Philosophies of Sex

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Bergland, Renee and Gary Williams.
Philosophies of Sex: Critical Essays on The Hermaphrodite.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
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In chapter 16 of The Hermaphrodite, Julia Ward Howe describes what looks like an attempted rape. Laurence is the eponymous “hermaphrodite” in this unfinished and, until 2004, unpublished novel, which Howe wrote in the 1840s. Laurence has been allowing himself to be understood as male in his capacity as tutor to Ronald, a young nobleman. Ronald has venerated and loved Laurence for a long time, without ever knowing of his ambiguous sex. As Ronald moves deeper into adolescence, his passion grows so strong that it worries Laurence, who claims to have no sexual desire at all. It also worries the collegiate boys among whom Laurence and Ronald live. They find the intensity of feeling between the preternaturally handsome tutor and his student strange. Nevertheless, no one suspects that Laurence is not, or is not entirely, male. When Ronald discovers that something isn’t quite right about his tutor’s sex, he attacks Laurence, and the ensuing scene seems to roll forward on the greased wheels of genre, with Laurence girlishly resisting Ronald’s lustful masculine advances, finally repulsing Ronald by drugging him.

I think that the physical struggle between Laurence and Ronald in chapter 16 can and should be read two ways, and this essay is largely a close reading arguing for the importance, though not the singularity, of the less obvious way. The scene is, at first glance, a representation of a failed rape, and as such...
it achieves certain narrative ends. But it is possible and necessary to read beneath its generic façade and understand it simultaneously as a representation of consensual and mutually enjoyable sexual exchange: of consummation. Indeed, the more obvious reading protects and enables its opposite. For most of the manuscript, Howe insists upon Laurence’s lack of sexual desire, a prosthetic insistence that allows her to ask questions about the social construction of gender without the complication of sexuality. Throughout *The Hermaphrodite* Howe clearly puts her character through his paces as a means to explore how gender is effected, performed and policed. But it is a mistake to think that because she needs him to be without desire for the vast majority of the book, she therefore never explores this equally essential question about the character she has otherwise made so multidimensional. Here we see her quietly, even secretly within her own secret manuscript, using her ambiguously sexed character to interrogate desire and the acts that constitute sex, and asking how gender informs acts of sex and how gender is transformed through sex. Indeed, the most important consequence of my reading of this scene is that the passionate sexual exchange renders Ronald’s body also ambiguously sexed.

To argue that the sex I see in this scene is pleasurably consummated and mutually constitutive is not to say that there is no struggle, or that this is a happy scene. The scene is still a scene of violence, and it is still a scene in which Laurence resists and triumphs over Ronald’s violent assault, but I read the violence as that of genre. “Gender” and “genre” are, of course, the same word. English took it from French twice; the first time, several hundred years ago, the French pronounced the word with a “d,” and English snapped it up as “gender.” The second time, the word entered English without the “d,” as “genre.” But in French, *genre* remains a homonym. In “The Law of Genre” Jacques Derrida takes the pun to town, claiming that the law is simple: “Genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them” (Derrida, “Genre” 55). He explains: “as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity” (Derrida, “Genre” 57). Convinced of Laurence’s womanhood, Ronald begins the work of division and enclosure that is what I will call the law of genre/gender. He insists that Laurence divide his ambiguously sexed self and straddle separate spheres, inhabiting public masculinity and private femininity, and Ronald demands that Laurence do this within a marriage-like arrangement. He then attacks Laurence. Laurence passionately resists both ultimatum and physical assault. The more obvious reading of the scene relies on us understanding Laurence’s refusal of Ronald as him rejecting, and indeed not even wanting, sex—as he does elsewhere in the text. But what if
the very physicality of Laurence's rejection comes not through resisting but through instrumentalizing the sex act itself and turning it against the strictures of gender? If we read the passage as a sex scene, we can see that through sex Laurence is able to constitute Ronald as also ambivalently gendered and sexed. In other words, what Laurence saves himself from is not sexual passion but the constrictions of literary and social genres that enforce gender and the social division of men and women, the very things Ronald demands of him at the beginning of the scene. Laurence protects and indeed spreads the “impurity, anomaly [and] monstrosity” of indeterminate gender and sex. Across this secret sex scene, Howe explores the possibility of Laurence's and Ronald's (and perhaps everyone's) physical intersexuality and bisexual desire, to use contemporary language to describe states of being for which Howe had no single words but which she could, I argue, quietly describe and theorize with incredible complexity.

This intervention into the generic rules governing gender and sex is facilitated in part through the novel's engagement with an intertext: William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In chapter 15, Laurence and Ronald attend an all-male college production of some scenes from the play. When the boy playing Juliet turns up tipsy, Laurence unwillingly steps in at the last minute and takes the part. Laurence's impromptu performance causes uproar in the student body; they love the performance and carry Laurence in triumph from the stage. But Freiherr von ____, the boy who plays Romeo, experiences what he thinks is a revelation: the seemingly male Laurence is actually a woman. The Freiherr expected to play Romeo opposite a boy playing a girl but is instead confronted with a brilliant unrehearsed performance by a “man.” This “man” flawlessly performs Juliet at a moment's notice, without the mediation of the time it takes to memorize lines, rehearse staging, or learn to seem to be a girl. And not just any girl; Juliet is the *sine qua non* of girlhood, just as *Romeo and Juliet* is the *sine qua non* of heterosexual romance. Laurence, in other words, steps into both genre and gender without any rehearsal. But here we see that genre and gender *are* the same thing, and for Freiherr von ____, the fact that Laurence seems naturally, not artificially, the ultimate girl in the ultimate love story means that he must “really” be a girl. The Freiherr has clearly not been made to read either Derrida or Butler in English classes. For him, Laurence's perfect Juliet undoes the possibility that gender is performative, for he is not seen to be copying a script but rather simply being it.

Extending P. Gabrielle Foreman’s concept of the “undertell,” which I employ later in this essay, I want to argue that Howe introduces us here, in chapter 15, to the power of what we might call the “overtell.” She relies, in this
chapter, on her readers knowing the play so well that she need not even cite it, and indeed, *Romeo and Juliet* was at a particularly fevered pitch of popularity in the 1840s. It is a play whose story has been told too many times, and Howe uses exactly that generic ubiquity to comment upon the generic ubiquity and totalizing plot of gender. The play’s universality means that a schoolboy can play Juliet and still be Juliet (or, for Howe’s contemporaries obsessed with Charlotte Cushman’s performances opposite her sister’s Juliet, that a woman can play Romeo). The play was written in the sixteenth century with cross-dressing boy actors in mind. But even in a later era when women could perform on stage, the power of overtell means that within the confines of its performance, men can play at being women and vice versa, and audiences can enjoy the titillations of cross-gendering without that enjoyment halting the ideological juggernaut of the heterosexual plot. The polymorphous perverse can romp within the city wall of the overtold play so long as everyone agrees that it is merely a story. But playing Romeo opposite Laurence’s Juliet teaches the Freiherr to “know” that Laurence is a woman (a “knowledge” he demonstrates by leading Laurence from the stage by the hand, continuing the performance of boy and girl across the threshold from theater to real life). Watching the performance teaches Ronald to feel, for the first time, hotly gendered rage and jealousy (he tries to push the Freiherr away from Laurence when they descend from the stage), before he even allows himself to “know” that Laurence is a woman. *Romeo and Juliet* teaches these two boys to turn their backs on the sexual ambiguities of youth, and to enact and police rigid gender categories in their everyday lives. The two boys are changed by the play, and changed away from play. They enter the theater ready to suspend their disbelief and enjoy the performance of gender ambiguity onstage. They exit the theater believing they know how to see and feel the “truth” of genre/gender. After the performance, they are violently dedicated to defending the rigidities of gender roles in lives that immediately begin to follow generic formulae for masculine behavior, namely duels and sexual aggression.

The *Romeo and Juliet* chapter comes immediately before the chapter in which Ronald attacks Laurence. This positioning should be an object lesson to readers. Howe makes the point about *Romeo and Juliet* very clear: overtell—the power of stories told again and again and known “by heart”—brings beautiful ambiguous youth with its endless possibility for play to a violent end. This happens in the plot of the drama, but Howe shows us that it is also the consequence of acting in and watching the performance. In *Romeo and Juliet* the teenage lovers die because their parents have overtold their enmity and poisoned the next generation; their children die for their parents’ dedication to genre. In *The Hermaphrodite* the performance of the play
turns pretty boys who can play both male and female into violent men, and the pretty “hermaphrodite” who can also play both male and female is forced into the position of weak woman. Howe is partly making an argument about how gender is enforced culturally, but she is also training us to read her next chapter. She is about to offer us a generic scene of sexual assault. If we read it only generically, she warns, we may experience the pleasures that come with the unfolding of plot, but we also run a risk: the Freiherr and Ronald think they see truth but have only enslaved themselves to the law of genre/gender; despite his name, the “Freiherr” is not free at all. The challenge, which Howe lays down in the Romeo and Juliet chapter, is to read as well for what Foreman calls the “undertell,” about which more later.

After the performance, the Freiherr tells Ronald that “Your Juliet is a woman” (Howe, H 82). Ronald denies it and is quickly catapulted into that most generic of male responses—he calls for a duel. But through the logic of homosociality, whereby the conventional interactions of men exclude and constitute woman as man’s opposite, Ronald’s scripted masculine defense of Laurence’s honor seems to confirm what the Freiherr thinks: Laurence is female. Ronald loses the duel in more ways than one. He could resist being affected by Laurence’s performance, but he cannot resist the effects of the part he plays. In other words, when Ronald himself joins the overtold melodrama of masculinity, he is captured by the generic, and returning to their shared rooms late at night, Ronald is now convinced that his mentor is a woman. He lays down the laws that govern the gendered divisions of Howe’s world and that define what love and marriage can be. It takes only one sentence for Ronald to outline the fantasy of separate spheres, of men whose masculinity is proved in the rigors of the wide world but who come home to be comforted by cloistered, angelic women: “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 hurls himself upon Laurence, who resists. A struggle ensues, described in a single short paragraph:

Still, other words of terrible import, half heard, and dimly comprehended; still that terrible grasp, straining me closer and closer to the heart which, once 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—that appeal was not answered. Suddenly, I felt Ronald shiver and tremble—gaining courage, I raised my eyes to his face, and saw the burning flush pass, in an instant, from his cheek—exhaustion was already subduing the fever of his wound, maddened by wine—a certain confusion of thought
was visible in his countenance. This was the critical moment—by the Mercy of God, I took advantage of it. (Howe, H 87–88)

The last line of this passage can easily be understood as describing an escape from sexual embrace and thus the preservation of Laurence’s virginity; after a struggle, he seems to recognize a “critical moment” of weakness in Ronald, a moment he grasps “by the Mercy of God.” Used as we are to the generic understanding that rape or even consensual premarital sex constitutes a “fate worse than death” for a girl, it is easy to read the “Mercy of God” as an escape from sexual penetration. Keeping that reading in play, I think it is also possible to understand that pleasurable sexual acts occur in this paragraph and that Laurence is a willing and indeed active participant in them.

The final line of the passage is, in fact, the second of two moments in the paragraph when Laurence references the divine. The first comes mid-paragraph, with his “faint but rigid struggle, a sob, a mute and agonized appeal to heaven.” Immediately after the temporal pause and spatial thrust of the dash we learn that “that appeal was not answered.” Because the next word is “Suddenly,” we understand that some time, either a little or a lot, passes between the appeal not being answered and the next event, which is Laurence feeling Ronald “shiver and tremble.” The physiological descriptors make possible the reading that Ronald’s desire to have sex with Laurence has resulted in sexual release: Laurence feels the young man come. Having felt it, he also witnesses the immediate aftereffects of that orgasm: he “saw the burning flush pass, in an instant, from his cheek—exhaustion was already subduing the fever of his wound.”

What is it that Laurence asks from God that first time? The generic reading is that he asks to be delivered from sexual assault. But his prayer is not answered here in the middle of the paragraph. Are we to assume that he is successfully raped and that he feels Ronald’s ejaculation unwillingly? No: the generic reading has us scoot over this moment when God deserts Laurence and take the ending of the paragraph as the moment of successful resistance to rape. And yet that troubling phrase remains, dividing the paragraph: “that appeal was not answered.” Reading even more closely, we see that Laurence’s struggle is “faint but rigid.” Laurence is both man and woman, and this odd pair of adjectives given to us as incompatible or even opposite—faint but rigid—could be a genital description of Laurence’s response to a young man whom we know he admires. “Faint” could be a description of female arousal—swooningly passionate rather than weak. “Rigid” could be a description of male arousal, an erection, rather than resistance. Is Laurence—both the male and female parts of him—aroused by Ronald? Does
that “Suddenly,” after which Ronald’s ejaculation is described, come after the enactment of passions mutually enjoyed by both parties? Perhaps Laurence’s first appeal to God is that he, Laurence, will be able to hide his desire, to retreat to the passionless life he has cultivated. Perhaps Laurence gives in to and demonstrates passion, or rather, male and female passions, “faint but rigid,” that he feels for Ronald.

This reading complicates the second reference to God that comes at the end of the paragraph: “This was the critical moment—by the Mercy of God, I took advantage of it.” Again we have the pause and forward push of the hyphen, as we did last time. But this time Laurence is active, while Ronald is in a state of swooning confusion. We could argue that here is where the lovers switch positions, where Ronald becomes the girl to Laurence’s boy; certainly this short paragraph gives us both an active and a passive Laurence and an active and a passive Ronald. It is important to let our imaginations do the dirty work here and let ourselves sense Howe thinking through the physical details of the sex these two characters might have. And why shouldn’t she, and why shouldn’t we? Generically, men aggress and women resist, men have passions and women don’t, men are rapists and women are vulnerable. Here in this almost nonexistent sex scene I think we can see, out of the corners of our eyes, Howe writing against genre beneath the cloak of genre and theorizing gender through sex in a way that contemplates the mutability of gender and sexual desire for both men and women. I think she is asking here whether and how gender, male and female, and desire, heterosexual and homosexual, can morph and change and flip in the crucible of sexual activity, and what implications such mutability has for the law of genre/gender. Under this reading, if Laurence’s first cry to heaven is unanswered and sex goes forward, then Laurence’s salvation at paragraph’s end, when he reemerges from crisis in control of the situation, is quite radical. I think we find him finally the consummate hermaphrodite. He is sexually knowledgeable and at the same time actively and consciously “innocent” of gender. He has succumbed to sex, but he has protected the bothness of his own gender identity and introduced the pleasures of bothness to his lover.

This is not the first time that we have sensed Laurence’s desire for Ronald, and we can learn something about the structure of his desire by turning back the pages. Earlier in the book, Laurence has seen Ronald as perfect, innocent and beautiful. The boy’s attraction for Laurence is shown to be the affection of a pure soul. Ronald is carefully described as sexually ambiguous, and his purity stems from indeterminacy. Laurence is attracted to these qualities in Ronald, and the lure is at least partly physical:
Scarce knowing what I did, I stooped to print the lightest, faintest kiss upon his forehead; but as I did so, his red lips parted and he murmured: “Laurence!” I shrank back into myself. I turned away, lest a tear should fall upon his face. I spread over him hands which seemed able to compel from heaven its dearest benediction. One more look, and I was gone—oh soft bloom of adolescence, oh gentle type of nascent manhood! (Howe, H 76)

In Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes explains that originally “there was a distinct type of androgynous person, not just the word, though like the word the gender too combined male and female” (Plato 25). Androgynes comprised, along with men and women, the three genders of humanity, but these original three genders were round beings, with two faces, four arms and legs, and two sets of genitals. They were complete in themselves, without need of anyone else for comfort. They were very powerful and challenged the gods, and Zeus split them in half, thus getting rid of androgynous humans altogether. So traumatized were the newly divided men and women that they were dying of grief and apathy. Aristophanes explains that we remain divided and yearning, but we manage to live with that pain because “Love draws our original nature back together; he tries to reintegrate us and heal the split in our nature” (Plato 27). Laurence draws back not because he does not feel desire, but because Ronald addresses him as a beloved—“Laurence!”—revealing that Ronald is already moving past sexual ambiguity and into definite manhood. He is already incomplete and needs a partner who can make him whole. The difference, as Plato and Howe theorize it, is love. Laurence “shrank back into myself” and turns away so as not to sully Ronald with a “tear.” Is this proof that Laurence feels no passion, or that he feels no love in that sense of painfully divided creatures yearning toward wholeness? In this moment, I think that Laurence recoils from love rather than from passion.

Reading shamelessly, let us admit that it is possible to say that Laurence satisfies his passion for Ronald by himself here: he masturbates. Shrinking back into oneself and turning away to shed “tears” elsewhere than on the body of the beloved is a description of two methods of withdrawal—emotional and sexual. Ronald will later accuse tears of being the currency and ocular proof of womanhood, but whether the liquid emanates from Laurence’s masculine or his feminine body, he withdraws and carefully does not spend his passion on Ronald because he realizes that the boy has already lost his sexual ambiguity. Ronald’s “nascent” manhood is beginning to emerge. If we read the shrinking back and the tear as both genital and emotional, then we understand that Laurence’s sexual passion wanes because he realizes
that he is too late: time has already robbed him of the Ronald he can desire, the Ronald who, like him, is ambiguously sexed. That ambiguity is a passing moment in a male or female human but an eternal condition for a “hermaphrodite.” By the time of the rape/sex scene we know that Ronald’s sexual ambiguity has receded almost completely. His demand that Laurence “must love me” as a woman is the fully articulated yearning of a divided heterosexual human.

So if by chapter 16 Ronald is given over to the generic structures of gendered love, how can I argue that Laurence, who desires only an ambiguous Ronald, has passionate sex with him, sex that teaches Ronald the joys of polymorphous perversity? I can because I think Ronald, even in the very moment of his highly performative, drunken and violent accession to the overtold genre of masculinity, is himself made physically ambiguous and thus available again to Laurence’s desire. To see this possibility we must be attentive to what happens immediately before the rape/sex scene. Laurence returns to his rooms after the play. He describes an angel who defends his innocence this last night before the violence that will occur the next day: “He stood at my threshold, and waved his flaming sword across it, so that no dark or dangerous thing could enter there, and on the eve of ruin, and on the verge of desolation, I slept in innocence, in peace, in safety” (Howe, H 81). That threshold and its innocence of anything “dark or dangerous” entering it constitutes a barely disguised description of female virginity. But the flaming sword that crosses the entrance? We are actually never shown the contents of Laurence’s combinations: his genitals are never described. But he bears a “strange resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Howe, H 9), and I think we are meant to understand that physiologically Laurence has both a “threshold” and a “sword” that waves across it. What is Laurence’s innocence, then? It is more than simple sexual purity. He fears the rape of his female body but feels protected by his male body; his innocence is the perfect duality of his gender, what I have already called his bothness. God placed an angel with a sword at the gates of Eden after Adam and Eve were banished; here we see Laurence as himself the Garden of Eden and his genital bothness as the gate to innocence. The boys want to make Laurence into the woman they think they know he really is. But Laurence’s bothness is angelic protection against the fatal “knowledge” of gendered, fallen humans, who seek endlessly for a way back to an innocence they forfeited when they mistook their nakedness for generic difference.4

We are given this portrait of Laurence lying in peaceful, prelapsarian wholeness and the description of his anatomy and its state—the sword is flaming and the threshold is uncrossed—as elsewhere Ronald prepares for
a duel. He fights it, loses, and is wounded. Ronald’s wound is an envagination. His masculinity has faltered in the very excess of its overtell: his body has been pierced and symbolically feminized. When Ronald finally arrives at Laurence’s architectural threshold, he is also sexually ambiguous, but sufferingingly and sinfully so, rather than innocent. As Dana Luciano puts it elsewhere in this volume, in Howe’s “sentimental theology, to be human is to remain ever-vulnerable to being wounded, and thus woundedness itself manifests humanity; it is in this sense that wounds, viewed from a certain perspective, carry within them their own redemptive power” (Luciano 231). And indeed, at the moment of his accession to the law of genre/gender, Ronald is wounded by his disillusion with it and thereby saved from it. Both Ronald’s new manliness and his painful, wounded womanliness cause the young man to approach the door with inexpert steps that reveal him to be, again, nascent: “The step that ascended my stairs was heavy and rough; the hand that undid my door was slow and unskillful, but the sound approached, the door opened, and Ronald staggered into the room, and flung himself heavily upon a chair” (Howe, H 85). It is not his generic manhood that is dewily emergent this time, rather, it is a still “unskillful” but mature sexual ambiguity that works against the law of genre/gender, “impure, ambiguous and monstrous,” in Derrida’s terms. Why, after all, does the angel of the flaming sword not protect Laurence’s threshold against Ronald’s entrance? Perhaps because Ronald’s very emergence as sexually ambiguous is the key that allows him entry.

Yes, I think Howe is now juggling two “hermaphrodites,” and I think there is reason to pay very close attention to why she does so. She brings the wounded ambiguous body of Ronald up against the flawless ambiguous body of Laurence and compares them. She looks closely at how each character falls into passion and what passion does to them. And it is through Ronald, not Laurence, that she theorizes the pain and complexity of human sexuality. Howe is a Christian, and in Ronald she fabricates a Christian “hermaphrodite.” Laurence’s sexual ambiguity is indebted to, among many other sources, the Platonic androgyne; he has no need for love. But Howe filters Ronald’s sexual ambiguity through the Judeo-Christian origin story. The stories in The Symposium and Genesis are similar. Eve is made of Adam’s rib, and the two people don’t know they are different until they threaten the sovereignty of their god. Their punishment is the same as the androgynes—suffering, pain and estrangement. Plato’s divided humans are saved from death by the god Love, or Eros. For Christians, the answer to the death that comes with the Fall is the divine love of Jesus, who offers eternal life. The earliest Christian writers were Greeks and Hellenized Jews familiar with the Platonic corpus. Interpreters of the life of Jesus, like the author of 1 John (ca. 100 C.E.) and
Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254 C.E.), were deeply indebted to Plato for their explications of Jesus’s love—for humans, God and the church—as multiply gendered. Plato’s origin story is entangled with the origin of Christianity itself, and the possibilities for gender ambiguity that Plato’s story allows were carried over into Christianity from the beginning. Nor were those possibilities absent in nineteenth-century American considerations of Jesus’s body and capacity for love.

But if the origin stories are so similar, why and how does Howe shift so decisively to the Christian story when theorizing Ronald’s sexual ambiguity? Because there is a crucial difference between the stories, and it lies in the definition of love and its relationship to the divine. Eros saves divided humans by turning their attention toward one another, and the life he saves is their terrestrial life. In Christian thought, the love that humans have for one another is triangulated through the pierced and suffering body of Jesus; the life that is saved is that of the immortal soul. As the New Testament author puts it in 1 John 7–11 (KJV), “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God. . . . He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him. . . . Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.” Laurence is Eden before the fall and the androgyne before Zeus’s thunderbolt. Ronald is a Christian human, and his yearning for a beloved is also his yearning for his god; he can only find the love of a human if he can find the love of his god and vice versa: “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.” In Ronald, Howe pushes that Christian structure of love, whereby human love leads to divine and back again, to a postlapsarian and Christian sexual ambiguity, and she does it in order to theorize human sexuality outside the law of genre/gender. Howe’s Platonic (and Edenic) Laurence is, throughout the book, a foil for her exploration of gendered human culture. But if she is going to think about how sexual ambiguity manifests itself in and through the sexual practices of so-called men and women, she needs to bounce her Laurence against a person whose sexual ambiguity is not legible in the evidence of his genitals, but in the evidence of his suffering. She needs a character whose sexual ambiguity is post-rather than pre-genre, post-rather than pre-gender—someone whose sexual ambiguity is not the sign of his completeness and perfection, but is the result of the wounding pain of division and the quest for wholeness through human and divine love.

In dueling, Ronald falls from his youthful ambiguity and becomes aware of male and female even as his body, penetrated, becomes both male and female, capable of pain, suffering, and salvation. His wound is Christ’s wound,
but his sin is Eve's sin. Having eaten of knowledge, Ronald's wound bleeds, and he shows it, the sign of his knowledge and his femininity, to Laurence before he explains that he "knows" that Laurence is a woman. "Does the sight of it make you sick?" he asks, for like Eve he now knows that he should be ashamed to show his sex (Howe, H 86). Ronald, like Eve, is made to bleed painfully for the knowledge of sex and gender. Indeed, he argues that he is Eve to Laurence's Adam and that therefore Laurence should love him: "my first crime is also yours, for it is born of the union of your soul and mine"; he doesn't understand that Laurence's bothness is in fact the Eden from which divided, gendered humans are expelled (Howe, H 87). Ronald goes on to make explicit his femininity, telling Laurence that the proof of their union is Ronald's virgin blood. It is female virgins who bleed at the time of their "first crime." Virgin blood is the telltale sign of consummation and, under a marriage contract, it proves the bride's so-called honesty in coming into the bargain "whole." Ronald clarifies his gendered alliance to Eve in particular and women in general in a sentence that seems, on the surface, to proclaim his masculinity: "yes—women weep, and it does not cost them much, but I have bought you with tears of blood" (Howe, H 87). The generic reading of this sentence asks us to understand that Ronald was wounded like a real man in a duel defending the honor of a real woman, and his difference from women lies in the liquid he sheds. But we should also read this sentence thusly: any woman can cry cheap tears, but Ronald is paying for Laurence's love with a woman's most valuable currency—her virgin blood.

And Ronald experiences consummation as a woman as well as a man. After Ronald comes, we learn that "exhaustion was already subduing the fever," but this is not the fever of male arousal, rather it is the fever "of his wound" (Howe, H 87; italics mine). When Ronald demands that Laurence "must love" him, he means it, as I have already argued, from his position as a now generic man demanding that a generic woman be private to his public, gentle to his forceful, etcetera. But here Howe shows us that Ronald's sexual desire—which is different from his need to enforce the law of genre/gender—emanates from his own recently carved-out ambiguous body; he desires Laurence because of, perhaps even from, his wound, his slash. Ronald, as well as Laurence, is satisfied as both a man and a woman: he shivers and trembles as a man, but the exhaustion of that satisfaction also subdues the fever of his "wound." And Ronald can't get enough of it. After the encounter he says, ostensibly of the wine, "I have drunk, but not deeply enough," and he cries, "Here is to love, a past without a reckonings—a present without a future!" (Howe, H 88). This is a radical redefinition of the love that he demanded before attacking Laurence. In the struggle that immediately pre-
cedes the rape/sex scene, he wanted Laurence to “love” him, but the definition of that love was decidedly temporal, decidedly nineteenth-century in its division between public masculinity and private femininity. It is the violent divisiveness of that generic demand that I have argued Laurence resists. Now, at the end of the paragraph, Ronald raises a toast that is hardly the pledge of a young man who has just raped an unwilling woman, but could well be a revelation of the bliss of love outside the law of genre/gender, outside of time itself. Howe gives this moment of blissful revelation to Ronald, not Laurence.³

Laurence was “born that way.” Ronald’s sexual ambiguity is born of adult pain. His transformation from the sleeping innocent whose beautiful ambiguity attracted Laurence, through generic masculinity to the passionate adult of ambiguous sex whom we meet in chapter 16, is Howe’s exploration of what happens to gender and desire in the crucible of experience and knowledge. More precisely, it is an exploration of what happens in the wake of the complex disillusionment and suffering that comes after the shattering of youth’s generic dreams, after the fantasy of separate spheres and marriage that Ronald outlines before he attacks Laurence is revealed to be a trap. It is through genre- and gender-altering love like he has just experienced that Ronald can imagine the bliss of an existence not driven forward into generic and gendered futures: “a past without a reckoning—a present without a future.” Through this new definition of love, in other words, Christian Ronald can glimpse immortality. But it is exactly the cry to love, which seems so freeing to Ronald, that horrifies the more pagan Laurence; again, his desire dies. It is at this point, when Ronald toasts love, that Laurence, the consummate hermaphrodite, drugs him and flees. The rape/sex scene ends here. In the first, generic reading, Laurence resists rape and escapes, passionless and sexually untouched. And in the second reading, Laurence and Ronald emerge from a bed of almost unimaginable pleasures that briefly carry them beyond and outside the law of genre/gender. But Ronald’s ambiguous sexuality is the coming to fruition of his Christian humanity, and he needs love to reach salvation. Laurence, the consummate hermaphrodite, does not. The idyll must and does end.

Understanding that there is a way to read the text that enables Laurence not only to feel sexual passion but to give and receive sexual pleasure allows us to do things with this text that are restricted if we believe only the overtell: that sexual feeling is not included in Laurence’s deluxe toolbox of sexual equipment. In “Manifest in Signs: The Politics of Sex and Representation in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,” P. Gabrielle Foreman defines the narrative strategy of what she calls “undertell.” Foreman provides a brilliant reading of Jacobs’s text that allows us to understand the possibility that Jacobs was raped
and, through “undertelling” that rape, could remain very much in charge of her own text and its effects. Jacobs had to negotiate a white readership with crippling expectations of what a black woman could experience and express. Foreman argues that in that context we need to recalibrate what we understand as “truth.” She encourages us to understand that the text’s “truth” operates on several levels that seem opposed only if we remain obsessed with a narrow, ultimately genital understanding of Jacobs’s claim to sexual triumph. It is in Jacobs’s acrobatic control of genre that Foreman suggests her triumph lies—a triumph over the readerly prurience of white women as well as the sexual prurience of white men.

This essay does not attempt to substitute one reading (Jacobs’s triumph over Norcom) for another (that Norcom really raped her). I resist accepting or offering any critical exegesis as a definitive one. Yet I do mean to call into question the politics of transparency that often lead critics to accept Jacobs’s principal script, her sexual ‘triumph,’ and that act to quiet down a subtext which constitutes her signifying narrative success. (Foreman 93)

Howe and Jacobs are of a generation, but Howe, born a banker’s daughter in 1819, is a very different author from Jacobs, born a slave woman’s daughter (and therefore a slave herself) in 1813. Howe is writing from the very center of Northeastern class, race, cultural, educational and marital privilege. She is writing a novel with no claims to “truth.” Unlike Jacobs, Howe did not publish her text and put it before the lascivious gaze of a judgmental readership, whether or not she was worrying about a potential audience while writing. And where Foreman is arguing that we should see a rape concealed behind the conventions of true womanhood, I am arguing that we should see mutually pleasurable sexual consummation behind the conventions of a rape scene. Nevertheless there is much in Foreman’s reading of Jacobs that is helpful here. Most immediately, I am inspired by Foreman’s call that we look past the question of “did she or didn’t she” to the question of how an author’s manipulation of textual convention allows her to almost silently theorize sex and sexuality. And theorize them far more complexly than we—always bound in spite of ourselves to the repressive hypothesis—ever allow the female members of Howe’s and Jacobs’s generation.

Foreman makes it clear why Jacobs’s strategy of undertell was entirely essential to both her political project and her integrity as a writer and a human being. But why does Howe employ it? If she did imagine that she was writing for an audience, she clearly couldn’t describe sex itself, but she could make her character libidinous. If she knew she wasn’t writing for publica-
tion, she could have written more explicitly about Laurence's sexuality and again, made him libidinous. The reason, I think, is that both Laurences—cold Laurence and horny Laurence—are important to what Howe is trying to theorize through her novel, but the two Laurences cannot touch because their critical projects are mutually exclusive. Denying Laurence sexual feeling allows Howe, for the majority of the text, to concentrate on the generic and diametrically opposed codes of nineteenth-century Euro-American gender. Howe is fascinated by the cultural opposition of men and women and by the limits of their gender performance. She pushes the envelope of that opposition, placing both male and female characters at the extreme edges of acceptable masculinity and femininity, then sets her “hermaphrodite” loose among them to explore what actually crossing the line might look and feel like. This exploration depends upon the thesis that Laurence has no sexual feeling; his asexuality keeps an analysis of gender categories in play. Were he to desire these men and women, his own use as a tourist—his abstraction from the characters he studies and his sentimental journey in their strange lands and among their bizarre customs—would be compromised.

But in the “undertell”—the reading that allows Laurence to be a passionate, pleasure-giving and -seeking lover—Howe explores something else, something we are now critically adept at parsing: that biological sex is different from gender and that neither biological sex nor gender are roadmaps for sexual desire. This “undertell” is the way that Howe explores the possibility that the biological codings of sex and the social codings of gender performance are immediately scrambled when mapped onto sexual feeling. It is the way she explores the inexpressible possibility that there is a wider spectrum of sexual attraction and practice than either biological sex or gender can account for. Foreman quotes Karen Halttunen’s description of the “sentimental typology of conduct” at mid-century: “The most important law of polite social geography was that no one shatter the magic of the genteel performance by acknowledging back regions that alone made the performance possible” (quoted in Foreman 78). If gender is the “principal script” of *The Hermaphrodite*, sexual desire is the “back region.” Howe couldn't have the principal script without the suppression of the undertell, and the very fact that the narrator firmly denies the existence of sexual joy and consummation for Laurence should tell us that of course sexual joy is quietly pleasuring itself in the wings.

How Laurence denies sexual desire is itself very revealing. What exactly is he denying? Early in the novel, Laurence explains that:

> For man or woman, as such, I felt an entire indifference—when I wished to trifle, I preferred the latter, when I wished to reason gravely, I chose the
former. I sought sympathy from women, advice from men, but love from neither. Like all other young creatures, I was gladly in the company of the gay and the gentle, but I could not be in it long without learning that a human soul, simply as such, and not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender, has but a lame and unsatisfactory part to play in this world. (Howe, H.5)

Is Laurence really saying that he cannot feel sexual passion? I think not. “For man or woman, as such, I felt an entire indifference.” That “as such” provides a world of possibility. A man “as such” is a man. But what about a man or woman who is not “as such?” What about for man or woman, as something else? A man who is a woman or a woman who is a man? Or both? And what does it mean to feel an “entire indifference” for man or woman? Entire and indifferent (from the Latin indifferēns, “making no distinction”) are, of course, what Laurence is. He is entire man and entire woman—each in its entirety. He is literally indifferent—not different from either—except that of course to be both in one is to be entirely different from everyone else. To say he “feels an entire indifference for” is not the same as saying he is without sexual passion. He is saying that he cannot feel the vive la différence that is endlessly hawked as the genre-driven engine behind heterosexual desire, because he is literally indifferent to both man and woman, as such. He is telling us, in other words, what doesn’t turn him on, what isn’t his kink. That doesn’t mean he has no kink at all.

So what are “man” and “woman”? They are the structural pieces of narrative, of story, of time. They are gender and genre, modes of entertainment, the one trifling, the other grave, the one sympathetic, the other instructive. Together they produce narrative—specifically described here as theater—that Laurence chooses, when he “wants.” Man and woman “as such,” then, provide for Laurence’s picky narrative desires, which are satisfied by strongly gendered players whose performances please him socially though not sexually. But the price of being the voyeur, genderless and genreless, is high. For Laurence, there is nothing outside of the watching: “A human soul, simply as such, and not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender, has but a lame and unsatisfactory part to play in this world.” Here that tricky, slippery “as such” is brought to bear not upon gender but upon the human soul. When used with “man or woman,” “as such” shakes the foundations of those two words and invites us to understand them as unstable. It hints at Laurence’s potentially voluminous sexual desires, were those generic codes to topple. But when used with the singular “human soul,” which has no opposite against which to ricochet and deliciously break, that phrase “simply as such” seals Laurence’s fate and shows us why the sex scene
I have argued for ends with Laurence running away from Ronald. In that scene we see Laurence physically capable of both entire possession and entire surrender; he is physiologically male and female and he uses sex to protect his “entire indifference,” his “simply as such” bothness. In the same scene we see wounded Ronald learn the pain and pleasure of both possession and surrender; his sexual pleasure is like Laurence’s, but for the young man the revelation of sexual joy outside the law of genre/gender leads to a revelation of spiritual joy. Both characters invite us to consider the possibility that possession and surrender, action and passivity, giving and receiving, public and private (the list goes on forever) are not specific to gender or to sexual acts, but to moments in time. Both characters experience and delight in a physical interlude in which I think we see Howe theorizing sex beyond gender. But it is when that capacity for passionate flux is brought to bear upon the soul, genderless and immortal, that Ronald and Laurence part ways. Physical passions experienced outside the law of genre/gender are, for Christian Ronald, the gateway to a new definition of love—and that new love is the thing that makes humans human and promises them immortality: “a past without a reckoning—a present without a future.” In contrast, Laurence’s description of his soul (rather than his body) as “not invested with the capacity of either entire possession or entire surrender” is a description of a soul that is not divided from itself, and that is therefore not invited to the orgy of post-lapsarian human feeling—love—promised in the New Testament: “he that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love.” Laurence is hermaphrodite in body, Ronald in soul. Laurence can have amazing sex, but he cannot move through the dramatic and sentimental teleology of salvation to Christian immortality. His immortality is of a different sort. He seems to come at last to speechless, motionless, eternal consciousness of his own powerlessness and voicelessness, possibly buried alive by friends who cannot see past the generic appearance of death. There is no narrative, no part in the play of heterosexual pairings and gendered posturing, and no possibility of salvation from that narrative, for a genreless human soul, simply as such.

In the principal script of The Hermaphrodite the exclusion of the ultimately speechless Laurence from time and narrative is the tragedy of gender and genre. But like Romeo and Juliet, whose plot informs The Hermaphrodite, this novel is perhaps a tragicomedy. In the undertell, the back region of the text, the above passage points us to a different understanding of the possibilities of being outside the script. Not a happy ending (there can be no ending at all for a storyless immortal, and indeed, the manuscript of The Hermaphrodite has neither a beginning nor an end), but stolen moments outside the structures of gender and genre, as there are in Romeo and Juliet—moments
of consummation. Neither man nor woman, Laurence can only be a watcher, with perhaps a “lame and unsatisfactory” walk-on role. But reading for the undertell, the implication is clear. Look offstage. Howe puts Laurence onstage as Juliet, and, because genre drives gender and vice versa, he is misread as a woman in disguise. Take him offstage, look back in his rooms—outside the script, beneath the text itself—and he is passionate man to Ronald’s woman and vice versa and both and neither.

Notes

1. Like Dana Luciano elsewhere in this volume, I mostly describe Laurence as “ambiguously sexed” rather than as a “hermaphrodite,” though sometimes that term is useful to me. For her careful parsing of the reasons for this choice, see her footnote 2.

2. See Gary Williams’s discussion of the importance of Cushman and her performances to Howe in note 24 of his introduction to The Hermaphrodite (Williams, “Speaking” xli–xlii), and Lisa Merrill’s discussion of Cushman’s performances in When Romeo Was a Woman (2006).


4. Renée Bergland, in her essay in this volume, carefully delineates which of several Borghese hermaphrodite statues Howe might be referencing here. Only one statue, which Howe could not have actually seen, represented male and female genitalia. Bergland argues convincingly that it is in fact a more coy statue that Howe probably knew. As Bergland explains, “The inaccessibility of the genitalia of the sleeping hermaphrodite in the villa make it the likeliest inspiration for Howe’s novel, since sexual inaccessibility is a much more central theme in Howe’s work than sexual exposure. But there is great erotic energy in sexual denials, and nineteenth-century writers seem to have shared Howe’s association of hermaphrodite statues with erotic impossibility” (Bergland 168). I agree with Bergland, and I think that Howe does describe the otherwise unseen genitals of the hermaphrodite in this section. She does so, however, in terms that reduplicate the statuary perfection and distance from human experience that Bergland theorizes in her essay: “nude sculptures offer ideal beauty without the soft pollution of actual flesh” (169). Here Howe describes Laurence’s genital bothness as Edenic, pre-gendered, and pre-sexed. She thus shows us the hermaphrodite’s bothness in the very moment that she asserts that bothness as the state of perfection from which humans are ontologically, teleologically, and narratively fallen, and of which human fleshliness, desire, and suffering is the punishing opposite.

5. For consideration of the anxieties and excitements surrounding the genders of Jesus in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American thought, see Stephen D. Moore 41–45 and 109–114. Suzanne Ashworth’s essay in this volume, “Spiritualized Bodies and Posthuman Possibilities: Technologies of Intimacy in The Hermaphrodite,” is a useful parallel to and historical anchor for my argument. She places the text in relationship to eighteenth-century Swedenborgian theological thought that theorizes the ungendering of the human spirit the closer it gets to perfection.

6. Dana Luciano in this volume reads Ronald’s toast as a cancellation of the “possibility of the conventional romance’s sequential progression. . . . [T]his desire calculates,
rather violently, on the moment alone” (235). I agree, but would add that Ronald’s redefinition of love comes after his disillusionment with gender and genre and that his reach to timelessness as a way of describing the love he now feels casts the “moment alone” as beyond rather than against genre/gender. This is a reading that dovetails with Ashworth’s delineation of the importance of Swedenborgian thought to Howe. Laurence will find himself in just such a timeless state at the “end” of the text, but in despair rather than bliss, a trance state that Bergland describes as a “Swedenborgian coma” (Bergland 165). The manuscript winds down with Laurence trapped in that trance because his bothness is physical rather than spiritual. The manuscript ends in mid-sentence, with Ronald in motion toward his statue-like lover. That motion toward love that never resolves into an ending is another “moment alone” given to Ronald but not to Laurence, and again it is the gesture of immortality, the genre/genderlessness of the spiritual rather than physical hermaphrodite.