When asked to judge Laurence’s sex, the physician who attends him/her in the final pages of *The Hermaphrodite* declares, “‘I cannot pronounce Lauren[ce] 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
whole; as spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay. (Emerson, “Compensation” 57)

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 hermaphroditism 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
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after a month’s sojourn, he comes disguised as a beggar, and explains the significance 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 hermitage. Having reduced Emma to madness by the paradox of his embodiment, 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 submission to the gross laws of animal being? This blood which should glow with high ethereal 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 necessities 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, com-
mon 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 exer-
cised 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 Lau-
rence’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
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 circum-
ference—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 *Herculine 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 Lawrence. 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 1837.9 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.