (Bergmann & Hippler). The term was always used derogatorily, to describe something monstrous. Patterson argues in her article, ""Hermaphroditish Disturbers Of The Peace": Rufus Griswold, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, And Nineteenth-Century Discourses Of Ambiguous Sex," that the practice of describing independent women has hermaphroditic in the 19th century is related to "larger cultural anxieties about changing gender roles," especially about the loss of "male control over the actions of women in the public sphere" (Patterson). Patterson goes on to reference Dreger as having noted that, whenever there was an increase in references of hermaphroditism in public discourse, it was likely during "a period in which sex/gender roles are being challenged" (Patterson).

So, the term was not rare. Patterson explains that the term was freely circulated in newspapers and magazines at the time. "…its use varying from the literal and mundane—the word described a particular class of sailing ships—to the more figurative: an oddly shaped building addition, a wavering politician, or a newly launched newspaper of dubious intentions might also be dubbed 'hermaphroditic'" (Patterson). As mentioned above, it was often used as a synonym for words such as "deformity, deviance, deception…debauchery," etc. In addition, newspapers began publishing sensationalized stories about monstrous, hermaphroditic bodies and crimes of a sexual nature, which gained great public reactions.

> "Stories about gender-deviant women seem to elicit the greatest anxiety, as their actions directly challenge the dominant ideology of separate spheres and male dominance of the public arena. For this reason, women who took on the heretofore primarily masculine roles of authors and public speakers came under greatest attack" (Patterson).

So, hermaphrodism was both a source of outrage and fascination for the 19th-century audience. Julia Ward Howe would have likely seen herself in many of the women coming under attack at this time, as a prominent woman author.

Upon further research, it became clear that hermaphrodism and the discussion of it were not as strange and out of place at the time as I may have originally assumed. Bergmann and Hippler remark that the cultural trope of the hermaphrodite was common in the 19th century. "…the Laurence manuscript is heavily inspired by numerous and diverse literary and cultural influences which are concerned with hermaphrodism, androgyny, and cross-dressing, such as Plato, Ovid, William Shakespeare, Emanuel Swedenborg, George Sand, Théophile Gautier, Margaret Fuller, and Charlotte Cushman" (Bergmann and Hippler). Author Jessica L.

Lewis-Turner takes this idea one step further in her piece "Fantasizing Hermaphroditism: Two-Sexed Metaphors In Nineteenth-Century American Literature And Culture". As the title may suggest, she postulates that the hermaphrodite was, in fact, a fantasy for 19th-century authors, that the prospect of "true hermaphroditism" inspired both fear and pleasure as it remained a prevalent topic in both fictional and non-fictional texts. She adds that, by fantasizing about the hermaphrodite, these authors would have to acknowledge that the sexual binary, along with other social rules they perceive to be inherent, may, in fact, be unstable and eventually undermined.

For Howe's manuscript, Lewis-Turner argues that it reveals a "vision of the hermaphrodite as a model for the perfect marriage," an ideal union of man and woman within one body. This idea will be explored further later on, as it was prevalent in several pieces of research. Lewis-Turner broke down several texts from the 1800s within her dissertation regarding hermaphrodism as a fantasized ideal, directly contradicting the common discourse of hermaphrodism as undesirable and monstrous. To sum up 19$^{th}$-century cultural beliefs and discourse of hermaphrodism, medical professionals aimed to diagnose a patients "true sex" in order to reestablish the sexual binary, the term was almost always used pejoratively, it was used to control and demean independent women, usually writers, but it is possible hermaphrodism was a secret, fantasized ideal for some authors, Howe included.

**Patterns in Scholarship**

*To Love the Hermaphrodite*

There is a common idea in the scholarship I collected that, by loving Laurence (or any hermaphrodite), one will be consumed by them and/or cease to exist. A pinnacle part of the

manuscript's plot is the doomed relationship between Laurence and Emma von P, a wealthy, independent widow who desires him deeply and unabashedly. Upon learning of his intersexed state, Emma utters “monster!” and is so shocked, she soon dies (Howe). She ceases to exist. In a similar, but more metaphorical, way 16-year-old Ronald is later driven near mad with lust for Laurence and attempts to rape him. He is “the demonized youth, strong with the strength of madness,” (Howe, 87). He is then turned into a mere ghost and made to wander the land “long, oh so far, oh so wide” (Howe, 190) as he is tormented by demons.

Both of Laurence’s would-be lovers are turned into monsters for loving him. Emma becomes sexually aggressive, and Ronald becomes a homosexual, both an “aberrant or inappropriate craving” or behavior that turns them into as much of a "sexual other" and social deviant as Laurence is (Ashworth). When Ronald is rendered unconscious after trying to rape Laurence, he is likened to marble (Howe, 88), a motif constantly and consistently attributed to Laurence. In addition, before Emma dies, she utters a scream like “that of Medusa,” furthering the stone imagery. Advancing this idea that Laurence’s lovers become “like him,” as he is also attributed stone-like qualities. Derek Bedenbaugh points out that Emma’s desires are equally homosexual, as Laurence is both genders. “When she realizes that she desires another female body, Emma begins “foaming and writhing”—a sign that her own body, the locus of her gender and sexual identity, has slipped beyond her control…in desiring Laurence’s body, Emma has become similarly “monstrous” and therefore outside social norms” (Bedenbaugh). Emma dies and Ronald becomes a wandering ghost; becomes nothing.

Ashworth remarks on the parallels between Howe’s depiction of Emma von P and Ovid’s *Metamorphosis,* in which 15-year-old Hermaphroditus is lusted after by the water nymph,

Salmacis. Like Laurence, Hermaphroditus does not understand this as he is sexually and romantically ignorant. Like Emma, Salmacis cannot contain her desire for Hermaphroditus, she longs to possess him, to be his bride. In a moment of volatile, overwhelming lust, Salmacis attacks him, wrapping her body around his in an unbreakable hold. She prays for their union to be eternal, and the gods grant her wish, fusing their two bodies into "a single face a form so that they were no longer one woman and one man, but 'seemed neither and seemed both'" (Mandelbaum, as cited in Ashworth). At this moment, Salmacis effectively disappears, "annihilated in name and body" (Weil). Her desire for Hermaphroditus results in her own immolation, as does Emma's desire for Laurence. Ashworth put it poetically:

> Emma and Laurence are inextricably linked, bound by the physical and psychological implications of her desire. Thus, Emma's encounter with monstrous incomprehensibility leads to a radical shattering of her body, sexuality, and self. And yet, that shattering, whatever its revolutionary potential, annihilates her. Emma meets the monster, loses her mind, and dies.

To love the hermaphrodite is to both become a monster yourself and to then lose yourself entirely, consumed by your unholy desires and by the "other," the "ahuman" that the hermaphrodite represents.

*To Love; to be Human*

An even more common pattern in scholarship, and possible in the 19th century, was this idea that sexual and romantic desire is what made someone a person and that without it, they were "no man, no woman, nothing" (Howe, 22). Ashworth states that "without gender to organize his desire, and without desire to organize his gender," Laurence is nothing and lacks the

ability to connect which would make him a “viable social subject" within the dual-gender system. Without desire, he lacks identity, which further obstructs his social life. Ashworth further postulates that Laurence’s desirelessness frustrates his very personhood. He could have potentially found personhood in his relationship with Ronald. Laurence admits he does love him, something he hasn’t felt before. Ronald offers for Laurence to “be a man to all the world…but a woman” to him. He sees this offer as a type of freedom, as he says:

> “I am weary of seeing you thus encased, thus imprisoned—do off, do off these hated garments, which wrong your heavenly grace and beauty—float before me, swan-like, in loose, light robes—throw off the narrow bondage of that vest—let your heart beat freely, let your bosom heave high, heave wildly, till the very remembrance of my sorrow be buried beneath its white waves” (Howe, 86).

Ronald sees Laurence's masculinity as a cage imprisoning him. This is quite contrasted by other scholarly regarding the freedom of the sexes at this time. Bedenbaugh remarks that Ronald desires to have control over Laurence by making him into a woman. Regardless, Ashworth maintains that Ronald would have allowed Laurence to a sexual being and thus, fulfilled and human.

Keeping with the idea that without desire means one is without gender and thus without personhood, Bedenbaugh (and others) ponder the incomplete nature of Howe’s manuscript, namely in that first missing page. The very beginning of the text would likely chronicle Laurence's life before his physical form and behaviors directly and clearly presented as “male.” As page two begins in a place where Laurence’s gender has more or less been agreed upon, Bedenbaugh argues that Howe’s “decision to erase or leave blank whatever came before these

initial lines suggest that, on some level, she realized that an ambiguous body could only enter Victorian plots if it assumed a stable male or female identity." In short, Laurence had to have at least a tentative sex/gender in order for American readers to accept him at all, and for him to exist in, as Bedenbaugh puts it, a "Victorian plot," as the text is set somewhere in Europe. Thus, having a gender is directly linked to having personhood, according to this scholarship.

This connection between one being sexual and one being a person can be seen in the historical views of hermaphrodism. Sexual morphology refers to the physical externalization of sexual preference, which becomes "evident in dress, preferred sexual positions," sex drive, the location of sexual sensation, sexual effectiveness, etc. Reis' work suggests that the early 19th century put more stake in a hermaphrodite's sexual morphology to determine personhood (Ashworth). Thus, this line of thinking by Ashworth is backed up by historical accounts.

*The Ideal Marriage*

As a bit of an opposing view to the above section, much scholarship attributed Laurence as this complete and whole person, as an ideal of both man and woman. Bergmann and Hippler felt that Howe's manuscript "protests the binary understanding of femininity and masculinity and calls for an ideal of human beings who are truly androgynous, who are 'combining in the spiritual nature all that is most attractive in either sex'." Lewis-Turner discusses essays Howe wrote in which she remarked that people were born as one half and needed to become complete through marriage to the opposite gender. Howe writes Laurence as a kind of androgynous ideal: being unnaturally beautiful and embodying the ideal characteristics of both genders.

In Bedenbaugh's "Novel Violations: The Hermaphrodite And The Failure Of Form", he ponders what would become of marriage plots and property inheritance plots common in

19th-century fiction if hermaphroditic forms became the norm, as these plots rely on clear and stably gendered bodies. Laurence's body, according to Bedenbaugh, renders the marriage plot impossible but also enables other plotlines. Emma and Laurence's relationship presents the most obvious potential for a marriage plot, seeming heterosexual, but Laurence's body frustrates this possibility. "…Emma recognizes that Laurence's body is not that of a male lover who will reciprocate her affections, affirm her femininity, and enable the consummation of a marriage plot" (Bedenbaugh). Lewis-Turner critiques Ashworth's earlier claim that Laurence's lack of single-gender prevents him from existing in society, as Ashworth failed to consider the "theme of heterosexual marriage" within the text. Lewis-Turner argues that Laurence's "two-sexed body" presents an ideal for the individual and for a marriage and that Howe used her manuscript to critique "19th-century American views of heterosexual marriage." Within Laurence, she argues, the text's marriage plot is fulfilled, as is marriage's promise of wholeness. Through this, it can be said that Laurence is not a listless, shapeless monster, but an ideal, something whole and complete, a higher form of physical being. He is not "no man, no woman, nothing," but rather both; all.

*The Asexual Icon*

There was a pattern I was reading in almost all of my sources that wasn't being directly stated, and I never would have linked it together if not for one article: ""For He Never Makes Love": Reclaiming Asexual Representation In Julia Ward Howe's The Hermaphrodite" by Saffyre Falkenberg. Falkenberg utilizes the academic theories of asexuality and her own experiences to prove Laurence's asexuality within *The Hermaphrodite.* She notes that this reclamation is important for asexual history, as well as demonstrating how asexuality is

necessary to understanding the historical record of human attraction and desire (Falkenberg). The absence of Laurence's sexual desire is constantly remarked on throughout the text. Throughout the manuscript is this motif of marble, coldness, stone-like characteristics, all attributed to Laurence, and all usually referring to his lack of affection or desire. Many scholars referenced this motif, but none saw it for what Falkenberg sees it as: asexuality. "Laurence is frequently likened to a statue throughout the text…coldness and comparisons to statues are also often used to speak negatively about asexuality" (Falkenberg).

Falkenberg relates to Laurence's often expressed sentiment of uncertainty and confusion surrounding romantic and sexual relationships, and the alienation he experiences with his peers in this aspect. Ashworth comments that "Laurence connects with men and women, but he does not love them." Additionally, Falkenberg points out Laurence's aversion to physical intimacy, which is greater than any dislike of emotional intimacy. For example, despite Laurence's love for Ronald, he'd rather die than have intercourse with him (Howe, 87). This is a sentiment many in the asexual community share, Falkenberg says. She notes that Laurence has learned, as many asexual individuals do, to separate romantic and sexual attraction, while Ronald has not. This adds to the toxicity of their relationships and is a common struggle between asexual and allosexual (experiences sexual desire) people (Falkenberg).

As many asexual people are forced to do, Laurence learns to "fake it" by joining his peers in wooing the neighboring village girls with poetry, but he feels no passion for them. Emma and Ronald's anger and frustration at Laurence's lack of desire echoes the common sentiment the public has for asexual people. "Sexual desire is seen as so ingrained in humanity that flirtation or sexual advances seem obvious to everyone—except for many asexual people" (Falkenberg). She

ends with a final commonality Laurence shares with many asexual people: surviving sexual assault.

> Although I do not want to imply that all asexual people have experienced sexual violence, it is an unfortunate fact that many asexual people do suffer "corrective" rape in the attempt to "cure" asexuality, or some may experience sexual violence at the hands of individuals who feel they have been "led on" and "deserve" sexual gratification.

Locating Laurence's asexuality in *The Hermaphrodite* is meaningful and important in finding historical and literary context for asexuality. This is perhaps one of the most important takes on this manuscript, as it provides a voice for a group of wildly marginalized and underrepresented people. Laurence is regarded, by 19th-century thinkers and still by many pieces of scholarship, as a freak, as inhuman or inanimate, as "no man, no woman, nothing" simply for his lack of sexual or romantic desire. Falkenberg provides a much-needed alternative and critique of this potentially harmful discourse for a modern audience by noting Laurence's asexual nature.

*The Hermaphroditic Christ Figure and Other Religious Motifs*

Samantha Sears' "The Holy Hermaphrodite: Gender Construction, Gothic Elements, And The Christ Figure" explores and argues how Laurence can be read as a re-imagined Christ figure. Sears remarks on similarities between Laurence and Jesus' documented appearance, both being described as tall, delicate, curling hair, having rare beauty, etc. Both have a blend of masculine and feminine features. Laurence is also often connected to symbols of piety, being inherently un-sexual, and is frequently connected to the cross, cross imagery, or religious symbols. Laurence often speaks of God and is frequently likened to an angel (this is clear in the text, but also pointed out by Sears). As he is becoming paralyzed, he has visions of himself being

stretched out upon a cross, which is clearly a Christ-like image. Additionally, both Laurence and Jesus endure burdens and sacrifice themselves for others, as well as “save” others.

> Williams acknowledges that the Laurence character undeniably saves Howe through her tumultuous and often loveless marriage. Williams fails to note, however, that Laurence is also a savior for other characters within the manuscript and for readers who grapple with the same gender questions that plagued Howe (Sears).

For example, Laurence can denote the historically underrepresented group of asexual people. Sears furthers this thinking by adding that past scholars considered the hermaphroditic qualities of Jesus Christ as “the perfect combination of contraries—masculine and feminine, human and divine—in one body” (Sears). Similar to thinking’s surrounding Laurence.

In addition, there’s a great deal of spiritual and paranormal references and imagery in the text. In Ashworth’s "Spiritualized Bodies And Posthuman Possibilities: Technologies Of Intimacy In Julia Ward Howe's The Hermaphrodite," she describes how the Nina-Eva story within the manuscript describes many spiritual possibilities. In the text, Laurence’s friend Nina goes into a kind of coma after her lover is exiled, during which she follows him everywhere he goes in spirit form. During this time, Laurence reads a story of a couple of similar circumstances, in which the character Eva is a medium. Both of which display spiritual communication and an interplay between the paranormal and 19$^{th}$-century technologies of connection (Ashworth). Ashworth remarks that, “Nina and Eva love in ways typically reserved for angels.” Laurence’s relationship with Nina is also said to be a “spiritual connection” (Lewis-Turner), advancing the idea that he is a spiritual, supernatural being.

Moreover, there is imagery of Greek mythology when Ronald dreams of Laurence and likens him to Hebe, the cupbearer of the gods. During this, Ronald also uses ethereal imagery to describe Laurence:

> "It was a glorious dream," replied Ronald with vehemence. "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. Your countenance too was altered—it was no longer grave and sad, but beaming, glowing, all life, all tenderness. Young and beautiful as the Hebe of the Gods, you glided around me, and dropped odours on my head, and poured out wine for me from a golden cup" (Howe, 74).

This all seems very angelic and godly, furthering Sears' ideas about Laurence's Christ status. Regardless, religious and spiritual imagery is prevalent throughout the text.

**Conclusion**

I have not explored even half of the scholarship surrounding this text. There was much more to include from the sources I did utilize. Sarah Schuster explored how Howe used Laurence as a vessel for her own feelings of hermaphrodism. Nicole Livengood also made connections between Howe's life and her manuscript, as well as between other hermaphroditic writings. There is discourse about the text's gothic qualities and on the topic of hermitage. Many scholars postulated connections between Howe's life and the Laurence Manuscript, which I'd have liked to explore if I'd had the space and time. It would likely require another 14 pages to properly discuss every way that Howe influences Laurence and the text.

I told myself some time ago that I would never again write another paper about something that didn't matter to me or interest me or help me grow in some way. I wouldn't waste my mind on intellectual mundanity if I could help it. So, I chose to read everything ever composed about an incomplete book written in 1846, lost for 150 years, and published in 2004. *The Hermaphrodite* initially seemed to me as alien as Laurence would have seemed to his 19th-century audience, but after reading its fragmented pages and the scholarship surrounding it, I have found instead something universal. Because Laurence is not "no man, no woman, nothing," Laurence is everything and everyone. Laurence is the 19th-century experience for men and women; Laurence is Julia Ward Howe, her husband, and her husband's boyfriend; Laurence is a boy who doesn't know how to talk to his father; Laurence is a girl under the patriarchy; Laurence is trying to make friends and go to school and love; Laurence is marble and grace; Laurence is whole; Laurence is a sexual assault survivor; Laurence is a poet; Laurence is asexual; Laurence is the son of God; Laurence is one of the founders of queer American Literature.

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