
Transmitting, Transmuting, and Transforming Gender in Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite*

Nancy Strow Sheley*¹

¹California State University Long Beach – United States

Abstract

Julia Ward Howe's novel *The Hermaphrodite* is a complicated study of the transforming performance of gender. With its principal character Laurent/Cecilia as its focus and Europe (mostly Italy) as its location, the novel explores sexuality, sexual preferences, sexual identification, and society's expectations of gendered behavior in the nineteenth century. Although physical differences exist between the hermaphrodite and the transgendered individual, both are at odds with society's "expectations" of male/female behavior based on appearance and performance. Raised as a young man and heir to his father's estate, Howe's protagonist passes through several romantic experiences-with a woman and a man-totally confused by his own body and psyche and perplexed by society's gender-based behavioral demands. He/she performs various roles, including cross-dressing as a female aristocrat who for the first time becomes privy to private conversations by women. These dialogues expose sexist expectations, a diminishing status for women, as well as personal conflicts for the main character. Lauren/Cecilia moves across sexual boundaries, through society's gendered restrictions, beyond dictates of gendered behavior, and lives on the other side of gendered expectations. Of specific interest to today's audiences are the clichéd, sexist, and gendered beliefs debated in *The Hermaphrodite* that continue to fuel arguments about intellectual expectations, social behavior, and possibilities unlimited by sexual orientation or gender construction.

*Speaker