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 a very strange letter, Charles Sumner announced that his bosom friend Samuel Howe wanted to marry Julia Ward. As Sumner put it, Howe, “as Presid’t of the Phrenological Soc., . . . would like to have her head in their collection—perhaps I might . . . [add] that he would like it for his private cabinet” (quoted in Williams, *HH* 47). This metaphor of murder, decapitation, and connoisseurship is a little disturbing. Even before the marriage, the rivalry between Charles Sumner and Julia was fatal, at least metaphorically.

Perhaps in some senses Sumner was right, and Julia Ward Howe’s marriage was a sort of murder. Her gloomy newlywed poetry certainly supports this notion. But as she began to recover herself and started to work on *The Hermaphrodite*, Julia might have imagined a sort of a “private cabinet” of her own. Hers would have been furnished with marble sculptures rather than phrenological specimens. Like most nineteenth-century Americans interested in sculpture, Julia Ward Howe would have given a prominent place in her mental gallery to Hiram Power’s iconic *Greek Slave*. Next to it, she might have imagined a copy of the lovely hermaphrodite of the Villa Borghese, a statue that must have fascinated her. Perhaps other niches would have held busts of the two great rivals for her husband’s attention: Laura Bridgman (sculpted by Julia’s friend Sophia Peabody Hawthorne) and Charles Sumner.
(sculpted by Julia’s brother-in-law, Thomas Crawford). In the halls of Howe’s imagination, Bridgman and Sumner might have served as objects of contemplation, frustration, perhaps even horror. A little further along, perhaps Howe would have placed a great, unfinished sculpture of Michelangelo’s, an emblem of impossible genius. These sculptural forms could have helped her to shape her own great, unfinished novel.

Sculpture was desperately important to Julia Ward Howe. She associated it with artistic genius, with disembodied spirituality, and with sexuality. Statues represented the extreme case of being trapped in a concrete body, an idea that Howe found so desperately frightening that she often veered between fear of death and fear of fleshly embodiment. Somehow, statues were both for her: dead, and concretely embodied in fixed form. And at the same time, so many statues were nude. For Howe, sculptures tied sexuality to death and to the confining limits of embodiment. They aroused her creative excitement and awakened her erotic interest.

One of the strangest moments of Howe’s Reminiscences is her account of the birth of her first daughter, Julia Romana, in Rome in 1844. “The early spring brought the dear gift of another life to gladden and enlarge our own,” Howe writes. And then, without a clear transition, the following paragraph continues: “Of the months preceding this event, I cannot at this date give any very connected account. The experience was at once a dream and a revelation. My mind had been able to anticipate something of the achievement of human thought, but of the patient work of the artist I had not had the smallest conception” (Howe, Rem 128). Readers who begin the paragraph expecting that Howe may have been preoccupied with pregnancy during the “months preceding” her first child’s birth may presume that her dreams and revelations were concerned with childbearing. At first, even “the patient work of the artist” seems that it might be a metaphor for gestation. But in fact Howe soon makes clear that during the months preceding the birth, she was preoccupied not with pregnancy but with sculptures and tombs. The “conception” that she remembers is her new understanding of the possibility of death—brought home to her when she fears being lost in the catacombs, and culminating with her new appreciation for sculpture. The sculpture galleries move her and frighten her, she explains:

Among the wonderful sights of that winter I recall an evening visit to the sculpture gallery of the Vatican, where the statues were shown us by torchlight. I had not as yet made the acquaintance with those marble shapes, which were rendered so lifelike by the artful illumination that when I saw them afterward in the daylight, it seemed to me that they had died. (Howe, Rem 129)
Light and shadow, death and life, stone and flesh. For Julia Ward Howe, as for many of her cultured contemporaries, sculpture was richly paradoxical, sometimes embarrassing, sometimes terrifying, but always fascinating. And on top of all that, it somehow managed to be polite. Howe did not publish a graphic account of the actual conception of her first daughter. In its place, she offered an account of the revelatory new conception that took place in the sculpture galleries of Rome.

Howe’s *Reminiscences*, with their strange omissions and associations, were definitely written for publication. Indeed, the woman who sat down to compose them had been a literary celebrity for much of her life. But the Laurence manuscript was much more private, much more raw. There is no evidence that Howe ever really considered publishing it. Strikingly, in the private manuscript the connection between sex and sculpture is, if anything, stronger than in the public one. *The Hermaphrodite* is plotted around statues. Although the plot turns on its protagonist’s anomalous genitalia, there is relatively little discussion of Laurence’s body. Where we might expect flesh, Howe gives us marble. Rather than monsters, she presents us with statues. Or perhaps she writes her own gothic Pygmalion story—the gradual coming to life of a statue who eventually becomes a “beautiful monster” (Howe, *H* 193) in his own eyes, even as his admiring friends insist that he is “the poetic dream of the ancient sculptor, more beautiful, though less human, than either man or woman” (Howe, *H* 194). Not man, not woman, and not quite human, Laurence is instead the dream of a sculptor.

In this essay, I discuss a number of specific statues. First, *The Greek Slave*, by Hiram Powers, offers a context for discussion of nineteenth-century neoclassical sculpture. Second, I turn to the only statue that is mentioned by name in Howe’s novel, the Borghese hermaphrodite. Laurence’s sexual ambiguity is coded through his resemblance to this statue. Yet although the Borghese hermaphrodite is the touchstone of Howe’s *Hermaphrodite*, it is not the only statue that the text takes up. Each of the significant episodes in the narrative can be keyed to a particular sculpture. The hermit’s cottage episode contains a long description of a bas-relief of a veiled woman. I associate this renunciatory image with the third statue I discuss, a bust of Laura Bridgman. Next, Laurence and Ronald’s passionate friendship is broken when Ronald compares Laurence to a statue and tries to embrace him with enough passion to “turn marble itself to molten flame” (Howe, *H* 87). For this essay, Charles Sumner is the emblem of impassioned intimate friendship between men, and the bust of Sumner, the fourth in this essay’s imaginary gallery, must be considered here. Finally, in Rome, Ronald’s renunciation of Laurence leaves him a “beautiful monster” made of stone. I connect Howe’s beautiful monster to Michelangelo’s unfinished sculptures, the fifth and final group of statues
under discussion. Other than the reference to the Borghese hermaphrodite, the associations that I offer here are speculative. And yet, Howe’s concrete ties to these particular sculptures were very strong. Considering the specific statues that were important to Howe offers a useful strategy for understanding the issues of physicality and spirituality, anatomy and identity, that inform her conceptions of life and death, tangled as they are with her conceptions of art and sex.

I. The Greek Slave

Why sculpture? What does making statues have to do with the complexities of sexual anatomy and sexual identity in play here? Although these are real questions for readers today, in the 1840s the connections would have been fairly obvious. For one thing, the prevailing neoclassical aesthetic dictated that most human figures were nude. At the same time, extremely modest clothing fashions meant that sculpture galleries were one of the few places where the human form was on display. After Hiram Powers’s wildly popular *Greek Slave* (figure 1) toured the United States in the 1840s, cultured men and women of the nineteenth century equated statuary with naked bodies. Looking at sculpture was an occasion for contemplating human anatomy and for thinking about sex and sexuality. Four decades after Howe’s marriage, a terrified Edith Wharton, “seized with such a dread at the whole dark mystery,” asked her mother what would happen on her wedding night. Her mother said, “with an effort, ‘You’ve seen enough . . . statues in your life. . . . You can’t be as stupid as you pretend!’” (Lee 76).

And so it makes sense that Howe would turn to sculpture as she tried to represent sex. Many scholars document the prevalence of this sort of thought. Most notably in *Marble Queens and Captives*, Joy Kasson argues that nineteenth-century Americans turned to statues to explore their “ideas, hopes, fears, and associations surrounding the subject of women—their roles, their capabilities” (Kasson 2). As Kasson explains it, *The Greek Slave* embodied contradictory meanings, “—eroticism indulged and denied, passion and passionlessness, power and powerlessness” (Kasson 72). Nineteenth-century Americans didn’t merely associate sculpture with sex, they associated it with sex’s contradictions. To add a further layer of complexity, the statue explicitly represented a white slave, defined as “Greek,” her chained nude body constructed from pure white marble. In America in the 1840s, whiteness, nakedness, and slavery were a shocking and fascinating combination. Thinking about sculpture was a way to think about both race and sex, and about the vexed relationships between anatomy and identity.
Figure 1. Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*. By permission of Yale University Art Gallery
Anatomy and identity are a difficult problem. Alice Dreger explains, “The great theorist of racism W. E. B. Du Bois asserted that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line. I argue . . . that we are far from having solved this problem, and that the problem of the twenty-first century will be the great fault on which the color line falls: the anatomy-identity line” (Dreger, One 9–10). Dreger’s revision of Du Bois moves from color to anatomy, from racial identity to identity itself. Her reformulation allows us to think about sex alongside race, and it also opens up space to consider blind people, deaf people, hermaphrodites, conjoined twins, dwarves, users of wheelchairs and crutches or prosthetics, pregnant women, and comatose people who linger on life support—in short, those with anomalous bodies and complicated identities. But Dreger, like Du Bois before her, is careful not to focus attention exclusively upon the anomalies. Whether normal or strange, the real problem is that anatomy is tethered to identity in ways that no one quite understands. The problem is the relation between anatomy and identity and the lines that link them together and divide them from each other—tough as steel hawsers, fine as gossamer. Anatomy–identity lines are as hard to locate as they are easy to cross.

Dreger may be right that the anatomy–identity line is central to twenty-first century thought, but this doesn’t mean that the problem is new. Long before Dreger, long before Du Bois, American thinkers were fascinated with similar philosophical and political problems. The paradoxes of equality and difference have been central to the United States since its founding. People of color and women have often struggled with the tangled relation between anatomies and identities, since whiteness and maleness were the foundational norms for United States citizenship. In such a context, to be female or to be nonwhite is to be anatomically anomalous—and hence to have an anomalous identity, whether you want it or not.

Alice Dreger’s anatomy–identity line offers useful new words for an old problem. Like Mark Twain and Julia Ward Howe (and others), Dreger focuses her discussion on the extremely anomalous bodies of conjoined twins and hermaphrodites in order to consider fundamental philosophical issues surrounding race and sex. These hard cases exemplify the complexities of identity for us today as they did more than a hundred years ago when Twain wrote *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and “Those Extraordinary Twins,” and Howe secretly penned her hermaphrodite novel. But although there are many similarities between nineteenth-century approaches to the problem of identity and twenty-first-century approaches, there are also some startling differences. Today it makes sense to consider many angles that would be utterly foreign to Julia Ward Howe—for us, film and photography, along with medical scans
and genetic codes, are places where anatomies and identities come into focus. For Howe, on the other hand, sculpture was a clear locus for working through the problematic contradictions of anatomies and identities, bodies and souls.

The first decades of the nineteenth century saw a sudden surge in sculpture making. Artists from all over Europe and the Americas converged on Rome, where they learned the complex technological process of nineteenth-century sculpture. Many knew how to cut, chisel, and polish stone, but sculptors were not stone cutters—they worked in wax or clay for the most part, then hired workmen to transfer their designs to marble. Nineteenth-century statue making was an industrial process, relying on trains and shipping lines to transport materials and using a coordinated workforce of many specialized laborers. A sculptor’s studio was a hive of activity, stacked with dangerous chemicals, tools, and machines, along with dozens of highly trained workers to use them. Studios were loud and crowded. There was nothing solitary or private about them. To the contrary, most studios were open to the public and functioned as showrooms and galleries as well as workplaces. When Charles Dickens visited sculptors’ studios in Italy in 1844, he commented that it seemed “so strange to me, that those exquisite shapes, replete with grace, and thought, and delicate repose, should grow out of all this toil, and sweat, and torture!” (Dickens, Pictures 106) Like many of his contemporaries, Dickens was fascinated by the intense contrast between the toil, sweat and torture of early industrial production and the “delicate repose” of neoclassical sculpture.

The industrial and Victorian aspects of nineteenth-century sculpture may not be immediately apparent to us, in part because the sculptors often tried to emulate classical statuary. To a large extent the aesthetic forms were ancient. Even so, Hiram Powers’s Greek Slave was wholly of its time. Art historian Tom Flynn explains that its success “can be attributed to its timely subject matter, managing on an abstract level to evoke a range of contemporary political and social issues” (Flynn 106), including the Greek War of Independence, the abolitionist movement, and the women’s movement (all causes very important to Samuel and Julia Ward Howe). In addition, the startling anachronism of crinolined Victorians viewing neoclassical nudes changed the classical aesthetic deeply. Powers’s presentation of a naked female body was very Victorian—the statue was carefully crafted to present female nudity as the apotheosis of modesty. In a pamphlet that Powers distributed to the throngs who came to see The Greek Slave, the Reverend Orville Dewey carefully explained that “The Greek Slave is clothed all over with sentiment; sheltered, protected by it from every profane eye” (Kasson 58). Victorian sentiment, strenuously applied, could clothe the naked. But at the same time,
the shock of nudity was much greater for Victorians than it would have been for ancients, or even than it is for us in the spandex-clad present. Tom Flynn argues that the success of *The Greek Slave* derives from its “managing to hold such contradictory values in fruitful tension” (Flynn 106). Like Powers’s *Greek Slave*, nineteenth-century sculpture in general was paradoxical and exciting, if sometimes troubling. Sculpture embodied contradiction as much as it embodied sex.

**The Sculpture Motif**

Although Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* was the most popular statue in mid-nineteenth-century America (as both Margaret Fuller and Henry James commented upon with disgust), Howe does not mention it in *The Hermaphrodite*. Rather than a chained, naked white woman, her subject is likened to a series of sculptures, starting and finally ending, with the ancient Greek hermaphrodite in the Borghese collection. The first telling reference to sculpture is on page 12. Emma says to Laurence (the ambiguously sexed narrator): “You are like this marble against which I lean my head, whose pulses throb so that there seems to be a pulse in the cold stone itself—thus, a heart that is near you may think to feel the presence of one in you, but it is marble, only marble” (Howe, H 12). Emma does not know about Laurence’s ambiguous genitals, but she fears he is one of those “unsexed souls” (Howe, H 15). She wants to rescue him from unsexedness—transform him from marble to flesh. Laurence tells us that Emma’s radiant love and delight “sent a strange thrill to the very core of my frozen heart, and again I asked myself: “What is it to be a woman?” But just as Laurence starts to feel his first strange thrills, he overhears an Italian stranger remark that he bears a “strange resemblance to the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Howe, H 16), and deadly faint at being compared to the sculpture, he rushes away. When Emma follows him to his bedroom, Laurence listens to her propositions “in stony silence.” She realizes her mistake, runs mad, and dies. 

In penance, Laurence retreats to a hermit’s cottage that has a marble chapel. “No portraits of saints, no luxury of religious symbols appeared on the walls, but that upon the left of the altar supported a strange, monumental conceit. This was a sculptured bas-relief, describing the head and bust of a female figure. The forms of neck and shoulders were delicately chiseled, . . . but a strange caprice of art concealed the features that should have given the charm of soul to such perfect physical beauty. The sculptor, and his patron, had kept their secret—a marble veil covered the face, as hopeless as
the grave” (Howe, H 38). Laurence falls into a coma on the marble floor in front of the veiled statue, and he is discovered there by Ronald, “quite alone, stretched on the floor as stiff and cold as the marble itself” (Howe, H 50).

Ronald and Laurence share their lives for a few years, but then Ronald writes a poem about falling in love with a statue that eventually comes to life and kills the lover with a fatal embrace. The moral of his poem: “It is more dangerous to love marble than flesh and blood” (Howe, H 75). In spite of the danger, Ronald embraces Laurence and passionately claims, “I bear in my bosom a wondrous fire, a strange alchemy, that can turn marble itself to molten flame” (Howe, H 87). In response, Laurence drugs Ronald, turning him to a statue in his turn: “No marble could have been more unconscious than Ronald, as I laid him upon his couch” (Howe, H 88).

Finally, Laurence runs away, moving to Rome to assume the garb of a woman. Here, he experiences the limitations of women’s clothing and social roles for the first time, while he waits for Ronald, who eventually arrives to kiss Laurence “on cheek, brow, and lip” and then renounce him, saying: “By day perhaps again, but by night, never!” (Howe, H 193). As Laurence tells it, “These words awoke in me a consciousness of shame, and I snatched myself abruptly from Ronald’s grasp, but as he turned to leave me, shame was swallowed up in agony—I sprang to his side,—I held him fast with all my strength—we looked again into each other’s eyes. One long gaze of tearless anguish, one mute appeal to heaven, and Ronald was gone, and the beautiful monster sat as before on the heap of stones, in the ancient forum, himself as mute and dead as any thing there” (Howe, H 193).

Desolate, Laurence falls into a Swedenborgian coma in which he/she is finally acknowledged as both male and female (rather than neither) and likened to “the poetic dream of the ancient sculptor, more beautiful, though less human, than either man or woman” (Howe, H 194). The manuscript ends mid-sentence, with the paralyzed but conscious Laurence listening to the hurrying footsteps of Ronald, approaching the bed.

II. The Borghese Hermaphrodite

The only particular sculpture that Howe’s manuscript explicitly refers to is the Borghese hermaphrodite. Although there is no question that Howe means to invoke an actual sculpture, there are a number of hermaphrodites associated with the Villa Borghese. The first was a very beautiful Hellenistic statue of a sleeping hermaphrodite that was sold to the Louvre a few decades before Howe visited Europe.
Figure 2. *Sleeping Hermaphrodite*, Roman copy of a Greek original, second half of 2nd century B.C.E. Marble, 148 cm. MA 231. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. Louvre, Paris, France. Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY
The Hermaphrodite Room in the Villa Borghese was designed to display this version of the sculpture. It’s likely that Howe saw this sculpture in Paris. When she arrived in Rome, she had the chance to see a few more versions of hermaphrodite statues from the Borghese collection—two in the Villa Borghese and a third in the Palazzo Borghese. Ever since the first sleeping hermaphrodite was transferred from the Borghese Collection to Paris, a second, very similar sleeping hermaphrodite has taken its place as a prominent feature in the Hermaphrodite Room of the villa, surrounded by paintings and mosaics depicting Hermaphroditus’s fateful meeting (and melding) with the nymph Salmacis. But the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (whose book was translated by Howe’s acquaintance Giles Henry Lodge in 1849) also mentions that there was a second hermaphrodite that was kept locked in a closet at the Villa Borghese because its posture was “somewhat bold”—bent slightly backward, lifting its garments to offer full frontal exposure. Winckelmann particularly admired the closeted hermaphrodite: “Nothing can be seen lovelier, smoother, rounder, and especially softer, than these features, these limbs. . . . The skill of the artist has enabled him to introduce . . . a touch of common humanity—a trace of sensuality—and even by this very means to enhance the fascination of his work” (Winckelmann 59). This secret hermaphrodite, Winckelmann explains, was intended for a niche, and so its back is “very carelessly handled, or rather it is only sketched” (Winckelmann 59). When the two Southern strangers compare Laurence to “the lovely hermaphrodite in the villa Borghese” (Winckelmann 16), there is at least a chance that Howe is thinking of the unfinished hermaphrodite, the closeted, frontal sculpture. But it is far more likely that Howe is invoking the better-known sleeping hermaphrodite, nestled face to the wall in the Hermaphrodite Room. Gary Williams points out the coyness of this positioning: “the work is placed in the room so that the figure’s left side is to the wall, thus preventing precisely the view that the viewer presumably most wants” (Williams, HH 96). Winckelmann is clear about what there would be to see: “All figures of this kind have maiden breasts, together with the male organs of generation; the form in other respects, as well as the features of the face, is feminine” (Winckelmann 56–57). But in order to see either a hermaphrodite’s sculpted genitalia or its face, Howe would have needed to find access to the closeted hermaphrodite in the villa, or to travel to Paris, where the original Borghese hermaphrodite was displayed more forthrightly.

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. At least one nineteenth-century
writer seems to have shared Howe’s association of the Borghese hermaphro-
dite with erotic impossibility, while also understanding it as a wellspring of
heightened passion. In 1863, Algernon Charles Swinburne wrote a series of
highly charged erotic sonnets about the Borghese hermaphrodite that he saw
at the Louvre. His poetry helps us understand the passionate lyrical eroticism
that the hermaphrodite evoked for mid-nineteenth-century writers. Swin-
burne sees the hermaphrodite as an embodiment of sexual impossibility as
well as possibility, what he describes as:

A strong desire begot on great despair,
A great despair cast out by strong desire. (Swinburne 104)

Like Swinburne, Howe was fascinated by the convergence of despair and
desire, and she also saw the hermaphrodite as a locus of both. Winckelmann
also understood the Borghese hermaphrodite as paradoxically chaste and
voluptuous, explaining, “It was the intention of the artist to represent this
Hermaphrodite as sleeping, it is true, yet sleeping unquietly, and excited by
voluptuous dreams” (Winckelmann 57). The Hermaphrodite’s unquiet sleep
was intimately connected to Julia Ward Howe’s own experience of Rome as
a “dream and a revelation,” as her manuscript demonstrates. But these con-
nections are complicated, ambiguous, and contradictory. Howe’s published
Reminiscences make it clear that she can offer no “very connected account”
of all that she was thinking and feeling in the first years of her marriage, but
her unpublished hermaphrodite manuscript also shows us that she was fas-
cinated by the strange connections she found between sex and statues, desire
and despair, the possible and the impossible.

Perhaps because of its potent combination of erotic impossibility as well
as possibility, many nineteenth-century thinkers saw the hermaphrodites as
embodying ideal beauty. Winckelmann explained matter-of-factly, “artists
sought to express in the mixed nature of two sexes an image of higher beauty:
this image was ideal” (Winckelmann 56). Swinburne puts it more lyrically:

To what strange end hath some strange god made fair
The double blossom of two fruitless flowers?
Hid love in all the folds of all thy hair,
Fed thee on summers, watered thee with showers,
Given all the gold that all the seasons wear
To thee that art a thing of barren hours?

In another “Hermaphroditus” sonnet, Swinburne writes:
Yea, love, I see, it is not love but fear.
Nay sweet, it is not fear but love, I know;
Or wherefore should thy body’s blossom blow
So sweetly or thine eyelids leave so clear
Thy gracious eyes that never made a tear? (Swinburne 105)

Actual human bodies disappoint. Flesh is weak and somewhat soggy. Eyes that make tears can never be as unsullied as the hard eyes of marble statues. For Swinburne, as for Howe and many mid-century thinkers and writers, nude sculptures offer ideal beauty without the soft pollution of actual flesh. The Borghese hermaphrodite offers all this and more—the chance to imagine sex itself as equally fantastic and ideal, unbound from anatomical strictures that force most human beings onto one side or the other of the line that divides male from female. The hermaphrodite allows us to imagine the human body as a place where both maleness and femaleness may blossom simultaneously.

Seeing these new possibilities seems to have been a deeply emotional and enlarging experience for many American tourists in Italy at mid-century. Margaret Fuller remarked that the artworks at the Borghese Palace reflected her gaze back at her—the portraits, she wrote, “look upon me new and strange. They are portraits of men such as I have not known. . . . In the Borghese Palace one of the figures has developed my powers of gazing to an extent unknown before” (Fuller, AHAA 223). Although she was not referring to the Borghese hermaphrodite, Fuller’s experience of having her own “powers of gazing” developed by the galleries of Rome was quite common. Many American women exulted in the experience. Upon her first visit to the Borghese gallery, Sophia Peabody Hawthorne exclaimed, “I congratulate myself, that I have travelled to Rome from America!” (Hawthorne, Notes 235). The sense of exultation that Fuller and Hawthorne experienced in the Borghese gallery is closely related to Howe’s deeply emotional experience there. There is no question that a large part of the emotion was intellectual passion—Fuller, Hawthorne, and Howe felt that they were becoming educated, cultured people. Particularly for women, whose access to formal education and culture was often limited, the tourist experience of art could be remarkably liberating. It was also undoubtedly passionate. Remembering her 1851 departure from Rome, Howe remarked, “As the time of my departure approached, I felt how deeply the subtle fascination of Roman life had entered into my very being. Pain, amounting almost to anguish, seized me at the thought that I might never again behold those ancient monuments” (Howe, Rem 203–4). Notice Howe’s movement from “subtle fascination”
to “anguish,” as she tries to describe the way that the ancient monuments “entered into my very being.” The emotional and intellectual involvement with the classical sculpture that she found in Rome was intimately connected to her sense of herself—her being. And yet the complexity, ambiguity, and passion of those connections were so intense that it was hard for her to give a very connected account of what she experienced there. The talisman for all of these confusing passions was the Borghese hermaphrodite, a classical sculpture whose subtle fascination was the foundation for her first long, disconnected, writing project.

III. Laura Bridgman and Charles Sumner

Julia Ward Howe’s world was thickly populated with sculptures. She knew many sculptors, sculpture critics, and sculptor’s models, and she was a familiar guest in the studios of Rome. Before she married, she attended a conversation led by Margaret Fuller, who wrote quite a bit about sculpture. Also in attendance was Sophia Peabody, soon to be married to Nathaniel Hawthorne. At that time, before either woman married, Sophia Peabody was one of the most accomplished artists in Boston—she’d just made her first three-dimensional sculpture, and it was a great success at the Boston Athenaeum’s 1842 show. The model for Sophia Peabody (Hawthorne’s) sculpture was Laura Bridgman, the celebrated blind, deaf, mute student of Samuel Gridley Howe. The Athenaeum also proudly displayed a bust of Charles Sumner, Samuel Gridley Howe’s dear friend. Thomas Crawford, the sculptor of Sumner, would soon host the Howes on their honeymoon, fall in love with Julia’s sister Louisa and marry her. In the following years, his studio in Rome would be the central meeting place for Julia’s coterie of Roman friends, many of whom were sculptors, sculpture patrons, or art critics or historians. Crawford was a very successful American sculptor who would go on to win commissions for many of the most significant public sculptures in Washington D.C., including the figure of Liberty perched atop the dome of the Capitol building.

It is remarkable that both Laura Bridgman’s and Charles Sumner’s busts were on display at the Athenaeum Show of 1842, since Bridgman was Samuel Gridley Howe’s most celebrated student and Charles Sumner was his best friend. Early in their relationship, Julia’s interest in Samuel might have been piqued by the sculptures she was likely to have seen on her visits to Boston in 1841 and 1842. Neither bust would be referred to specifically in her first manuscript, but there is no question that Julia Ward Howe was familiar with
both sculptures: the Bridgman bust was in the Perkins school, where Howe lived in the first years of her marriage (along with Laura Bridgman herself). The Sumner bust would remain in the Athenaeum, a place Howe visited frequently. She couldn’t have missed it, especially since it had been made by her future brother-in-law. More important than her sister’s relationship to the bust’s sculptor, the fact that Charles Sumner was her husband’s closest friend would have drawn her attention. Both Sumner and Bridgman had been present on the day that Julia met Samuel.

From the very start, Laura Bridgman and Charles Sumner both triangulated the Howes’ difficult marriage. In many ways they were Julia’s rivals for her husband’s attention, if not his love. But what makes the busts of Bridgman and Sumner deeply important to a discussion of *The Hermaphrodite* are the anatomy/identity questions that motivate the novel. Bridgman was a disabled woman, arguably the iconic disabled woman of her time. Publicly, Sumner was best known as a Massachusetts Senator. Privately, Julia Ward Howe seems to have thought of him as something like a gay man, famously declaring, “Sumner ought to have been a woman, and [Samuel Howe] to have married her” (Williams *HH*, 61).

I consider Bridgman as Julia Ward Howe’s icon for the disabled woman and Sumner as her icon for the gay man. Howe saw herself as “a student and a dreamer” (Howe, *Rem* 84), and longed to write a masterpiece and transform herself into a woman of genius. Yet this identity, “woman of genius,” like those of the disabled woman and the homosexual man, would put her at odds with her own anatomy and position her outside of conventional nineteenth-century femaleness. *The Hermaphrodite* works through these tangled identities/anatomies by casting them into sculptural form.

**IV. The Veiled Woman: Laura Bridgman**

Although there are many sculptures of veiled women, the bust of Laura Bridgman is the one that graced the entry to the Perkins School where Howe lived early in her married life. Sophia Peabody had worked on the statue in the months before her marriage to Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1842.

A statue of a person like Bridgman presents a number of interesting aesthetic problems. The absence of sensation is particularly hard to depict, since statues are generally unable to sense. Sophia Peabody solved this problem by representing Bridgman with a light bandage over her eyes. Since Bridgman habitually wore such a covering it was an accurate as well as symbolic choice. The Peabody statue, with its subtle veil, possesses a fascinating interiority: It
Figure 3. Sophia Peabody, bust of Laura Bridgman. Photo by Renée Bergland
idealizes girlhood and blindness. It is not a full figure, but just a head and shoulders—as different from Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* as a sculpture can be. Neither sculpture dramatizes a woman’s gaze, but the Bridgman bust emphasizes her blindness from within, while the Greek Slave emphasizes her body from the outside, under other’s eyes. Megan Marshall describes the bust as “[a] remarkable likeness” that “captured Bridgman in a pensive mood on the verge of fame, her unseeing eyes masked with the cloth band she always wore, her youth and vulnerability poignantly expressed in delicate, bare shoulders and loose, lanky hair” (Marshall 418).

As Sophia worked on the bust, the *New York Times* reported on May 18, 1883, “Laura herself watched the progress of the clay model with keen interest, perusing its features with delicate, sensitive fingers, clapping her little hands with delight, and gleefully speaking of the bust as her ‘white baby.’”

The bust is an ambitious work by a young woman. Megan Marshall comments, “In some ways, Sophia’s sculpture was no less prodigious than her subject: the first three-dimensional work in clay she had produced from a live model would one day be cast into copies for blind schools across America, themselves brought into being because of Howe’s widely broadcast success with Laura Bridgman” (Marshall 418). The *Times* proclaimed the statue a “perfect success,” and announced that by 1883, “Copies have been multiplied, and nearly every school for the blind and for deaf mutes in this country . . . has procured one.” Thus, the Bridgman bust represented more than Bridgman herself—paradoxically it offered an idealization of female disability and an example of female artistic genius, each “ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (Garland Thomson 29).

The statue with veiled eyes may have been particularly resonant for the young Julia Ward Howe in the early years of her marriage, as she struggled to write her *Hermaphrodite* manuscript and to find her way in her very difficult marriage and situation. In the manuscript itself, after Laurence is exposed as a hermaphrodite, he retreats to a hermitage furnished with a marble chapel, where he spends his days fasting and contemplating a bas relief of a veiled woman. Howe describes the sculpture as “the head and bust of a female figure. The forms of neck and shoulders were delicately chiseled, . . . but a strange caprice of art concealed the features that should have given the charm of soul to such perfect physical beauty. The sculptor, and his patron, had kept their secret—a marble veil covered the face” (Howe, *H* 38). In this description, Howe’s emphasis on the delicate shoulders and neck, along with the veil, strengthens associations with the Bridgman bust. But what is more interesting is Howe’s emphasis on “strange caprice” and her opposition between “perfect physical beauty” and the secrets of the soul.
Even without the Bridgman associations, the veiled woman sculpture represents a body disassociated from a soul. All of the statues that are invoked in *The Hermaphrodite* concern bodies and souls (anatomies and identities) that are in tension—but the veiled woman at the hermitage is the most explicit embodiment of a longing to escape the physical senses. Laurence’s sequestered life is ascetic almost to the point of being suicidal. Lying on the cold marble floor of the chapel, he asks, “What obligation binds me to languish in patient subjection to the laws of animal being?” (Howe, *H* 46).

Let me have no sights, no sounds, no soft bed to tempt me to repose, no fire to awaken the physical pleasure of warmth. I am choked with the solid, asphyxiating gases of our materiality—give me the pure atmosphere of the upper regions—let me once breathe the air of sublimated spirituality, even though that breath should forever dissolve the link that binds me to the visible and tangible. (Howe, *H* 47)

Laurence wants to become a disembodied soul. He longs to “have no sights, no sounds, no soft bed” and to “dissolve the link that binds me to the visible, the tangible.”

The delicate Laura Bridgman whom Charles Dickens described in *American Notes* and Howe described in her *Reminiscences* was certainly remarkable for experiencing no sights and no sounds and having no link to the visible. Bridgman, however, could still feel soft beds and warmth and was strongly linked to the tangible. Bridgman was without the senses of sight, hearing, or smell. Her sense of taste was not particularly acute. Touch was all for her. Of course, she and Samuel Gridley Howe communicated by touch—and once they had developed an effective mode of communication, Bridgman used it to communicate with all of her interlocutors. In a very real sense, all of Bridgman’s relationships were physical. This is not to say that Bridgman’s relationship with Samuel Gridley Howe was sexual, or even to imply that Julia Ward Howe thought of it in such terms. Rather, it provides an important piece of context for *The Hermaphrodite* manuscript, in which Howe works through questions about physical touch and physicality in general as well as sexuality.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson defines “the disabled woman” as “a cultural third term, defined by the original pair of the masculine figure and the feminine figure. Seen as the opposite of the masculine figure, but also imagined as the antithesis of the normal woman, the figure of the disabled female is thus ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (Garland Thomson 29). If we consider Bridgman as a “cultural third term,” then she becomes an important source for Howe’s thinking. Because of
her array of disabilities, Bridgman had been unable to communicate before Samuel Gridley Howe devised the tactile methods that made communication possible. Her soul was trapped in her body, isolated from others. And then, by touching, she became connected. This sort of connection is not sexual and not even necessarily sensual. And yet, there is an erotic edge, a certain unavoidable intimacy, to communicating by touch. By the time Helen Keller took Bridgman's place as the iconic disabled woman of her time, many writers were more frank about their prurient interest in the sexual energy tied to tactile communication. Kim E. Nielsen comments, “What interests me is the discomfort with which so many consider Keller's sexuality. She knew that her intense tactile nature made people uneasy . . .” (Nielsen 132). Nielsen sees Helen Keller as a “cultural third term” (as Garland Thomson would put it), particularly because of her sexual energy. “Physically attractive, and disabled, to many Keller literally embodies contradiction” (Nielsen 132).

The contradiction came because of shared cultural conviction that disabled women must avoid sex. When Alexander Graham Bell asked Helen Keller about whether she had considered marriage, Keller responded, “I can't imagine a man wanting to marry me. . . . I should think it would seem like marrying a statue.” Keller understood herself as sexually interesting but forbidden from sexual activity. Tellingly, she reached for the metaphors of sculpture to articulate her own impossibility.

The same can be said for Bridgman. She was fascinating to many because of the very condition, and contradictions, that would later make Keller so fascinating (Nielson 132). For Howe, who shared a household with Bridgman while she was writing *The Hermaphrodite*, these contradictions and confusions were very much alive. Bridgman may well have been “ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (Garland Thomson 29), but the unhappily married Howe, spending her time writing rather than doing domestic chores, may have seen herself in a similar light. For Howe, such ambiguity was fascinating. Bridgman's position as a “cultural third term” might have made her a sort of hermaphrodite in Howe's eyes; certainly, as she struggled to write, Howe saw herself, like Bridgman, as “ambiguously positioned both inside and outside the category of woman” (Garland Thomson 29).

V. “The Marble Image of a Saint”: Charles Sumner

The idealized and unparticular statues mentioned in the body of *The Hermaphrodite* are not secretly coded references to particular works. The bas relief of a veiled woman is imaginary; it isn't a description of Sophia Pea-
body’s three-dimensional bust of Laura Bridgman. Similarly, the “marble image of a saint” that Ronald writes his long poem about is certainly not a secret reference to a statue of Charles Sumner. The saint in the text seems to be female—or at least it is accorded a feminine pronoun when it descends from “her marble pedestal,” so that the lover may “clasp her to his heart” (Howe, H 75).

But although there are no direct equivalencies between Sumner and the “marble image,” it is useful to consider the man Sumner and at least one of the sculptures made of him during his life—the Roman bust by Thomas Crawford. During Sumner’s Grand Tour in 1839, he became fast friends with the young American sculptor who was struggling to start out in Rome. He commissioned a bust (figure 4) and sent it back to the Boston Athenaeum, where it was admired enough to convince Bostonians to commission a large Orpheus that Crawford had designed in clay and longed to make in marble. Crawford’s bust of Sumner can be said to have started the neoclassical sculpture craze in Boston, while the Orpheus convinced Bostonians that sculpture was “the natural talent of an American,” as Margaret Fuller put it, asserting, “I have no doubt that glories will be displayed by our sculptors unknown to classic art” (Fuller, AHAA 356). Fuller also wrote a sonnet on “Crawford’s Orpheus” and described Crawford as “the sculptor of Orpheus—him who had such faith, such music of divine thought, that he made the stones move, turned the beasts from their accustomed haunts, and shamed hell itself into sympathy with the grief of love” (Fuller, AHAA 242).

When Julia Ward visited in Boston in 1841 and 1842, Charles Sumner and Margaret Fuller were both there to introduce her to their passion for sculpture. She was sure to have admired Crawford’s bust of Sumner along with his grand Orpheus at the Athenaeum. Sumner also introduced Julia to Samuel Gridley Howe, on the fateful day when he and Longfellow took her and sisters out to Perkins to meet Laura Bridgman. Later, his letter of introduction to Thomas Crawford would lead to Julia’s sister Louisa’s marriage to Crawford.

There is no question that the bust of her husband’s best friend Charles Sumner made by her brother-in-law Thomas Crawford must have been a statue that Julia Ward Howe was aware of and one that she had contemplated. Further, since Sumner introduced Julia to Thomas Crawford and provided her introductions to Crawford’s circle of sculptors in Rome, Sumner’s link with the art of sculpture was very strong. The best emblem of Sumner’s love for neoclassical sculpture is the Crawford bust. It is startlingly handsome, depicting Sumner’s bare collarbones and neck and his carefully styled hair. His jaw is strong, and his lips are slightly open; it shows us the young Sumner
Figure 4. Thomas Crawford, bust of Charles Sumner. Rome, Italy, 1842. 68.6 x 35.6 x 26.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Bequest of Charles Sumner, 74.30.1. Photograph © 2012 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
before he became a senator, and it presents a heady mix of romanticism and republicanism, cast into “Greek,” neoclassical form.

The link between Sumner and the saintly statues that Ronald imagines is very faint, if there is any at all. Some did think of Sumner as a saintly figure. Later, after he was beaten by the pro-slavery South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks on the Senate floor, it became fairly common to refer to Sumner as a martyr for abolition, or even as a saint. There is a (probably apocryphal) tale that Sumner showed John Brown his bloody coat when Brown visited Boston and that Brown treated the stained garment with the reverence due to the relics of saint. But it is very unlikely that Julia Ward Howe ever thought of Sumner as saintly. Perhaps she may have thought of him as an “angel-fiend,” a term Ronald uses to upbraid Laurence.

Yet although the Sumner bust is not much like the statue that Ronald imagines embracing, the relationship between Ronald and Laurence had very strong parallels to the relationship between Samuel Howe and Charles Sumner. For Julia Ward Howe (if not for her character Ronald), the Sumner bust may have been very closely linked to Laurence, the hermaphrodite of her imagination. Julia was quite frank about her feelings of rivalry with Sumner—he was her husband’s closest friend, and, as Gary Williams discusses, the Howes’ unhappy marriage was painfully triangulated by Samuel’s intimate bonds with Sumner.

It is not clear that the relationship between Samuel and Sumner was sexual, though Williams points out several passionate exchanges between them that certainly focus on gender, if not sexuality. Sumner confided that something unmanned him when his friendship with Samuel Howe grew intimate—in a letter to Samuel, he wrote, “During our special intimacy, I have been blasted by another unhappiness, which unmanned me & took from me all interest in labor” (quoted in Williams, HH 59). The combination of “special intimacy” with “unmanning” may have sexual connotations for readers today; it may not have had the same connotations in 1844, but Williams is surely right when he comments that this correspondence shows great emotional intensity. It is just as foolish to completely exclude sexuality from the discussion as it would be to read Sumner’s unmanning in an overdetermined, exclusively homosexual way. The Howes were certainly aware of the possibility of same-sex physical love, even if they may have understood it differently from the way it is often understood today. It was common knowledge in the nineteenth century, as it is now, that sex between males had been socially encouraged in classical Greece and that attitudes toward same-sex contact differed in varying cultural and historical contexts. In this context, the Hellenistic, “Greek” style of the Sumner bust is particularly significant.2
Although the pages of *The Hermaphrodite* make it clear that Howe was fascinated by same-sex love, it is less clear that Howe thought of homosexuality as an identity. Today, scholars generally use “sex” to refer to physiology, “gender” to refer to cultural norms, and “sexuality” to refer to sexual desires. All three—sex, gender, and sexuality—are framed as identities. But Foucault argues that before the 1880s, sexuality was not understood as an identity. People did not necessarily understand themselves in terms of their own patterns of desire. So that, according to Foucault, Sumner and Howe might have had a physical sexual relationship without identifying themselves as homosexual. Indeed, they would certainly not have identified themselves with that term, since it had not yet been coined. Rather than “homosexual,” later-nineteenth-century sexologists might have seen Sumner (and perhaps also Samuel Howe) as “inverts” or “Uranian” figures—often described as soul of a woman trapped in the body of a man (certainly a hermaphroditical sort of conception). These terms would begin to circulate in the 1860s, after Howe had (most probably) stopped work on the manuscript. Nonetheless, sexuality and identity are certainly in play in *The Hermaphrodite*.

Ronald is not exactly a gay man, and his “identity” does not seem to be a central concern. He falls in love with Laurence (who is, after all, a hermaphrodite) and begs him to “change my torment to the raptures of heaven. You shall be a man to all the world, if you will, but a woman, a sweet, warm loving woman, to me” (Howe, *H* 86). Ronald's desire for Laurence is not a homosexual desire. His willingness to love Laurence seems situational rather than a matter of his own identity—he does not understand himself as someone who consistently desires to have sex with males (and, in fact, Laurence is not conventionally male).

Laurence is not exactly a gay man either. But for Laurence, sexuality is certainly a question of identity, just as sex and gender are. He struggles with all three of the aspects that contemporary scholars discuss (sex, gender, and sexuality) in terms of his identity. Because his sex identity is ambiguous, he believes that sexual desires are impossible or forbidden for him. How does this relate to Sumner? Most likely, Charles Sumner was not a person with anomalous genitals. It is improbable that he was physically a hermaphrodite. Williams does report that Sumner was known as “The Stag” while he was a college student, because his college classmates all knew that he was sexually impotent (Williams, *HH* 60). Much later (1866), he married a woman and was divorced after two years, amid a swirl of rumors that he “could not perform the functions of a husband” (Williams, *HH* 60). It is possible, if highly unlikely, that Sumner’s sexual impotence (if it existed) had particular anatomical causes. What is more likely is that Sumner was uninterested in
sex with women. This is all speculation. We will never have any certainty about Charles Sumner’s sexual anatomy or his sexual desires. Sumner himself may have been very uncertain about these matters. At any rate, although Julia Ward Howe probably had some theories of her own about Sumner, her insight was merely that of his best friend’s wife.

Charles Sumner should have been a woman, and Samuel Howe should have married her. Samuel reported to Sumner that Julia Ward Howe said this frequently. It is hard to interpret her statement. Partly, it was a way to express the wish that she and Howe had never married. Perhaps it was also an expression of jealousy. Howe might have been commenting on Sumner’s sex identity: Perhaps she saw him as someone who “should have been a woman,” even apart from his friendship with Samuel. The declaration certainly expresses dissatisfaction with the actual state of affairs—both the marriage of Julia and Samuel and the intense friendship between Samuel and Sumner.

It was clear from the very start that Julia and Samuel’s marriage was going to be difficult. Valarie Ziegler notes that Julia Ward Howe’s first poem about regretting her marriage was dated two days after the ceremony (Ziegler 32). Within six weeks, Howe had written enough verses to bind them into a small, very sad book. In *Hungry Heart*, Williams argues that her husband’s intimate friendship with Sumner was at the root of Howe’s despair (Williams, *HH* 42), noting that Howe described Charles Sumner as Samuel’s “intimate friend,” while styling herself Samuel’s “companion” (Williams, *HH* 43).

Who is closer, the intimate friend or the companion? Who is most beloved? These questions may have worried Julia Ward Howe: they were certainly very powerful questions for many in the early nineteenth century. Companionate marriage was a relatively new development at the time. According to Ivy Schweitzer, for many centuries previous, friendship had been a much more important emotional relationship than marriage. Early Americans experienced dramatic cultural and emotional shifts as marriage was redefined as a love relationship rather than a more hierarchical power relationship and began to replace friendship as the primary mode for intimacy. This transition was painful for many; as Schweitzer eloquently explains it, “marriage was the tomb of friendship” (Schweitzer 122) in the early republic, as Americans were forced to kill their same-sex loves for the sake of married love.

In this context, it is particularly notable that on their honeymoon, Julia and Samuel Howe made a strange pilgrimage to Wales, where they visited the graves of the well-known ladies of Llangollen, whom Howe described as “the once famous maids whose romantic elopement and companionship of
many years gave the place some celebrity” (Howe, *Rem* 111). The tomb of friendship, indeed. The next year, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow married, Charles Sumner wrote mournfully to Samuel, “In all these ceremonies, I have seemed to hear a knell; for a friend becomes dead to me. I ask pardon, dear Howe, for your most affectionate letters tell me I am wrong” (quoted in Ziegler 183). If the Howes’ marriage did not kill off the friendship between Samuel and Sumner, as Sumner claims here, then the triangulated relationship that Julia, Samuel, and Sumner tried to create worked directly against prevailing norms. Schweitzer’s discussion of marriage as the death of friendship invokes Judith Butler’s notion of “Melancholy Gender” to argue that cultural prohibitions of the period demanded “not only the denial of same-sex attachments, but the disavowal of those losses. . . . Society not only denies the significance of same sex friendships, but forbids us to mourn the loss” (Schweitzer 129). But what would happen if you refused to allow the intimate friendship to die?

Sumner and Samuel’s decision to maintain their intimate friendship was certainly anomalous. It can’t be reduced to the simple statement that Sumner was a metaphorical hermaphrodite. Rather, Sumner was one of the figures who forced Julia to give serious thought to sex, gender, identity, and love, and the sometimes conflicted lines between and among them.

But this is not to say that Laurence is Sumner, or anything so simple. Indeed, in at least one sense, Howe may have seen herself as Ronald. In 1858 she published a poem much like Ronald’s fictional one, about a sculpture coming to life.

**TO A BEAUTIFUL STATUE**

I would there was a blush upon thy cheek,  
That I might deem thee human, not divine!  
I would those sweet yet silent lips might speak,  
Even to say, “I never can be thine!”  
I would thine eye might shun my ardent gaze,  
Then timidly return it; ’neath the fold  
Of the white vest they heart beat to the praise  
Responsive that thou heedest not. I hold  
Thy slender hand in mine: oh, why is it so cold?

Statue! I call on thee! I bid thee wake  
To life and love. . . .
Chapter Eight

In its entirety, the poem includes seven nine-line verses. The first verse, quoted above, could be Ronald’s: it calls out to the statue of a beautiful woman, asking it to awaken. The next verses speculate about the events that turned the sculpted person to stone, finally declaring, in the middle stanza quoted here, that Heaven soothed the beautiful youth to “wakeless sleep” because such perfect beauty could not be entombed. This verse, which subtly changes the statue’s gender to that of a more masculine “youth,” recalls Swinburne’s and Winckelmann’s musings on the unquiet sleep and ideal, impossible beauty of the hermaphrodite.

But what do we make of the last stanza? Howe seems to believe that eventually a thrilling voice will wake the statue from its unquiet sleep. Perhaps she means God, or perhaps at the poem’s close she is thinking of the husband whom she has never managed to fully arouse. Maybe she’s generously, if heartbreakingly, handing Samuel over to Sumner, his “deathless Love.”

As Ovid tells it, Hermaphroditus’s story is about a divine young man, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who rejects a beautiful female nymph—he is not interested in her, sexually. His punishment for the rejection is that when they swim together their bodies are melded, and, although he retains his male genitalia, his form and features grow feminine and his breasts swell into a female shape. After the transformation, Hermaphroditus is both male and female, but he is more a feminized male, and his feminization happens because of his lack of desire for a woman.

Insofar as Laurence and Ronald are stand-ins for Samuel Gridley Howe and Charles Sumner, Howe’s unfinished novel is a remarkably generous work
of empathy—in the Ronald and Laurence parts of the book (which are the most fully developed). Howe makes the possibility of homosexual love achingly desirable even if it is not quite possible.

VI. The Beautiful Monster: The Romance of the Unfinished Masterpiece

As far as we know, Julia Ward Howe never finished her manuscript. The surviving pages end with an encounter between Ronald and Laurence after a long separation. The two embrace and renounce each other, and then pull apart: “One long gaze of tearless anguish, one mute appeal to heaven, and Ronald was gone, and the beautiful monster sat as before on the heap of stones, in the ancient forum, himself as mute and dead as anything there” (Howe, H 193). Laurence, transformed by the kiss into a “beautiful monster,” falls unconscious. His friends stand near his unconscious form, discussing his puzzling nature and finally deciding that he is “the poetic dream of the ancient sculptor, more beautiful, though less human, than either man or woman” (Howe, H 194). They agree to bury him, since he seems to be dead. But in fact, Laurence is merely petrified:

My brain was now excited to a vivid consciousness of the horror of my fate, and I longed earnestly for the power of averting it by giving some token of life. At this moment, I hear another step, oh how well known. And then the falling of one upon his knees beside me. Silence, dead silence from all—oh that he might have spoken, that I might hear his voice once more! He knelt for . . . (Howe, H 198)

Mid-sentence, the manuscript ends. Howe must have finished the sentence—there must be pages missing. As readers, we know that the well-known footsteps must be Ronald’s. We hope that he will kiss Laurence and finally awaken him. In short, we hope for the same ending that Howe gave to her published poem about the beautiful statue:

Soon on thine echoing ear a voice shall thrill,
Whose well-known tone alone thy bonds may sever,
And bid thy spirit burst its cerements chill:
Thy frozen heart its pulses shall resume,
Thine eyes with glistening tears of rapture swell,
Thou shalt arise in never-fading bloom!
The voice of deathless love must break the spell. (Griswold 323)
But the manuscript does not end as neatly as the poem. Laurence remains suspended, both a beautiful monster and a poetic dream.

Unfinished artworks can be frustrating, but they can also be even more interesting than finished ones. In the nineteenth century, when serious people gave a lot of thought to sculpture, Michelangelo’s unfinished sculptures were often held up as the apotheosis of his genius. George Stillman Hillard, another member of the Howe circle who was fascinated by sculpture, explained in *Six Months in Italy* that the unfinished “statues of Michelangelo’s take us into a new world of genius. He is the Columbus of sculpture” (Hillard 86). For Hillard, as for many Romantic thinkers, the realm of the unfinished was “a new world of genius.” Hillard’s description of Michelangelo’s creative process recalls both the passions between Ronald and Laurence and Howe’s own passionate creative process:

His conceptions seized upon him with a sort of demoniac possession, and became a presence not to be put by. He labored to escape from their over-masterying tyranny, and flung himself upon the marble with that fervor and passion with which love embraces and hatred grapples. But when the thirst of the soul began to be slaked and the vision to be realized,—when he had torn from the block the form which was concealed in its mass,—the divine ardor relaxed, and the frost of indifference fell upon the mind and the hand. The shortcomings of his labor—the chasm, which there will always be, in imaginative natures, between the forms of things unknown, and the shapes into which they are converted—chilled and repelled him.—He turned away in coldness from the block which had lost the morning beauty of hope and promise, to chase new visions, again to be disappointed. (Hillard 87)

I imagine that Julia Ward Howe’s relationship to her own manuscript echoed Michelangelo’s passions and disgusts. At some point, she stopped work on the project. But although her manuscript was not done, it has proved to be her greatest masterpiece, just as Michelangelo’s unfinished works were his greatest. Speaking of Michelangelo’s unfinished Lorenzo, Hillard wrote, “Its power is like a magician’s spell. . . . It is an entirely original work, and a distinct enlargement of the limits of art: such a work as would have been pronounced impossible to be executed in marble, had it not been done” (Hillard 86). The same can be said for Howe’s Laurence. It was impossible, and yet it was written. In writing it, Howe transformed herself into that most hermaphroditical of nineteenth-century beings: Howe made herself into a woman of genius.
Notes

1. Margaret Fuller’s sonnet on “Crawford’s Orpheus” reads:
   Each Orpheus must to the abyss descend,
   For only thus the poet can be wise;
   Must make the sad Persephone his friend,
   And buried love to second life arise;
   Again his love must lose, through too much love,
   Must lose his life by living life too true;
   For what he sought below has passed above;
   Already done, is all that he would do;
   Must tune all being with his single lyre;
   Must melt all rocks free from their primal pain;
   Must search all nature with his one soul’s fire;
   Must bind anew all forms in heavenly chain;
   If he already sees what he must do,
   Well may he shade his eyes from the far-shining view.
   (Fuller, “Crawford’s Orpheus,” 2:175–76)

2. See T. Walter Herbert’s related discussion of the scandal generated by the neoclassical bust of Nathaniel Hawthorne that Louisa Lander made when the Hawthornes visited Rome in 1857. Herbert makes the case that such sculptures were seen as provocatively sexual (Herbert 230–34).