

# A Woman for Today: Julia Ward Howe and Gender Identity

By Henry Ticknor



Henry Ticknor earned his BA in English from Hartwick College. He spent 32 years in public education as a teacher, principal, and finally as a central office administrator. He earned his Master of Education in Special Education from George Mason University and a Master of Divinity, Summa Cum Laude, from Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington D.C. After retiring from the Fairfax County Virginia public schools in 2001, he was ordained a Unitarian Universalist minister and served congregations in Arlington, Va., Fairfax, Va., and Stephens City, Va. He retired from full time ministry in 2010 and in 2017 was named Minister Emeritus of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Shenandoah Valley.

He has been a member of the Winchester, VA. Torch Club since 2011 and just completed his term as President. He currently serves as President-Elect of the Winchester Medical Center Auxiliary. Additionally, he is a patient and family visitor for Blue Ridge Hospice and a member of the national Mended Hearts organization. He and his wife, Nancy, are active travelers who enjoy hiking, kayaking and cycling. They have two adult daughters. Henry is the great, great grandson of Julia Ward Howe.

"A Woman For Today: Julia Ward Howe and Gender Identity" was originally presented to the Winchester Torch Club on June, 7, 2017.

All lives are complex. Some are just more complex than others.

In the spring of 1977, Mary Grant, a Ph.D. candidate at the George Washington University, was researching the life of Julia Ward Howe at Harvard's Houghton Library, where most of Julia's papers are archived. One afternoon she was reading through a box of manuscripts that had been donated to the library by Howe's granddaughter, Rosalind Richards.

As Grant later observed, "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. [...] The pages were full of idiosyncratic punctuation, spelling and abbreviations. Some pages were apparently missing [...]. Worse, there seemed to be no readily identifiable thread to the narrative." (Grant, "Meeting the Hermaphrodite," 15). As it turned out, Grant had made a major literary discovery: a previously unknown novel by the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

In Elaine Showalter's 2016 biography, *The Civil Wars of Julia Ward Howe*, she observes, "Between 1846 and 1848 Julia

had begun in secret to write an extraordinary novel about her feelings of loneliness, rejection, and uncertainty as a woman and an artist" (88). The work was begun in her third year of marriage to Samuel Gridley Howe and after the births of her first two (of seven) children. Gary Williams, another Howe biographer, describes the text as "a long narrative work, ultimately over four hundred pages, never published and probably never completed, on which she worked for about a year [...]" (80).

Julia's only personal reference to the work is contained in her diary from 1843. She writes, "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, 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 [...]" (qtd. in Williams 81).

The manuscript that Grant stumbled upon that afternoon

at Houghton Library has come to be known as the “Laurence Manuscript.” Julia’s intended title is unknown; the title of the version published in 2004, *The Hermaphrodite*, was supplied by the manuscript’s 21st-century editor, Gary Williams. The very basic story is this: Laurence, also called Laurent, the scion of a wealthy and important family of the time, is born intersexed—possessing both male and female sex organs. The opening pages of the story make clear that while Laurence was born with both male and female genitalia, his father is determined to raise him as a son in order to provide him with an education and ultimately enable him to be the heir of a considerable estate.

As the story progresses, Laurence informs the reader that “[...] 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 in 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 3).

Laurence was a model student, well respected and “scrutinized” with interest by both sexes. As he notes, though, “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” (Howe 5). During his later school years, an older woman, known in the novel simply as Emma P., decides that Laurence will be her conquest, but when she discovers the truth about him, she calls him a monster. This only increases Laurence’s sense of alienation and his fears of intimacy.

“I sought  
sympathy from  
women, advice  
from men,  
but love from  
neither.”

Upon his return home, Laurence’s father makes Laurence sign over his birthright to Laurence’s younger brother, who would most likely produce an heir and continue the family line. Fleeing from home, Laurence comes across a hermitage where he takes up residence until he is at the point of both madness and death. He is rescued by a youth named Ronald and taken to live with Ronald’s family and serve as Ronald’s tutor. In time, Ronald falls in love with Laurence; then after an angry encounter, or what some read as a possible rape scene between the two, Laurence escapes to Rome.

Here a new friend, Berto, convinces him that he should

disguise himself as a woman and stay with Berto’s sisters at the family estate. Laurence learns women relate to one another differently than men do. The novel’s ending is unclear; the narrative comes to an end suggesting that Laurence is near death, but the manuscript ends mid-sentence with no clear resolution.

\* \* \*

What inspired the novel? Might a young woman, in only her third year of marriage, be so overcome by intense feelings of inadequacy, loneliness and rejection that she would begin to compose a novel whose themes reflect these very issues? I believe, and it is the premise of this paper that, indeed, the novel was written to help Julia understand her life and her relationships with men.

Although Julia Ward Howe is best known as the writer of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which became the unofficial song of the Union army during the Civil War, she was equally significant during her lifetime as an activist for abolition, women’s rights, peace, and prison reform. A founding member of the American Woman Suffrage Association, a noted lecturer and author, Julia was the first woman elected to the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters.

She was born in New York City in 1819, the second daughter and fourth of seven children of Samuel Ward, a prominent banker, and Julia Rush (Cutler) Ward, herself a published poet. The Ward family

roots included two ancestors who served as colonial governors of Rhode Island; her grandfather was a distinguished officer during the American Revolution, and she was a great grand-niece of Francis Marion, better known during the Revolutionary War as “the Swamp Fox”.

Julia became interested in poetry and art at an early age, thanks in part to a home with an art gallery and a large library. One of her biographers notes, “Julia Ward grew up living like a princess in a fairy tale. [...] she spent her childhood in a splendid mansion where the finest tutors instructed her in music and languages, and her summers were spent with her grandfather and cousins in Newport. She was cherished, indulged, and praised [...]” (Showalter 1).

Or so it would seem from the outside, for in her memoir, *Reminiscences*, Julia paints a quite different picture of her “fairy tale” existence, describing herself as “a young damsel of olden time, shut up within an enchanted castle. And I must say that my dear father, with all his noble generosity and overweening affection, sometimes appeared to me as my jailor” (qtd. in Showalter 1).

Julia was just five years old when her mother died in childbirth at the age of twenty-eight.

In his grief, Julia’s father returned to his strict Calvinist faith, banning music, drama, and parties in the home, casting a pall over the otherwise happy household. As Julia writes, “The early years of my

youth were passed in seclusion not only of home life, but of a home life most carefully and jealously guarded from [...] the world, the flesh, and the devil” (qtd. in Showalter 6).

“My dear  
father, with  
all his noble  
generosity and  
overweening  
affection,  
sometimes  
appeared to me  
as my jailor.”

The one bright spot for a young woman with keen intellect was that in spite of his dim views of society and culture, Julia’s father wanted his children to be well educated. Julia was tutored at home and at private schools in Greek, Latin, Italian, French, German, literature, science, and mathematics, and received music and voice training as well. Her singing voice was beautiful, earning her the not always complimentary moniker, “Diva Julia”. She would continue to read literature, history, and philosophy throughout her life. By the time Julia was twenty, she had had literary reviews and essays published anonymously in magazines such as the *Literary and Theological Review* and the *New York Review*.

But all this time she was keenly aware of the different opportunities afforded to her brothers to travel and to be out in New York society, and she became increasingly resentful of these restrictions. However, a fateful trip to Boston in 1841 changed her life completely.

\* \* \*

Samuel Gridley Howe cut quite a dashing figure when he galloped through the streets of Boston on his black stallion. The story goes that during her time in Boston, Julia saw Samuel Gridley Howe ride past her, and that was all it took. She was swept away. Although Samuel was 18 years her senior, they married after a two-year courtship.

Together the Howes were one of the most influential couples of nineteenth century. In Boston, they knew many of the leading intellectual figures of the Civil War era: Charles Sumner, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Margaret Fuller, and John Brown. They traveled to Europe and made friends there as well. Florence Nightingale was the godmother of one of their daughters; Dickens, their guide in London. Brilliant though it seemed from the outside, however, their marriage was turbulent and unstable from the beginning—a prolonged domestic battle over sex, money, independence, politics, and power. The Howes often lived and worked apart.

Despite his inexhaustible compassion for the suffering, the helpless, and the deprived, and regardless of his dedication to the abolition of slavery, Howe held

obstinate and conservative views on women's roles in public life. He expected his wife to be completely fulfilled in her domestic and maternal role, and to accept with gratitude his right to make all the decisions about their lives together. He took control of her large fortune, and lost most of it. Julia, on the other hand, expected to have a partner who would introduce her to his more consequential world of ideas and social reform, and allow her to act in it. She assumed that she would be an equal partner in their decisions and free to develop and pursue her own literary aspirations. She hoped to "write the novel or play of the age," but her husband tried to stop her writing efforts after she published an anonymous book of confessional poems that enraged and humiliated him.

Nevertheless, in the course of their marriage, Julia learned how to resist his dictatorship. As Valerie Zeigler notes in her biography of Howe, *Diva Julia: The Public Romance and Private Agony of Julia Ward Howe*, "No one knew better than she what life governed by an unyielding warden could be. Julia Ward Howe had spent her entire life in confinement, first by her controlling father and next tyrannical husband. 'I feel utterly paralyzed' she observes in her diary" (2).

Further complicating the marriage was Samuel Gridley Howe's relationship with his friend Charles Sumner, gifted orator and Massachusetts Senator, known for his deep commitment to civil rights and the abolition of slavery. A letter Samuel wrote to Sumner soon after

marrying Julia suggests the depth of this relationship: "the torrent of affection which is continually flowing from my breast toward the new object of my love diminishes not by one drop the tide of feeling which ever swells within my bosom at the thought of thee dear Sumner: I love thee not less because I love her more, but I am, forever shall be, with all warmth and sincerity entirely yours" (qtd. in Howe xxi). In a later letter, Samuel underscores his deep devotion for his friend: "When my heart is full of joy or sorrow, it turns to you [...]; in fact as Julia often says—Sumner ought to have been a woman and you to have married her [...]"(qtd. in Williams 42).

## In the course of their marriage, Julia learned how to resist his dictatorship.

In an 1843 diary entry, Julia reveals the effects of her husband's obvious love and devotion for his friend when she writes, "what shall I do? Where shall I go to beg some scraps and remnants of affection to feed my hungry heart? it will die, if it be not fed. My children will, one day, love me—my sisters have always loved me—my husband? May God teach him to love me, and help me to make him happy. For our children's sake, and for our own, we must strive to come nearer together, and not live such a life of separation" (qtd. in Bethune).

\* \* \*

Various critics have suggested numerous interpretations of the Laurence Manuscript. Gary Williams notes that "Howe saved herself with this 'history of a strange being,'" which he claims is a "projection of both her husband and herself (Howe xxxvi). He also notes that "the narrative [...] is solidly rooted in the psychological terrain" of Julia's unhappy existence (Howe xi).

The attachment in the manuscript between Laurence and Ronald seems somehow to reflect her mixed feelings about her husband's love and affection for Charles Sumner.

Laurence may be Samuel Howe, yes, but "he" is also Julia, a being bringing together impulses of both genders and thereby consigned, according to the domestic and cultural mores of the times, to a loveless and sexless ambition. Laurence, we may say, is the poet and adventurer she might have been had she been born a male. Julia also felt constrained by "claustrophobic conditions" (marriage, motherhood, male society's expectations of women in those roles) that hindered her desire to fulfill her intellectual ambitions. These frustrations are explored in *The Hermaphrodite*, most notably in the scenes where Laurence, now named Cecilia, engages with Berto's sisters, watching them move freely in their relationships and in their own intellectual pursuits. As Williams observes in his introduction to

*The Hermaphrodite*, “Howe’s Laurence was a product of a time in her marriage not only when her husband’s affection for another man (Sumner) seemed to displace any he had for her, but also when culture-wide premises about her appropriate role in patriarchal structures seriously threatened her intellectual and emotional survival” (Howe xxxvii).

Writing in her diary, Julia observes, “During the first two thirds of my life I looked to the masculine idea of character as the only true one. I sought its inspiration, and referred my merits and demerits to its judicial verdict. [...] 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” (qtd. in Showalter 185).

The Laurence manuscript has generated many contemporary discussions of gender identity. By definition, gender identity is one’s innermost concept of self: as male, female, a blend of both, or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One’s gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth. It could be, too, that the combination of Laurence’s masculine intellect and feminine body exemplified the plight of Julia Ward Howe and many

other nineteenth century women “whose intellectual ambitions might have made them seem unfeminine” (Saltz 83). Valerie Zeigler also comments on Julia’s frustration with her sex: “Julia may have used the story to dramatize her own attempts to achieve autonomy. She dressed like a woman, but she wrote and thought like a man—with independence and conviction” (68).

She was reborn  
as a self-  
assured woman  
capable of  
being true to  
her gender and  
a formidable  
fighter for  
women’s rights.

So, let me ask my original question once again. Is this novel a reflection of the author’s personal feelings and experiences?

There is no doubt that the Howes both identified by their sex at birth. Both ascribed to the prevalent role models of their times. Although Samuel Howe had a truly intimate relationship with Charles Sumner there is no suggestion that they were lovers. Howe fathered seven children and Julia was a caring mother.

Yet all during her marriage Julia chafed at her culturally proscribed roles in 19th century society. What she accomplished in literature, politics and in her efforts for world peace after her husband’s death in 1876 was remarkable; for the next thirty-four years, liberated from his crushing grip, and in spite of having been left nothing in his will, she was reborn as a self-assured woman capable of being true to her gender and a formidable fighter for women’s rights.

Nonetheless, in reading Julia’s autobiography and the first biography (written by her daughter Laura E. Richards), no one would guess that a nineteenth-century female author of conventional poetry and prose would be capable of producing a work containing such lurid passages of androgyny, bisexuality, homosexuality, and gender identity. *The Hermaphrodite*, which dates from the 1840s, is prescient of our twenty-first century understandings of gender, desire, and sexuality.

Today, Julia would probably be described as gender role nonconforming. As a child, she might have been a tomboy; as an adult, she might have been among the first women to wear trousers or to work outside the home. Like the Laurence of the novel, Julia wished for herself both male and female roles in society, and like Laurence she sees herself as “rather both than neither.” And this is what makes her life so complex.

Julia saved herself by writing a fable hewn from the somber mass of her existence as a woman and a

writer. The writing of the Laurence Manuscript allowed her to occupy a speculative region otherwise inaccessible in her historical moment, especially to American women. There is truly nothing else like it in nineteenth-century American letters.

Julia died in October, 1910, just ten years before the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment giving women the right to vote.

#### WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED

- Bergland, Renee and Gary Williams, eds. *Philosophies of Sex: Critical Essays on The Hermaphrodite*. Ohio State UP, 2012.
- Bethune, Zoe. "Letters of Samuel Howe and Charles Sumner." *QUEST: Queer United States Research Hub*. <https://sites.google.com/site/ushistorythroughlbteyes/>.
- Clifford, Deborah Pickman. *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Biography of Julia Ward Howe*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 1979.
- Grant, Mary H. "Meeting the Hermaphrodite." In Bergland and Williams, 15-22.
- . *Private Woman, Public Person: An Account of the Life of Julia Ward Howe from 1819 to 1868*. Brooklyn: Carlson, 1994.
- Howe, Julia Ward. *The Hermaphrodite*. Gary Williams, ed. University of Nebraska Press, 2004.
- Preves, Sharon E. *Intersex and Identity: The Contested Self*. Rutgers University Press, 2008.
- Richards, Laura E. and Elliott, Maud Howe. *Julia Ward Howe: 1819-1910*. 2 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915.
- Saltz, Laura. "'Rather Both Than Neither': The Polarity of Gender in Howe's *Hermaphrodite*." In Bergland and Williams, 72-92.
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Civil Wars of Julia Ward Howe*. Simon and Schuster, 2016.
- Trent, James W. *The Manliest Man: Samuel Gridley Howe and the Contours of Nineteenth-Century American Reform*. U of Massachusetts P, 2012.
- Williams, Gary. *The Hungry Heart: The Literary Emergence of Julia Ward Howe*. U of Massachusetts P, 1999.
- Ziegler, Valerie H. *Diva Julia: The Public Romance and Private Agony of Julia Ward Howe*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003.

*The publication of this article is funded by The Torch Foundation.*

## Torch Clubs Online

In addition to the great resource IATC provides at Torch.org, many clubs have their own websites, where you can get timely information about upcoming events and more.

Albany, NY	albanytorchclub.org
Central PA	acuri.net/torchclub
Chambersburg, PA	aliveinthevalley.org/default-1.html
Durham-Chapel Hill, NC	durhamchapelhilltorch.org
Erie, PA	erietorchclub.com
Fox Valley, WI	torchfoxvalley.org
Frederick, MD	fredtorch.org/home.html
Hagerstown, MD	hagertorch.org
Montgomery County, VA	montgomerytorch.org
Schenectady, NY	schenecladytorchclub.org
St. Catharines, ON	vaxxine.com/torch



### Where are you?

Does your club have a website, but you don't see it listed here? Please contact IATC to make sure we have all your club's information up to date.