

**'[A]way to solitude, to freedom, to desolation!':**  
**Hermits and Recluses in Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite***  
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Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) is today mainly remembered as the author of the Civil War poem "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1862), which on its publication instantly brought her literary recognition. Howe's greatest literary achievement, her book of poetry entitled *Passion-Flowers* (1854), has largely fallen into oblivion. And her most outstanding work of art was never even published while she lived: The Laurence Manuscript, a fragmentary fictional biography of a transgender hero/ine, which Howe presumably wrote in the 1840s and 50s, was only recently discovered at Harvard's Houghton Library and published as *The Hermaphrodite* in 2004, roughly 150 years after its creation. The importance of this discovery for the study of 19th-century American Women's Writing cannot be overestimated.

As the title of the publication reveals, the protagonist and narrator of the text, Laurence, is an intersexual character, physically male as well as female. In episodes, s/he gives an account of her/his life from cradle to grave. Laurence is an artist and thrives as a poet, an actor, and a singer. But her/his physical condition, or rather, her/his attempts to keep it a secret, turn the protagonist generally into an outsider. Certain episodes of the novel fragment are particularly noteworthy with regard to 19th-century cultures of solitude. In one of them, Laurence temporarily dwells as a hermit in a lodge in the wilderness, in a later episode s/he lives in the city as a female urban recluse. Other female characters also live secluded from society, for different reasons, in diverse forms, and to varying degrees. Overall, hermitism and reclusiveness in Howe's text evolve out of limiting situations and come at a cost, but provide – at least temporary – freedom from social restraints.

In my paper, I will read *The Hermaphrodite* as an encoded document that portrays the gender-ambivalent position of ambitious women and their struggle to defy prevailing gender conventions in the male-dominated intellectual and professional sphere of the 19th century.