When Julia Ward Howe began to write the text we now call *The Hermaphrodite*, did she consult Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* for a definition? If she had, she would have found an unsurprising entry with an intriguing conclusion: “Hermaphrodite: An animal uniting two sexes. *Man and wife make but one right/Canonical hermaphrodite—Cleaveland*” (Johnson n.p.).

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

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

*Man and wife are but one right*

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

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

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

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

Though They of Different Sexes Be

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How Curiously They’re Made

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Howe explores the notion that sexual experiences determine gender in
The Hermaphrodite, but significantly not through Laurence. Instead, Laurence’s first love interest, the beautiful young widow Emma von P., comments:

“Laurence, I hope you are not one of those unsexed souls.”
“Have you never been one?” I said.
“Never,” she replied, “since I have learned what it is to be a woman.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Woman’s Secrets I Have Surveyed

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Looks Gaetano as he used to look?”

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

“And you are his wife, Nina?”

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

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

“somehow, they are always empty.” (Howe, H 142)

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

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

The Strictest Searchers

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

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

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

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

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

1. In addition to Johnson’s *Dictionary* and *Aristotle’s Master-piece*, the couplet appears under the definition of hermaphrodite in encyclopedias, including *The New Encyclopædia; or, Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, and *Encyclopaedia Perthensis, or, Universal Dictionary of the Arts, Sciences, Literature, etc.: Intended to Supersede the Use of Other Books of Reference.*