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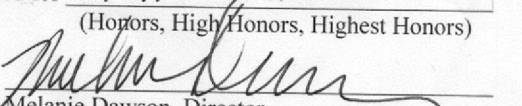
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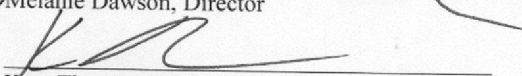
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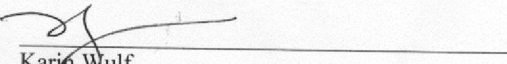
by

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“A product of her body as well as soul”: Narrative fullness and the feminine body in the
work of Julia Ward Howe

“I seem to myself languid and stupid, capable only of fitful exertions, followed by long reactions of dullness, and idleness—so much for my inner man, upon which the outer mainly depends—” (Howe to Annie, Letter #469)

This sentence, written by Julia Ward Howe in a letter to her younger sister, Annie, in 1847 describes Howe’s state of mind only a few years into her marriage to prominent physician and advocate for the blind, Samuel Gridley Howe: frustrated with her lack of productivity and study, languishing after the birth of her two children, her “inner man” collapsed under the weight of marital and gender expectations. Yet there is ambiguity in the sentence. Is the “outer” she speaks of feminine, an “outer woman”? Are we to interpret this inner man she speaks of as “man” as her person, or mind, or a more literal masculine presence? Howe goes on to note that “as for the latter, it is much improved, I am as well as usual, and begin again to feel the placidity which accompanies bodily health” (#469). The “latter” she refers to appears to be her body, implying that this “inner man” constitutes her mind and mental life.

The potential vagueness in this division Howe delineates is representative of her work, particularly that work created in these “fitful exertions”—the Laurence Manuscript. The manuscript, published in 2004 as *The Hermaphrodite*, seemed to be her primary project in 1847, four years prior to the publication of her book of collected poetry, *Passion-flowers*. Despite Howe’s frustration with her faltering attention and ability, the writer found herself more motivated over time by this “inner man,” this supposedly more masculine side, than she had otherwise found previously, pushing her to create beyond the bounds of her children and her largely unsatisfying marriage. Her overwhelming desire to write, to create in a distinctly masculine form, was powerful, but the feminine body appeared inescapable. The division between feminine body and “masculine” mind alluded to in this letter indeed seems the driving

force of much of Howe's poetry and manuscripts, if not her work ethic entirely. Without her "inner man," she might sink into the complacency of motherhood she describes over a multitude of letters, and without the widening rift between her mind and her body, her writing might not be quite so poignantly personal. If her poetry and other writing are any indication, this inner being was a cause of personal turmoil as well as creativity.

It could be suggested that the intensely personal nature of Howe's writing, and perhaps even the struggles between feminine performance and creative output, fit into a larger poetic context in the nineteenth century, that of sentimental women's poetry and "Poetess" poems. Scholars of nineteenth century American women's poetry and literature such as Laura C. Wendorff, Yopie Prins, and Virginia Jackson contend that the "Poetess," or ideal woman poet, was prone to such personal effusions in her work. What appears to characterize a Poetess, however, is a certain distancing from the intensity of the subject matter. The Poetess is not so much the true voice of the author; in Yopie Prins and Virginia Jackson's words: "the Poetess is not the content of her own generic representation: not a speaker, not an 'I' not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self" (523). She is a figure in which women's subjectivity could be effectively slotted while still conforming to a particular generic form. Nineteenth-century critics' propensity to excessively attribute women poets' work to a sentimentality and dissatisfaction common only to the feminine disposition and its corresponding "inferior intellect" (Wendorff 118) seemed to elide any suggestion of a female genius beyond their "hearts," or, in general, their distinctly earthbound bodies. All women, in a nineteenth-century critic's mind, were "Poetesses" insofar as they were representative of intellectually lesser, but morally superior feminine poetry.

Though the figure was excessively attributed to women writers' dispositions overall, it did allow for some subterfuge. It guaranteed some safety for women in expressing the personal and inappropriate, and the potentially subversive, as the figure could express the author's thoughts in absentia, allowing the author some emotional distance from the Poetess brought to life in the poem. The Poetess's very ability to seem dismissible or frivolous allowed women to more accurately express the decidedly serious, and the potentially dangerous, a factor especially relevant to Howe's intimate poetry. Poems like Frances Sargent Osgood's "The Daisy's Mistake," published 1846, appear to fulfill the charges of moral fortitude and sentimentality put upon Poetesses, but also subtly address issues of feminine sexuality and sexual assault. The poem concerns a daisy's early blooming as a result of the "great fib" (Read 73, line 15) told by the personified Zephyr and Sunbeam that spring had arrived. The frivolity of writing a narrative poem about a daisy's too-early blossoming would seem to confirm a critic's belief in the intense sentimentality of the Poetess. Certainly the poem could easily be read as an admonition to innocent young women not to let their vanity get the best of them—the Daisy, against her intuitions, blossoms at the appeals of the Zephyr and the Sunbeam and at the prospect of being the "belle" of the flowers (line 38). There are darker implications to Osgood's warning, however, that young women's innocence and vanity could easily be abused, and, at least in the Daisy's case, result in death and destruction.

The one characterizing feature of Howe's most poignant poems might indeed be their highly personal content, but that does not necessarily differentiate her from other women poets using the Poetess figure as a means of subversion, marketability, or discussion. Indeed, Howe might have had the potential to disguise herself through the excessively sentimental Poetess form, like her more coquettish and/or personally restrained (as well as profitable) predecessors. It

instead seems that she, like Osgood and other poets, used characteristic Poetess features to exaggerate, to imbue the generic form of the Poetess with the meaning of actual personal content and emotion, rather than a generic expression of sentimental feeling. Poems like the airy allegorical *Passion-flowers* poem “Mind versus Mill-stream” are best representative of Howe’s particular blending of the Poetess generic convention and raw emotion

The poem sets a typical scene for a Poetess poem—a miller, a rational male presence, attempts to subdue the unruly millstream, a water nymph who refuses to turn his mill-wheel. The poem ends, it seems, with the Miller’s defeat, but also possibly his death. After a struggle, the millstream “rose/In wrath and power fourfold./With roar and rush, and massive sweep,/She cleared the shameful bound,/And flung to the utterness of waste/The Miller, and his mound” (lines 77-82). From these somewhat darker lines Howe quickly moves to the poem’s moral, which appears as lighthearted as the lines previous to this final stanza, advising men to “[c]hoose out some quietly-disposed/And placid tempered wife” (85-6) rather than “woo the tempest” (91) mistaken for “summer dew (93). Certainly “Mind versus Mill-stream” conforms to a whimsical tradition of female figures that disturb the rational, and more often than not male order of things. In particular, this poem recalls Frances Sargent Osgood’s earlier poem “A Flight of Fancy,” although it is uncertain precisely how much Howe was influenced by Osgood.

But this poem seems more than simply a performance of a genre. The poem’s subtext reveals a darker moral than the explicitly stated one, given the dire fate of the Miller and the tonal shift that posits the mill-stream first as a light parody of womanhood and then an enraged force of nature who ultimately destroys the Miller and his mill-wheel. The lightheartedness of the prelude and moral sections appear exaggerated. The sounds of the poem are sing-song with alliteration; the Mill-stream, for example, is a “naughty Nymph” who “flashes, dashes, and

crashes” as well as “leaps and laughs.” Although the poem ends with the Miller’s destruction, the only warning Howe provides her readers of “tempestuous” women is the potential for “peace lost,” rather than the underlying warning in the end of the allegory itself. More evocative is the association, yet again, between mind and body drawn within this poem. The Miller is the “Mind” of the title, the rational masculine intellect against the Mill-stream, a body of water, a literal force of nature. The poem is still eminently publishable for its conformity to a certain playful, even flirtatious generic convention, but the anger and personal anguish of the author is still visible beneath the veneer. Using conventional poetic forms had the benefit of making Howe’s work largely palatable and inoffensive (while also generating revenue), while allowing darker poetic impulses paradoxically come to the forefront.

Out of all of her work, however, Howe’s most apparently shocking text appears to be the Laurence manuscript, so called by Gary Williams in his 1999 biography of Howe, *Hungry Heart: The Literary Emergence of Julia Ward Howe*, and later compiled and published as *The Hermaphrodite* in 2004. The manuscript describes the struggles of a being who is “like nothing human” (51), an intersexed individual who possesses “undecided” (16) beauty. This character, if not much of the manuscript, appeared to be first conceived of in approximately 1846-1847, not long before the writing of the previous letter to her sister Annie. Laurence, the titular intersexed protagonist, struggles with his body, desiring at points to divorce himself from it altogether. Though he is raised male, his appearance and performance betray his underlying gender ambiguity, while other characters ascribe gender attributes to him that most fit their interests (sexual or otherwise). Howe never completed the manuscript. Yet given confessions such as that in Howe’s above letter, it seems abundantly relevant to her published work and later writing career. which includes comments concerning Howe having a odd character, prone to “scribbling”

and bad temper, a desire for uninterrupted solitude, a similar representation of character as to the one she gives Laurence-- particularly given that the text was written after a long period of stalled output, concurrent with depression and faltering health after the birth of her first two children (Howe to Annie, Letter #469).

Meanwhile, the Laurence text acts as a metaphorical autobiography for Howe, discussing both her self-division and her inability to escape her body. But, importantly, Laurence is also the representation of a “perfect” being. He is neither male nor female, but a seemingly perfect admixture of both, beautiful and brilliant. His status as “neither one but both” terrifies and entrances the other characters of the book. Subjugating the body beneath intellect becomes a recurring theme throughout the text; Laurence continually attempts to make his body (which, more often than not, appears to be gendered as feminine) yield under his spiritual ministrations. Important female figures in the manuscript are constrained by their bodies, committing to their male partners only through strenuous spiritual exercise. Laurence’s body is especially unruly, grotesque, and seemingly emptied of meaning for its strangeness, containing only the meaning that others ascribe to it. His attempts to subsume his body under his spirit and intellect seem the only recourse for a being such as himself, the only available means by which he can possibly bridge the seemingly impassable gap between body and mind, and between masculine and feminine. His intellect must eventually win out over his body if he is to continue living.

Howe’s *Passion-flowers* seems to take this project in a new direction. The feminine body is crossed by desire and gender lines, but it is integral to Howe’s identity. The feminine figure looms, her presence in Howe’s texts at turns ethereal and monstrous, hollow and stubbornly weighted. Feminine identity, in Howe’s poetry, is empty, relegated to the status of “Poetess,” while the corresponding female body is unruly, problematic, and grotesque. She cannot escape

female identification. Thus, she must come to some new understanding of the feminine body beyond the popular representations presented to her in the form of the Poetess and of nineteenth century gender ideology overall. Howe's project in *Laurence*, in her manuscript poems, and in her *Passion-flowers* Poetess seems to be one of resuscitation, a reclamation of meaning through at times grotesque exaggeration. Poems like "Mind versus Mill-Stream" examine the personal depths of her character to revive her own identity, so lost in the expectation of generic emptiness and frivolity. The poem still recalls the *Laurence* text's central conflict, a division between body and mind, yet the poem's conclusion yields a rather different result. The Mill-stream rises in defiance against her would-be master, the Mind, crushing him and his attempts to subdue her. The conflict itself moves from internal to external—*Laurence*'s internal struggle to subdue his body becomes an external power struggle in the poem, a more direct conflict of masculinity versus femininity. What was previously her own "cross to bear" becomes an emblem of her art, a reason to produce, if only to revenge herself. The playfulness of the poem makes the poem's venom an easy thing to swallow, but even with its apparent mischief, Howe's aim in *Passion-flowers*, and indeed, perhaps the *Laurence* text is made clear. To all those who would doubt Howe for her femininity: "*Ye shall listen now*" (Williams 144).

I.

The Poetess as a figure was the paragon of domestic, spiritual, sentimental, moral, spontaneous femininity, writing only from what Rufus Wilmot Griswold would call the “outpourings” of her heart (7). Most Poetess poems concerned the private, the personal, or the domestic, targeting specifically “feminine” spheres. Engaging in the Poetess as a figure, or as a genre through which that figure is communicated, though potentially profitable, came with drawbacks, primarily that the majority of women’s poetry was forced into the confining, sentimental stereotype of Poetess poetry. The subsequent dismissal of women poets as Poetesses equated them with the hollow figure society forced them to inhabit as writers, refusing any suggestion of possible depth or thoughtful creation, as the Poetess was thought to be spontaneous, and inseparable from her lyric.

The inherently public nature of publishing one’s work, bringing it into the public sphere out of the domestic sphere, and allowing a window by which readers could observe the undistanced personal life of the “Poetess” posited a potential threat to the woman poet’s perceived moral worth. Writing from the heart “marked her poetry as a product of her body as well as soul” (Richards 65). The female author became equated with her body of work; her physical existence became associated with her literary existence to the extent that some woman poets could be accused of a kind of spiritual (or even literal) prostitution.¹ Published women poets necessarily participated in a dual identity of promiscuity and purity: by writing, they became the moral, pure Poetess, but by publishing, they made public their private lives, and ostensibly, their souls. For Eliza Richards, the poetess between the decades of 1830 to 1850 (the

¹ Lydia Sigourney’s husband makes such a claim in a letter, included in Gary Kelly’s anthology of her work, *Lydia Sigourney: Selected Poetry and Prose*, Broadview Press 2008.

approximate period in which Howe's Laurence Manuscript was written, and not long before the publication of *Passion-flowers* in 1852) "evoked both angelic purity and sexual promiscuity, spiritual amateurism and capitalist professionalism" (65). Indeed, this duality was undoubtedly necessary for a woman poet to be both profitable and respectable. She, by way of the Poetess, potentially had to conceal her personal identity from the content of her poem. The Poetess figure stood for her, regardless of content, as a catch-all of womanhood and femininity, a means by which the woman poet could potentially write personally and retain distance, her poems dismissible as generic. Embodying the Poetess figure could potentially empower a woman poet, since her true intentions are effectively disguised by the assumption of a generic, sentimental figure. A woman poet could generalize her personal emotions into sentimental lyric, preventing the accusation of promiscuity, but possibly still speaking to her own particular truth as a woman and as a person. Her work could easily be filed away by critics as characteristic of her emotional nature, or of the genre of women's poetry, even while women poets wrote of controversial and subversive topics.

Howe's inclusion in this tradition seems assured, if only because of her gender. She, too, seems to use the Poetess in the poem "Woman," published in Rufus Wilmot Griswold's *The Female Poets of America*, a collection of American women poets the critic and anthologist Griswold deemed significant or otherwise representative of the women's poetry particular brand of excellence (an excellence very different, he notes in his preface to the anthology, from male poets). The poem describes her conception of what could essentially be defined as the Poetess:

A vestal priestess, proudly pure,
 But of a meek and quiet spirit;
 With soul all dauntless to endure,
 And mood so calm that naught can stir it,

Save when a thought most deeply thrilling
 Her eyes with gentlest tears is filling,
 Which seem with her true words to start
 From the deep fountain at her heart (1-8)

Howe describes “Woman” in the same terms that the Poetess would be described by critics both at the time, a “vestal priestess” whose “deeply thrilling” thoughts cause tears, an outpouring, that seems, like her words, to emanate from the “fountain at her heart,” a phrase similar to one Griswold uses in his preface to the anthology. He expresses doubts that women’s literary ability can be considered “genuine,” stating that women’s “moral nature...partakes of some qualities of genius” (7) but does not obtain worth beyond its extreme moral fortitude. The woman poet writes from “the vivid dreamings of an unsatisfied heart” (7), her apparently deep and abiding moral nature, not her intellect or “creative intelligence.” Griswold, in his description, empties women poets of agency over their work by as attributing their poetry to an attempt to stem the deluges from this “unsatisfied heart.” The similarity in Griswold and Howe’s language indicates a certain common understanding of women poets as Poetesses (and more broadly, of women as moral compasses), and therefore dismissed as true writers. Indeed, Griswold’s preface to the anthology certainly reframes what he might truly mean when he prefaces Howe’s work as a production of “feminine genius” (Griswold 321). As a woman, Howe’s claim to genius can only ever be qualified.

Howe’s poem serves as counter to such a view, embedding a criticism of the Poetess even as she is brought into clear view by the poem’s description. Just as Griswold removes a woman’s agency in writing, Howe removes women’s agency overall in “Woman,” making her an externally defined figure dependent on men:

A vestal priestess, maid, or wife—

Vestal, and vowed to offer up
 The innocence of a holy life
 To Him who gives the mingled cup;
 With man its bitter sweets to share...
 His prayer to breathe, his tears to shed,
 Breaking to him the heavenly bread
 Of hopes which, all too high for earth,
 Have yet in her a mortal birth. (24-8, 30-33)

The priestess is “vowed to offer up” her life to “Him who gives the mingled cup”—in other words, she is bound to offer her “holy life” and “innocence” to God, who bids her to take the “mingled cup” of marriage. Through marriage, her husband inhabits her; she “breathes” his prayer and sheds his tears. Her body has become forfeit to the marriage, a proxy for her husband’s piety and emotions, though only she can “[break] to him the heavenly bread/Of hopes.” She is his spiritual guide, having been described as a “priestess” and “holy” for her innocence. She, as a woman, has more direct access to God. She is called to marry, tasked with sharing the mingled cup’s “bitter sweets,” subsumed into her husband’s identity and emotion. Woman, in these lines, is the conduit through which God speaks to man, and a further extension of man as a result. Howe’s description of Woman as a moral guide once again echoes Griswold’s preface: “feminine genius is perhaps destined to retrieve our public character,” he states, claiming that women possess a genius whose purpose resides in mending the international perception of America as amoral or overly political.

Yet the end of the poem complicates Howe’s picture of “Woman,” and consequently, the Poetess. She ultimately admits, “this is the woman I have dreamed/And to my childish thought she seemed/The woman I myself should be” (34-6), yet she cannot fulfill this ideal: “Alas! I would that I were she” (37). Womanhood, as Howe and Griswold define it, is unachievable

beyond the construction of an empty figure, which Howe more pointedly terms as “Woman,” not “Poetess.” “Woman,” unlike her author, is ethereal and barely present except as a moral intermediary, like the “Poetess,” whose name conveniently only purports to represent a certain subset of women, even while she speaks, seemingly, for the whole of womanhood. No woman can reasonably fill the role of “Woman” without forgoing some element of her own personhood beyond the figure, an equally salient criticism of the Poetess.

“Woman” ultimately both critiques and upholds this conception of womanhood (and the Poetess) by its final line, reinforcing its power by admitting Howe’s inability to fulfill the traditional conception of womanhood. Howe does not abandon the figure altogether despite its emptiness, noting, “this is the woman [she] dreamed,” and this is the woman that she believes she should be. Spending the majority of the poem outlining this ideal figure renders her rejection of it ironical, but also seemingly desperate. Its very impossibility as a template for actual women reasserts its importance as an ideal. While the identity-erasing aspects of “Woman” signal a fundamental emptiness, they simultaneously invite women to fill the role. Howe’s “Alas!” could at turns be read as ironic or sincere, but even its ironic reading seems to indicate some wistfulness in her lack of performance—this is, after all, the woman she has dreamed of, though she retracts her association by making her aspiration a “childish thought.”

The Poetess as a rhetorical figure often seems characterized by women’s rejection of it or their failure to conform to the figure’s expectations as much as it is characterized by idealization (or, as in Howe’s “Woman,” the figure appears to be exemplified by both). The figure certainly allowed for dualities, as in the poems of Frances Sargent Osgood, among others, whose poetry skirted the line between flirtation and modesty, between embodiment in the poem and their physical body. Poems like Osgood’s “Won’t You Die and Be a Spirit” reinforces modesty in the

female speaker while simultaneously enticing the narrator's suitor to "beam/Like a star around my pillow" (Bennett 26-7). Belying the poem's apparently flirtatious message (become a spirit so we can be together), too, is the request that the addressee die. One could easily interpret the poem not as an enticement for the addressee, but as a subtle and cutting rejection, emphasizing the latter part of the title's plea for the addressee to die. While certainly most evident in this poem, Osgood balances such opposing themes frequently in her poetry, and this is undoubtedly what made her a captivating Poetess. No one view can be totally attributed to Osgood's narrator in "Won't You Die and Become a Spirit," and it seems that we cannot fully attribute this poem to Osgood herself, but a more flirtatious narrator who entices the reader with the ethereal suggestion of death, and perhaps, textual life. Howe's "Woman" displays a similar sort of paradox, attributing "Woman" to Howe but ultimately disavowing that association. The poet, through the Poetess, could be present but absent, physical but ethereal, and flirtatious but modest, mainly through the Poetess's generic emptiness.

The division between mind and body seems particularly relevant here, given the Poetess's apparently characteristic divisiveness. If the female body is an absent presence in Poetess poems, then the female soul is present only insofar as it accesses some higher spiritual realm for men. The female mind seems more elusive, an indeterminate figure in the equation of feminine body and feminine soul. In philosophy the mind seems particularly tied to masculinity, and the body to femininity. The body characterizes some aspect of unruliness commonly attributed to femininity, particularly in philosophical writings that employ aspects of Cartesianism and substance-dualism. Elizabeth Grosz, in her book *Volatile Bodies: Towards A Corporeal Feminism*, expands on such ideas, stating, "Woman...remains philosophy's eternal enigma, its mysterious and inscrutable object—this may be a product of the rather mysterious

and highly restrained and contained status of the body in general, and of women's bodies in particular, in the construction of philosophy as a mode of knowledge" (Grosz 4-5). If philosophy, a discipline that purports to seek truth, cannot pin down the body (and cannot, by extension, define women's bodies), then literature seems equally incapable of portraying the body without essentializing, or without attempting to posit humanity as something greater than or beyond the body. In particular, "women and femininity are problematized as knowing philosophical subjects and as knowable epistemic objects" (4) in philosophical thought, and that sentiment seems to equally extend to conceptions of the Poetess. She as a figure could not, and will never be knowable by the reader except in the reader's fulfillment of her as a role, or by the woman poet's use of her as a rhetorical device (or perhaps more accurately, the poet's use of her as a mask). The Poetess is almost by definition an empty figure, a hollow proxy for the nineteenth century woman, but it seems Howe's "woman" is equally as empty, an unrealistic image of actual womanhood. But both constructions appear necessary for the nineteenth century to categorize actual women, for otherwise they are seemingly unspeakable—either they must be defined by some explicit bodily difference or by some difference of their mind, both of which become too uncomfortably similar to men's bodies and minds to be seen as so entirely different.

Femininity, and female writing, is then essentially marked by male critics (and probably by nineteenth century culture as a whole) by its difference, defined by its seeming difference from male writing and masculinity. If the female body does exist beyond the ethereal body the woman poet creates in the Poetess, then it seems as though it could be potentially monstrous in its cultural inability to be known in the context of male bodies, and male intellect. For Grosz, femininity is tied to the body by virtue of patriarchal reductionism, a project of reducing women down to their bodies in order to control their movements. Femininity, and feminine bodies, must

be delegated to the private, and the unspeakable, to those subjects kept firmly under lock and key. Femininity is always private in the context of Poetess poetry, and thus the production and distribution of poetry is inherently erotic, and all the more tied to the poet's body. Feminine unspeakableness and privacy ignites a fascination with the female body: though the Poetess, in Osgood and other poets' interpretations, could be seen as potentially obscene, the female body as an "epistemic object" seems so incomprehensible to a masculine subject as to barely exist. Women poets can only be understood as some complement to the masculine, as Griswold states in his preface: "The conditions of aesthetic ability in the two sexes are probably distinct, or even opposite," though in the masculine intellect, "the most essential genius in men is marked by qualities which we may call feminine" (7). In other words, men's genius might have some aspects of traditionally feminine-associated sentimentality, but unlike the woman poet, the male poet's "mind is transfused and incorporated into his feelings" (7). That women could be anything beyond the narrow definition that Griswold and other critics assign them is potentially dangerous, and women as anything more than moral guides and sexual bodies become potentially monstrous, if still an object of fascination and desire, as Howe demonstrates in the Laurence Manuscript.

The manuscript was later rediscovered and published in 2004 as *The Hermaphrodite* by Gary Williams, and appeared to have been written sometime between 1847 and 1848, by Williams's estimation, judging from correspondence and handwriting. The text seemed to be more of a hobby to Howe than a publishable novel; what is left of the manuscript is fragmented, involving multiple time lapses and missing pages. Given the manuscript's controversial subject, it is likely that Howe did not intend for its publication. The text focuses on Laurence, a male-identified intersexed individual, frequently referred to as "strange" or "monstrous," a character

so strongly in between genders that he is only definable by the assignments others give him. It seems, however, that such confusion is not entirely due to androgynous looks but to his intellect and gender presentation. Describing his entrance into college (and, accordingly, puberty), Laurence admits, “I know not how an impartial judge would have decided the doubtful question of my being—my powers of intellect had shot beyond those of my compeers, while yet my form threatened to take a strongly feminine development” (Howe 4). Laurence’s intellect seems to differentiate him as male, though his body would suggest otherwise. The fact that his intellect “shot beyond those of his compeers” seems to imply that if he were truly female, his mind would be far feeble. It is Laurence’s body that proclaims his difference, over and above his mind or disposition; he is a “strange being” insofar as he is ambiguous enough to be called male, but still problematically feminine. He, like Howe, must contend with a similar fate and relation with femininity that seems to parallel Howe’s relation with the Poetess.

His more feminine form, in conjunction with his intellect and gender performance, betrays him as “monstrous” when Emma von P., a widow who pursues him during his college years, discovers his secret shortly after his graduation. Laurence overhears a conversation between two strangers at the proceedings, comparing him to the *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, a marble statue at the villa Borghese. Horrified at the comparison, and the potential discovery of his secret, Laurence excuses himself to his room in a “galvanic agony.” He rips off his clothes, “half resolved to wear them no more” (17), and is half undressed when Emma enters his room and attempts to seduce him. In response to her professions of love, Laurence gently informs her that they can only have a “spiritual” connection. It is his rejection that spurs a “new and dreadful suspicion” (18) in Emma’s mind:

[S]he came up slowly to me, and uncovering my arm, held it up to the light—it was round and smooth as her own. With the same deliberation, she surveyed me head to foot...she saw the bearded lip and

earnest brow, but she saw also the falling shoulders, slender neck, and rounded bosom—then with a look like that of the Medusa, and a hoarse utterance, she murmured: “monster!”

“I am as God made me, Emma.”

A shriek, fearful to hear, and thrice fearful to give, followed by another, and another, and a maniac lay foaming and writhing on the floor at my feet. (19)

In this passage, the only feature of Laurence’s that is identified as masculine is his “bearded lip and earnest brow,” while all his other physical features are described as feminine or effeminate, particularly his “rounded bosom.” It may be the ambiguity itself that makes Laurence “monstrous,” but given his stated physical characteristics and the characteristics that Emma examines, it does not seem unlikely to assume that his “monstrosity” is a result of his “feminine” beauty paired with his superior “masculine” intellect. It is the discovery of feminine body traits that lead Emma to her conclusion, given his masculine gender presentation; it is the discovery of femininity that makes Laurence a “monster.” The further confirmation of Emma’s suspicion in Laurence’s statement—“I am as God made me”—sends her “foaming and writhing” in horror, and later causes her to die of shock. Ambiguity, in this case, kills, as does Laurence’s assertion that he is as God made him, since he was “made” in defiance of the gender binary. It is this final confirmation that sends Emma into hysterics, a confirmation that he is both the feminine “monster” he appears to be and God’s creation outside of the naturalized normative order. Being female bodied, as previously established, destroys any sense of being epistemically understood except in relation to male bodies and masculinity. Though Laurence himself is not a woman, his androgyny marks him as too feminine to be reasonably understood as simply a man, or masculine. More than any other feature, it seems Laurence’s feminine characteristics cause the most conflict and discomfort for the other characters. Tellingly, Laurence himself cannot force his feminine characteristics to submit, or appropriate them fully under his masculinity—they

continue to disrupt and deconstruct, while avoiding any potential for being understood (though, just as tellingly, Laurence does not attempt to understand). The female body refuses the constraints Laurence puts on it.

Rosi Braidotti, in her article “Mothers, Monsters, and Machines,” delineates the potential “monstrosity” of women and femininity, placing monstrosity in the same “system of pejoration” where femininity resides. Both, in her argument, are negations; femininity is the negation of masculinity, defined by its deviance from masculinity, while the monstrous is simply defined by its deviation from the norm. Both are deviations from a naturalized norm set by the larger culture and therefore they are “structurally analogous.” More to the point:

Women as a sign of difference is monstrous. If we define the monster as a bodily entity that is anomalous and deviant vis-à-vis the norm, then we can argue that the female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of *fascination and horror*. (65)

Laurence, and arguably his author, appear to the world as objects of “fascination and horror” for their feminine characteristics. While Howe is simply a negation of the masculine (though problematically so, due to her intellect and ability), Laurence is more clearly a negation of the norm, the “monstrous.” One might interpret his position as the female body made real (paradoxically, by fiction). While the woman poet’s body is invisible, immaterial, and largely subsumed in her text and in the Poetess, Laurence the poet’s body is stubbornly present, beyond definition, and a driving point of the narrative. Women’s bodies need only be present as metaphors for their written work, subsumed as a result of their potential indiscretion, but in Laurence, Howe demands that the feminine identity be recognized, and makes it such that it cannot be appropriated into masculinity. Laurence is eminently alluring and horrible, the “unique blend of fascination and horror” that Braidotti describes; he attracts attention due to his talent as a poet and his “rare beauty,” while he disturbs and horrifies those who know his secret. In other

words, the woman author/poet often appears invisible or negated, with only the suggestion of her body and existence outside of her text, while Laurence, the fictional, textual character, cannot be rid of his bodily existence, and is made monstrous for the continuing presence of his body.

Because the Poetess negates (or at least makes textual) the female body, the monstrosity of femininity is left unexplored. Since women's bodies are potentially horrible, and women's minds seemingly absent, women are pared down to their souls, and generally made benign to the patriarchal order. In Braidotti's words, "'she' is forever associated with unholy, disorderly, subhuman, and unsightly phenomena," but when 'she' is incarnated in the Poetess (and disassociated from her physical body), she is purified. Laurence's desires align with such a practice. He longs to be rid of his physical body, to transcend into some higher spiritual realm, shedding his responsibility to his father's estate and his initial dreams of fame and recognition in favor of sequestration at a hermitage, formerly owned by a Count. Laurence, "oppressed with physical lassitude" and a desire for "mental labour" (35) flees to the wilderness in the hopes he can "take root like a tree in some beautiful spot, and wait, and grow there quietly until fate should mark me to be cut down" (35).

His following stay at the hermitage seems less a period of repose than an ensuing struggle of the spirit to subsume the body. Laurence is, at that point, "choked with the solid, asphyxiating gases of...materiality...in frantic pursuit of the soul of the Universe" (47). So too it seems that women poets are in search of the soul that Laurence (and Howe) speaks of, a desire to be undone from Nature, who would will that Laurence, by extension, Howe, and perhaps women poets in general, be problematically sexed. Purification could be achieved in the Poetess figure (which Laurence appears unable to access). Conveniently, the hermitage, Laurence is told by the Count's "agent," is open to any willing to comply with the Count's terms, almost all of which

require abnegation and renunciation of physical and material goods. But If we are to identify Laurence as Howe's literary counterpart, it is clear that neither he nor Howe can fully extract their souls from their bodies, for Laurence's attempts at "subjugation of the body" (cite) lead to further entrenchment in his physical existence.

It is ironic, too, that his poetry seems to only reaffirm his bodily difference than extinguish it; his poem, for which he wins the college prize and the ardor of Emma von P., tells of "the sufferings of a soul exiled from heaven, and sent to this world invested with the semblance, but not the attributes of humanity" (14). Laurence's character, and by extension, Laurence, is "inhuman" in same analogous sense that women are "subhuman," and equally, in nineteenth-century thinking, as spiritual as women. The irony of Laurence's poetry seems to extend back to the Poetess, however, who reveals her body at the same time she conceals it, simply for being a Poetess—a woman—rather than a male poet. Her body, like Laurence's, is never truly hidden in verse. Rather, her verse is the paradoxical "key" to her physical being, because she has been identified as woman, and therefore, her lyric is accordingly womanly. Laurence cannot help but reveal himself in his lyric as well, though his revelation seems less intentional than the calculated, marketable lyric of woman poets posing as Poetess.

In some sense, Laurence might be seen as a Poetess, simply for the "outpouring" that characterizes the poetry he writes. The sole poem written by Laurence that is described to the reader throughout the manuscript is an epic about a being that cannot appropriate the features of humanity sufficiently enough to survive. Ironically, the poem reinforces his physicality, positing him as a spiritual being who is confined to the mortal world. The "poem," or at least, the description of it, is almost a play on the traditional conceptions of the Poetess, a hollow, spiritual being who manifests herself only in the real presences of her women authors or readers. More

accordingly, she *is* women's verse, or at least attributed as such. Laurence, it seems, imbues his own poetry with his personal feeling, and more potently, his ambiguity. His lyric, like the Poetess lyric, is made an avenue to his being, a pathway to his inner life, but this way of writing appears as dangerous for Laurence as it might be for a woman writing "too" personally, a woman failing to generalize her lyric enough to disguise herself in the Poetess form (or, perhaps, be misattributed as such). Indeed, the revelation of his ambiguous gender shortly after the recital, including the comments concerning his beautiful, but androgynous appearance, seem to coincide with his poetic revelation as a "strange being." Revealing oneself in lyric is a gateway to being revealed in public. Laurence, like many women poets, is not exempt from this connection, although his secrets perhaps prove more damaging, and potentially dangerous.

The Poetess is a hollow figure in nineteenth century women's poetry, indeed, she is often little more than a tool to further the woman author's ends, or otherwise she is generically identified in poems that modern eyes might perceive as against the Poetess, or against the lyric genre. Women's "subhumanity" as physical beings is removed through textuality, and their voices are given some moral authority in accordance to their fading physical presence as authors. As a result their verse can seemingly never be narratively "full," that is, it can never be fully attributed to their own personhood. Women's verse can never be individual, or truly personal, because of their misattribution of Poetess with individual women. Women poets themselves are made potentially hollow by their association with the Poetess, and by public perception of women. For if they were not hollow, their full being might be considered in their verse, which more uncomfortably includes their body, the physical differences that characterize their linkage with monstrosity and oppression.

Laurence's ambiguous gender representation seems to speak to this point. Though he chooses a masculine identity to allow for greater independence, he refuses to personally identify as either gender. He refers to himself as "no man, no woman, nothing" (22), and says that his "face and form [is one] of strange contradictions" (16). The nebulous gender that Laurence embodies physically leads to a strong internal division of masculine and feminine, body and spirit. His physical body and existence is traumatic to the extent that he strives for "entire subjugation of the body" (45) through spirituality, using methods of separation similar to the ones other female characters in the text employ. Yet these methods only serve to make his bodily existence more traumatic. During his attempts at bodily "subjugation" in the hermitage, Laurence seeks to end his material existence. "What obligation binds me to languish in patient subjection to the gross laws of animal being?" (46), he asks (a question that could equally apply to Howe herself). His body is "gross," "animal," and worthy of subjugation. His body is so closely tied to the feminine that we might easily conceive of him as addressing the female form as worthy of subjugation.

This is particularly salient given Laurence's new gender representation towards the manuscript's close. Laurence is in Rome, and begins to dress as a woman to disguise himself from his father, who threatens to commit him for his disobedience (at least according to Berto, his friend). He prefaces his explanation of his newly female gender performance with a description of women's desire to be subjugated: a liberated woman "will...feel the want of some one to bully and protect her, the necessity of being cherished and admired, or kicked and cuffed....she will...creep back to her woman's trappings, and to her woman's life" (131). One could see this as an explanation for Laurence's feminine performance, desiring, after his forays into the masculine world, a "woman's life," but he refutes this claim, reasserting his masculinity

both through this somewhat scornful description of the typical woman and through his fears that he might not be able to “bear the endless tedium of [womanhood’s] trivial details” (132).

Woman-ness, in his account, is ridiculous, and the liberated woman even more so. Yet his statements here appear ironic, if only for the fact that they are being said in justification both for his “cross-dressing,” and for his own subjugation under his father, forcing him to “become” female. He still must conform to his feminine disguise or risk being found and institutionalized by his father if he remains masculine performing—an ironic form of subjugation on both sides. His father intends to “break his spirit” and subjugate Laurence beneath his patriarchal order, while Berto, in concealing Laurence, forces him to become female despite his “masculine” personality, the final vengeance of the female-gendered Nature, who Laurence has “wronged” throughout the novel for “demand[ing] to be released from [Nature’s] jurisdiction” (47). Indeed, Nature becomes an avenging force against Laurence: “when [Laurence] deem[s] [Nature] slain, she may rise up against [him] with horrible energy, and avenge to the death the wrong [he has] done her” (48). By attempting to unfetter his soul from his material existence, Laurence is “slaying” and “wronging” Nature, according to “common sense.” In attempting to rein in the feminine body, he “wrongs” and “slays,” he incurs the wrath of a feminine force, the “Mother Nature” figure, which forces him to live the indignity of a life for one who has been gendered female. He cannot achieve transcendence through the dismissal of his feminine attributes, despite his patriarchal attitude towards them (yet another way to contain them).

Although the most central character, Laurence is not the sole representation of femininity that Howe presents. Berto entreats him to live with his sisters during this time of explicit feminine performance, pointing out one in particular “whose story cannot fail to interest [Laurence]” (Howe 132). His sisters, Briseida, Gigia, and Nina, are all women who have failed

to marry, and otherwise appear to buck traditional conceptions of women. Briseida and Gigia, in Berto's words, are "of natures at once too enlightened and too expansive to doom themselves to the narrow ropewalk of Conventual life...[and] too proud to present themselves as candidates for selection in the great woman market of society" (136), both artists and intellectuals in their own right. Nina, on the other hand, exists in an entirely different plane altogether. Nina, being "not so clever or so ambitious" (137) as her sisters, had a lover, Gaetano, whom she had intended to marry, and who was banished to America for various political reasons left relatively vague in the manuscript. As she cannot obtain Berto's permission to join him, Nina stayed in Rome, vowing to Gaetano that "[her] soul goes forth with [his] soul, wherever [he] may be" (137). She began to withdraw from everyday life and activities, claiming she was following Gaetano across America by way of her spirit; in Berto's description, "she continued strangely inanimate, she never spoke, and shewed no perception of things" (138). After Gaetano's presumed death she became more immersed in her fantasy, believing that she was actually with Gaetano while her sisters and brother are dead, or absent. Women other than Laurence, overall, are constrained, if not by their ambition, then by their inability to rid themselves fully of their bodies. Women like Nina become caricatures of the self-negating, moral woman (in some respects, the more shallow conception of the Poetess), or otherwise they are unfulfilled or amoral.

Viewing Laurence, Nina, and other women's struggles as a reflection of Howe's own, she appears to be using Laurence as a physical representation of her own "unsexed" self, and Laurence, like Howe, cannot find relief from his gender. He is continually subjugated beneath some form of patriarchal, or "natural," order, preventing him from either living or dying, or preventing him from either performing fully as male or fully as female, and more importantly, preventing him from living as the "unsexed" soul he truly is. The sign of difference in

Laurence's own self is monstrous, even grotesque, in Mary Russo's account. Since Laurence exists in a narrative world that is largely the same as the one Howe inhabits in the nineteenth century, his body is less a classic ideal than a grotesque disruption of the norm, and more importantly, it is marked by its increased femininity. Although Laurence can be compared to Russo's "Classical body[,] which is monumental, static, closed and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism" (63), his body becomes, like a Classical art piece, the subject of public debate. In being so monumental and perfect, his body becomes grotesque—it becomes part of "the rest of the world" (63) through its androgynous accessibility. Despite consistent allusions to Laurence's coldness, his statue-like or marble beauty, he is still human, and his body is all the more monstrous for reminding his suitors of perfection. In other words, the sheer fact of Laurence's existence in a world that is non-classical, but, in its time, current, makes his body a fact of the world rather than a static ideal. Since it is not aspirational, abstract, or otherwise figurative, it is made disturbing for its seeming perfection of both genders.

Although he is an "unsexed soul," his body cannot be fully brought to heed with the default of "unsexed," which, given femininity as a sign of difference, appears to be masculine. Thus, because of his body's difference, Laurence's body may be taken as a feminine sign, the subjugated feminine masquerading as the dominant, default masculine. The mask itself, in Russo's account, is feminine. In her words, after Jacques Lacan: "[f]eminine is a mask which masks nonidentity" (69). Laurence, in a sense, is that nonidentity, that inability to intelligibly signify as masculine or feminine in the heterosexual economy of desire. But Laurence, up until the final section of Howe's manuscript, masquerades as masculine as well, signaling masculinity's malleability as category (similar to femininity) and, perhaps, making the masculine performance feminine through the act of masking some non-gender identity beneath. This is a

dangerous assumption, implying the very lack of identity beneath all sexual presentations in the nineteenth century, but it is somewhat quelled by Laurence's feminine performance. He assumes the feminine only to mock it, to imply its subjugation and lack, and, again in Russo's words, "[t]o put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off" (70). Still, even in the potential power-play that might result in performing femininity, Laurence is himself subjugated, and furthermore subjugated under the patriarchal threat of the father incarcerating him for madness.

Arguably, Howe's project in creating Laurence could be seen as an attempt to resuscitate women as persons, or rather, herself as a person, if such an idea could be outlined before the prevailing views of the self in the nineteenth century. Laurence is a textual attempt to imbue womanhood with the personhood of men, to make women narratively full, but in doing so Howe creates a character perceived as entirely monstrous to her other characters. A woman performing as man is potentially dangerous to the construction and essentialization of gender and sexuality, but someone who is unidentifiable as either is terrifying: they cannot be essentialized down to features of either gender, and thus, seemingly by default, they must be taken as persons in their own right. When Howe writes as herself, intellect can be misattributed to or removed due to her sex (a "feminine genius") but in Laurence she raises the uncomfortable question of what features of gender can actually be said to be essential, and what can be entirely due to one's perception. To be narratively "full," to be taken as a person, however, seems impossible by the manuscript's end.

II.

Howe wrote in a January 1847 letter to her sister Louise—approximately the time at which she began writing the Laurence manuscript—that she had “*waked up*, for the first time since [her] marriage...ever since that event, [she has] lived in a state of somnambulism, only half conscious of the world around [her]; occupied principally with digestion, sleep, and babies” (Howe to Louisa, Letter #465). Howe was not especially prolific in the 1840s, particularly after the birth of her first two children. She had spent a great deal of the decade in personal turmoil, culminating in the (presumed) 1847 writing of the manuscript and, in the same year, the death of her brother Marion. Certainly her work had not completely halted. She had produced manuscripts like the Laurence text, and even earlier poetry, but this body of work is scant in comparison to the deluge of speeches, songs, and poems written in her later years. A few years later, in 1850, Howe found herself newly anthologized and newly (if temporarily) separated from her husband and two older children. By the 1852 publication of *Passion-flowers*, Howe had established a more decisive public presence than ever before. That year Howe had decided to live in Rome with her sisters for a time, a decision that ultimately geographically separated Howe from her husband and older children, due to his poor health. Yet this time was perhaps one of the happier of Howe’s life. She had finally freed herself from the constraints of her husband’s expectation, from Boston society, and partially from her children. Although Rome’s political situation at that time was tumultuous, the trip represented a new beginning in Howe’s life, and shortly thereafter, career.

Howe had been languishing. Pregnancy, a troubled marriage, and a lack of creative output cast a gloom over her life. Frustration with her “strange being” and overall inability to perform fully as a wife and mother (given associated issues with the household, hired help, and

housekeeping) plagued her. She began to feel an increased disconnect between her body and her soul, a sense of being crossed between desires. But, as she notes in a 1847 letter to her sister Louisa, her current “cross to bear,” if you will, has some ability to transcend her beyond the confines of her body; the

arms of the cross will one day turn into angels wings, and lift us up to heaven. Don’t think from this rhapsody that I am undergoing a fit of pietistic exaltation—I am not, but as I grow older, many things become clearer to me and I feel at once the difficulty and the necessity of holding fast to one’s soul, and to its divine relationships, lest the world should cheat us of it utterly.” (Letter to Louisa, #467)

The “arms of the cross” become transformed upon death—or perhaps they become the vehicle through which one transcends. Either way, Howe emphasizes the “necessity of holding fast” to her soul and its divinity, or risk the material world’s interference in her transcendence, her body’s stubborn refusal to yield her soul its “divine relationships.” Yet the phrase “holding fast” seems to contradict itself—she both desires transcendence (or spiritual engulfment in the form of death) and desires the material world. It is not that she longs for her soul to leave her body (for she seems to suspect that her consciousness will remain) but for her soul to cease its flickering, to be grasped fully and tied down to the material body. Holding fast to her soul is at once an act of assuring her transcendence and tying her soul back to her body. It is, after all, the arms of the cross that will turn to angel’s wings, the divide that prevents her happiness in the present, material world, might insure her transcendence in another.

Images of crucifixes and crosses figure prominently in Howe’s writings, in the Laurence text and into *Passion-flowers*, though the themes of the poems--allusions to death and burial, “crosses” of desire or self—remain interwoven into the fabric of Howe’s writing overall.

Although the Laurence manuscript (and many of her manuscript poems) would posit the cross of identity that Howe occupies as further reason to self-abnegate, *Passion-flowers* turns toward a different path. The Poetess might not serve as an effective means to her end of female subjectivity, but perhaps bearing the cross could transcend her in a Christ-like resurrection. The cross seems to have more possibilities than it would if it were simply a burden, a weight Howe must bear. Rather, she is crossed; she exists at an intersection that could lend itself to greater creative output. Thus it seems her focus shifts from escaping the cross to bearing it, and from bearing it to a recognition of its significance to her creativity. If Laurence's creation was primarily to resuscitate her own sense of selfhood (and indeed, her subjectivity as a woman writer), then it seems *Passion-flowers* is a reconciliation of her creative urges and her gender, a project that the Laurence manuscript is ultimately unable to achieve. A desire for spiritual engulfment, to become all intellect (or more likely, all soul) slowly transitions into a desire to regain her soul—a project more in line with making the Poetess grotesque and, indeed, human. The cross in Howe's manuscripts kills, but the cross in *Passion-flowers* has the potential to transcend.

In her early, personal manuscript poems, it seems that some aspects of Howe's disposition towards her need to write appear alongside a desire to channel this need towards an end that could very well entail body denial or sublimation. The following 1841 poem legitimates a “masculine” desire to write as a means of accessing God:

I am not chasing home my idle thought
 And dreaming life away in fancied soil
 Nor so the worlds' great market shall be brought
 The flowers and fruits that bless my scanty soil
 But on Jehovahs' altar meekly laid

Be my poor tribute, though unseen to fade.

I am not weaving for a dying name

A gorgeous winding sheet, methink twere shame

To waste the oil of life, for such unreal aim,

Nor do I linger in my dreamland, lost

In the strange music of mine own sweet singing

For on its waves the soul is tempest tossed

And o'er it brooding thoughts their shadows dark

are flinging.

But borne upon that current I would float

Unto the cherubs' mighty master note

And the frail things my busy finger weaves

Scanty and slight as Adams platted leaves

Will tell thee how, aspiring from the sod

My soul would seek to wrap itself in God.

Feb 16th 1841

This untitled, unpublished poem was included with a multitude of other fragments and completed manuscript poems, extending from 1835 to approximately the 1860s (Julia Ward Howe Papers, box 321). Given that the poem was unpublished, and given the personal nature of Howe's poetry overall, it seems safe to assume that the speaker is Howe herself. She does not "[weave] for a dying name/A gorgeous winding sheet" nor does she desire to "linger in [her] dreamland"; rather, "aspiring from the sod/[her] soul would seek to wrap itself in God" (line 6-10). The act of "wrapping" herself evokes the act of dressing or covering oneself, the previous lines linking writing to the act of weaving cloth, a "gorgeous winding sheet" that she might eventually be

wrapped in at death, or otherwise a “scanty and slight” cloth more similar to “Adam’s platted leaves” than any other form of clothing. The “winding sheet” (a burial shroud, a sheet to wrap corpses in for burial) she might be “weaving” is for her name, furthering the equation between cloth and written work, and, more importantly, writing and the body. The winding-sheet is for a body, but instead of her physical body, it is the persona associated with her name, made famous, ironically, by the writing that will now obscure her.

Her writing, she admits, is a “poor tribute,” perhaps, but its very humility more strongly indicates her passion for God, a compensating passion that obscures the true subject of the poem, her passion for writing. The allusion to Adam, too, seems to affirm a position of humility and relative innocence—her only desire is to serve God, though through her work she is made “naked,” a somewhat ironic statement since this poem was left unpublished. Further, the allusion to Adam’s “platted leaves,” the loincloth he, in cultural imagination, is usually thought to have, contains a possible allusion to Howe’s desire to conceal her own sex. Her writings are “scanty and slight as Adam’s platted leaves”—one can still see her beneath them, and there is, perhaps, a corresponding shame in that. The language of the text implies writing as clothing, as a means of covering oneself. Ultimately, though, Howe is naked before her audience, although she is morally protected, “wrapped in God” as she is.

One could read this as justification for poor writing, certainly, but it also appears to justify the personal nature of her lyric. Her desire to write, and her writing in general is not ultimately intended for fame or aggrandizement of any kind, but to clothe herself (or perhaps bury herself, given the “sod” and “soil” imagery) in God, though the fragments which she uses to wrap herself leave her entirely bare to the world, with only minimal covering. Wrapping herself in God has the implication of nudity, though the use of “soul” rather than “I” removes the

potential sexuality of the line. Rather, the phrase appears to represent Howe's seemingly bifurcated desire to transcend her body, to be spiritually covered or engulfed by God. In other early poems, and certainly in the Laurence manuscript, these desires often seem to be equated. Transcendence in this context becomes a transcendence of the body, a death that brings one closer to God, in some cases, or in others it becomes a struggle to force the body to yield to the spirit, a violent act of enslavement of body to soul. Yet these desires becomes more ambiguous as Howe articulates her desire to remain embodied, but also to die, and therefore to transcend her earthly body. Her evocative use of the cross and the crucifix in the Laurence manuscript, *Passion-flowers*, and, to a lesser extent, her manuscript poems, thus become paragraphs in a larger text, that of being crossed between desires, or carrying the cross of these desires. Clothing, and the adage "cross to bear" seem more relevant in this context if the clothing in Howe's vocabulary becomes writing, and the "cross" becomes the weight of one's earthly body, and perhaps more particularly, the weight of the female or feminine gendered body.

The weight of Howe's body becomes even more of a burden in her marriage. The "platted leaves" of her writing seem less a means of "wrapping herself in God" than yet another obstacle to the perfection of gender conformity. Writing, during the early period of her marriage, transitioned from a means to glorify God (while fulfilling her own fundamental needs) into a wedge driven between her husband and herself. The sheer fact of Howe's public silence in the 1840s seems a result of her attempts to appease Samuel Gridley, though the nature of Howe's manuscripts has always seemed to indicate a certain kind of yearning for print, or a local distribution that remained solely in the private sphere. Some of her most personal poems derive from an 1843 booklet (Williams calls it a "notebook" in his biography of Howe) with the epitaph or title "Life is strange, and full of change" (Julia Ward Howe Papers, box #321). The booklet's

pages are handsewn together, and its time period is roughly that of Howe's honeymoon in Europe. Indeed, many poems in this apparently miniature volume detail her travels, like "My Donkey-Driver in Wales" and "Sailing." Others, however, reach out from the depths of Howe's despair and longing, like the following poem:

The Present is Dead

Fancies and frenzies have all passed away,
A wide but level space comes to my mind,
Methinks the soul is ebbing from the clay,
So little of itself remains behind.

I feel all my varied powers depart
With scarce a hope they may be born anew,
And nought is left, save one poor, loving heart,
Of what I was—and that may perish too.

God! Spirit! come to me, in any form;
Afflict, arouse, alarm, awake my soul!
I will not dread the lightning or the storm,
Becalmed at sea, the bark nears not its goal.

And thou, my husband, in whose gentle breast
I seek godlike power, to keep and save;
Thou to whom I unkind, or fate blest,
These fragments of a scattered being gave,

Come nearer to me, let our spirits meet,
Let us be of one light, one truth possessed;
Tis time, our blended life on earth is sweet,
But can our souls within one heaven rest?

I am content to live, content to die,
For life and death to me are little worth,
I cannot know, through all eternity,
A grief more deep than those I know on earth.

June 4th 1843

Howe's soul is "ebbing" away from her body, yet she still remains physically present; her "heart" has not yet perished though she admits she is now content to live or die. Still she beseeches God to "[a]fflict, arouse, alarm, awake [her] soul" (Williams, 40, line 10)—she is deadened spiritually and emotionally, but not physically. Her materiality, her physicality appear the only vestiges of life she has left, although she longs for an existence beyond that of the purely material, and thus, the purely feminine sphere. The struggle outlined in these lines could

easily be rephrased as a struggle to retain her subjectivity—to be given a soul, despite her apparent womanhood. In marriage, she had perhaps lost the personal subjectivity previously given to her. Her husband, given the “fragments” of her “scattered being” to “keep and save” (16) seems, halfway through the poem, one of the few hopes Howe has left of retaining her personhood. . The last two stanzas reveal the crux of the matter—Howe and her husband’s “spirits” have yet to meet, and the poem leaves it questionable whether or not they “in one heaven [will] rest” (17-20). These lines seems to imply that Howe expected some fulfillment from the “blended life” they shared, perhaps a refitting of her fragmented selfhood into a new whole, of “one light, one truth possessed” (17-20). By the last stanza, however, this possibility seems to fade. She is “content to live, content to die/For life and death to [her] are little worth” convinced that she could not know “through all eternity,/A grief more deep than those I know on earth” (23-4). The possibility of a truly blended life with her husband, then, appeared to be impossible—her beseeching only underlines her despair at its seeming improbability.

Her writing, once a means of displaying how she might “wrap [herself] in God” now appears to chronicle her failure to wrap herself in her husband, a seeming equal to God in this poem. The last lines of the poem end bleakly, leaving Howe between worlds and binaries. She is too between life and death to see them as meaning anything beyond the problematic existence she currently has; her body and soul are too divided for death or life to have any impact. But Howe’s remedy for repairing the monumental distance between her scattered, strange being and her husband, in whom she seeks “godlike power,” seems to paradoxically reinforce this distance, and keep her in her fragmented self-division. Only by being “possessed” of “one light” and “one truth” can the Howes hope to repair their marriage, yet such a proposition still divorces the Howes—whether or not their souls can in “one heaven rest” is debatable, but Julia Ward Howe’s

soul has already begun to “ebb” from her body—her subjectivity has already been somewhat forfeited, if not by marriage, then by her increasing depression. Though she admits her earthly life with her husband is “sweet,” the vast majority of the poem implies the disconnection from her body to the point that closeness implies a meeting of the spirits, rather than a meeting of minds or of bodies.

The themes begun in the “The Present is Dead” certainly suggest a growing crisis for Howe, as her ability to fulfill her role as wife to Samuel Gridley Howe is made impossible by the emotional distance that separates her from him. Equally, in accordance with her own views in “Woman,” she is unable to fulfill her role as a woman, since she can neither directly access God nor access God through her “godlike” husband. Her identity is unable to become whole, frustrated by her marriage and a soul that seems in danger of separating from her body at any time. The Laurence Manuscript provides the first possible solution to the problem of Howe’s disconnection from her soul and her crossed desires, linking it more directly to her disconnection from her husband, as in the above poem. Seeking God, it seems, becomes equivalent with seeking out her husband, and “letting their spirits meet.” The story of Eva and Rafael, introduced in the latter half of the Laurence text, has particular significance to “The Present is Dead,” echoing and developing many of the same themes, however more bleakly. The story-within-a-story involves two lovers, Eva and Rafael, who are separated by Rafael’s untimely death. Separated from her lover by her physical existence, Eva, in hopes of rejoining Rafael, slowly commits herself to the spiritual realm at the instructions of visiting angels. Grimly, the first angel that comes to Eva (called, appropriately, “Despair”), warns her that “the arms of thy cross/Reach wherever thou turnest/... Thou’rt bound on it, nailed to it,/Born to it, wedded to it./Persuade the wood to tenderness,/Caress the iron to softness,/Then only shall fate take pity on thee” (169). A

harbinger of the “angel of consolation,” Despair and the other spirits are meant to “awaken the dormant soul—they force it to arise from its lethargy, and persuade it or scourge it towards the gate of heaven, which is near the tomb of love. If the fugitive turn upon its pursuers and force its way back to the world, that gate remains shut upon him” (174). Eva has no choice but to endure and perhaps learn from the various ministrations of the angels. The wood, after all, might be “persuaded to tenderness.”

The story of Eva and Rafael, briefly referenced in Howe’s letters to her sister, literalizes the state of affairs in “The Present is Dead.” Only Eva’s constancy can guarantee the hope of rejoining Rafael, and such constancy requires the acceptance of her burden, the cross. Self-abnegation and denial of her material existence become the means by which she can remain “faithful,” leading to transcendence from her painful physical existence. Through the consultation of angels, Eva learns that a “golden seed” lies in Rafael’s chest that will eventually grow into a flower that “burst the tomb” (cite), given that Eva cares for it. Should she sing to it, pray to it, and love it, it will grow. Once she “gathers it,” her “earthly days are numbered” (cite)—she will rejoin her love in death. If she does not, “[Eva] wilt be placed in a heaven where Rafael is not” (173), an instruction that seems answer Howe’s question in “The Present is Dead”: “can our souls within one heaven rest?” According to the Laurence text, it would appear they could not unless Howe can somehow spiritually devote herself to her husband. Thus Howe transitions from her initial pleas that her and her husband both endeavor to become one “spirit.../...of one light, one truth possessed” to Eva (and, undoubtedly, Howe) carrying the sole burden of becoming “one spirit” with Rafael through her constancy. Despair “awakens” her alone—Eva and Howe’s lovers are so far removed from their lives that they are remade as goals to achieved. Only Howe can make it such that their souls rest in one heaven, through the careful,

tender constancy of character displayed by Eva and Nina. Sinisterly, both characters seem to imply that Howe must die, either literally or figuratively, to be proven truly constant. Both women appear to bring a similar lesson—“bear thy cross,” whether it be the burden of grief or the burden of a “crossed” being that longs to be made whole.

Finding wholeness or subjectivity in marriage, or any sort of union, appears to be a lost cause unless one is willing to forfeit one’s life. Indeed, it seems the only means by which uncrossed wholeness can be achieved in the Laurence manuscript is through death, according to the Eva and Rafael portion of the manuscript. Laurence, however, appears subject to a different fate. After being reunited with Ronald, a male friend who claims to love Laurence, and, earlier in the text, attempts to rape him, Laurence falls into something of a living death. While he is still able to hear the physician, Berto, and Briseida talk over him and about him, he remains unresponsive and still, apparently close to death. Before he is “dressed in his grave clothes” (198) Laurence experiences visions of heaven and hell, or the dead and the living “so mingled and confused, that the one became to me as the other” (196). The apparitions of a young woman (presumably Emma Von P.) and a young man (presumably Ronald) seize him and attempt to claim him, one implied dead, and one living, each apparition gendering Laurence differently:

She shrieked aloud in her frenzy, ‘he is mine, he is mine, I have died for him!’ but one in the form of a young man came and tore me from her arms...crying aloud ‘give her up to me, she is mine alone, I have lived for her a life worse than a thousand deaths!’ Then I lifted my hands to God, and cried ‘take me, for I am thine!’ for my bowels were utterly torn asunder by the love I bare to both of them, the woman and the man. Then I perceived that I was stretched upon a cross, and it was said in my ears: ‘a cross is not formed otherwise than of two loves or two desires with cross each other or conflict’ (196-7).

Laurence is crossed between male and female desires, and between male and female mates, in this passage. Unlike Eva, Laurence cannot fully bear his cross, for his desires are conflicted, torn

between the physical and spiritual realms. In the previous poems, it seems that Howe is similarly conflicted. She aspires to wrap herself in God, and yet she also wishes to cease her soul's ebbing from the "clay." Indeed, Howe's depiction of Laurence can be interpreted as an account of her own gender division, an ideal "cross" between both genders. Laurence is both beautiful and productive, both spiritually and intellectually inclined, both masculine and feminine. He, unlike Howe, however, is entirely emptied of any erotic desire, his indeterminate gender seeming to prevent him from having any sexuality whatsoever, unless it is pressed upon him by a prospective lover, who desires him only if he fits within an intelligible economy of desire. Howe has both male and female desires that leave her between worlds, between a desire to work and female sexual desire, between the desire for distance from her children and the desire to be a good mother. She is similarly nailed to this cross, unable to fully represent either male or female desire, and unable to fully commit to life or death.

While *Passion-flowers* posits similar questions to the Laurence manuscript and the previous manuscript poems--the bifurcation of self, the justifications for writing, and the "cross" Howe must bear--the collection appears to represent a resolution of these themes, perhaps partially through publication. Though Laurence could be seen as hypothetical for Howe, a way in which Howe can creatively deploy her sense of being crossed in a seemingly perfect being, he is pinioned beneath the contradictory expectations of society, depending on their interpretation of his gender. Meanwhile, Howe's *Passion-flowers* takes these themes and makes them public, immediately personal, and literal. There is no metaphorical being that Howe speaks through in her poems; the narrator of all or most of the collection's poems appears to be Howe herself. The cross, however cumbersome, becomes Howe's sole reason to write, the production of *Passion-flowers* appearing to be a final declaration of herself and her own subjectivity. Laurence is

technically “full” as a character, a being possessed of both masculine and feminine characteristics, and of the beauty of both sexes. But the feminine bent of his physical appearance still forces him to subjugate his body beneath masculinity, through spiritualism, through the mind. The “cross” in the Laurence text then appears asymmetrical, preventing any illusion of gender perfection or fullness. Perhaps not coincidentally, Christianity’s emblem, the crucifix, is similarly asymmetrical, coinciding with its traditional ideology of masculinity and femininity. The crucifix, in *Passion-flowers*, both appears as a literal weight upon Howe, and as a point of thematic departure—the volume’s very title, although not chosen by Howe, references the flower most commonly associated with the passion of Jesus Christ. Though both the title and the crucifix recall the burden of carrying the cross, of being nailed and tied to an inevitable fate, the title additionally alludes to resurrection, and to the passion “of the soul...which would...if revealed, offend the narrow sense and breeding of the sensible world” (Howe 121).

The *Passion-flowers* poem “The Dead Christ,” is weighted with the emotional resonance of the metaphorical and, in the poem, physical cross and the “passion” of the collection’s title. The “dead Christ” of the poem is a crucifix, a souvenir from her trip to Rome (a place that figures largely in *Passion-flowers*). In the poem, Howe asks an unnamed addressee to unpack and “lay . . . beside her” a crucifix she bought in Rome that she refers to as “the dead Christ (Howe, 152, line 17). She presses the crucifix to her heart, “hold[ing] him long and painfully/Till the weary tears should start (19-20). Rather than an object that leads to spiritual and philosophical contemplation (and more bluntly, a symbol of religious contemplation and prayer), the crucifix in this poem is a strangely sexualized object, a more physical presence than her husband in “The Present is Dead.” Its materiality is in fact emphasized, its “cold weight” can “press wholly down/the pulse that chokes within,” and furthermore “bear [Howe] company” as a

physical presence. The crucifix's sexualization appears to represent her personal relationship with death and spirituality, a literalization of the ideal woman's spirituality and closeness to God (as she describes in "Woman"), as well as a reaffirmation of her physical existence. Despite her (seemingly) full life and children, "the time comes swiftly toward [her],/(Nor does [she] bid it stay,)/When the dead Christ will soon be more to [her]/Than all [she] holds to-day" (lines 13-16). Given the context of this poem within the whole of *Passion-flowers*, one could also presume that the crucifix, which was purchased during Howe's separation from her husband and elder children, represents the brief freedom that Howe experienced there. There appears to be a subtle irony in these lines as well. All that she "holds" is immaterial and abstract, yet the cross is physical, oppressively so. If the crucifix here additionally is weighted with the representation of her own crossed existence, then these lines also prove themselves to be an affirmation of the "cross's" power. It will soon be more to her than what she currently has, that is, her husband and children. In conjunction with the poem's context—the crucifix as an artifact from Rome—the "cross" and the crucifix perhaps appear as their own form of transcendence, representing a reprieve from the plodding dullness of her domestic life, and one perhaps only achieved because of her crossed nature.

This image, however, is further complicated by its deadness—it is, as she asserts, the "dead Christ," not a cross. Clasp the physical artifact of spirituality and transcendence, the crucifix, seems most appropriate. Rather than negating herself entirely through death, clutching the crucifix is a sublimated desire to be revitalized in her material body. As Howe is unable to access the passive spirituality of the "vestal priestess" of "Woman," she is also unable to detach herself from her bodily existence in the same way that Eva, and the "vestal priestess" can. Eva is the epitome of the "vestal priestess," domestic, spiritual womanhood taken to an extreme, the

apparition of self-negating womanhood that Howe should be. But Howe remains unable to fulfill such a role. She is seemingly “unsexed” her by the conjunction of her identity and her body; like her conflicted protagonist Laurence. Thus, the subtle reaffirmation of her physical body seems paramount to her possible spiritual transcendence, a subtle shift from the Laurence text, which appears to advocate a full divorce from one’s body. However, the artifact that asserts that materiality is apparently dead, an additional complexity to Howe’s imagery

Like Laurence, she cannot fully unsex herself through spirituality, and as she does not conform to any womanly ideal, she cannot fully access God. Thus, the closest alternative is the crucifix:

That salutary deadness
I seek, through want and pain
From which God’s own high power can bid
Our virtue rise again (45-8).

Only through her death can Howe be healed of “self and sin” (line 22), her problematic identity, and her insufficient “strength of feeling” (line 32). Her “virtue can rise again” if she is granted this “salutary deadness,” much in the same way that Laurence believes his spirit can overcome his body through death. To transcend would require her death, as she notes in the last stanza, or at least a full disconnection from her bodily existence, a sentiment asserted in the Laurence manuscript. The attribute of the crucifix that she mainly “prizes” is its deadness (45), and the poem would further ask that the dead Christ “press wholly down” on the “pulse that chokes within” (22-24). Yet seems the picture Howe draws in this poem, and indeed, the collection as a whole is more complex than simply desiring death. While the crucifix is a symbol of death and bodily transcendence, Howe is not bearing the cross; she herself is not the Christ figure on the crucifix, as Laurence eventually becomes. She holds the cross, presses it to her heart, and prizes

it as a spiritual object. It is, in other words, at a distance from her, a material object “defaced of worms” that signifies its transcendent subject poorly. Rather than caressing it to softness, she seems to desire the cross’s burden, wishing it would stop her pulse with its weight. Her weight is spiritual, for if she were not burdened by the desire to write or create, her bodily existence would be largely unproblematic. The burden she desires, then, is the physical one, a literal cross.

Otherwise, it seems she must do away with her existence entirely, with minimal hope of transcendence, if the “divine contagion” of the crucifix cannot heal her of her sins. Still, it seems as though her transcendence lies primarily in one like Laurence or Eva’s. This poem’s conflicting imagery would seem to indicate a greater ambivalence towards her own desires, a greater confusion from the Laurence text, since he is far more bent on non-existence than Howe herself. As she states in another poem, “The Heart’s Astronomy,” she is “between extremes distraught and rent” (Howe 102, line 24) both “to aspire” and “to languish” (Howe 102, line 24-8).

There is some benefit to bearing a cross, as well, behind the “veil of sweet illusion” (87, line 4), and out of sight of human understanding. Howe elaborates such possibilities in her poems “Behind the Veil” and “Mother Mind.” Each of these poems reflects on her status as writer, casting the bitterness and despair of the Laurence text and “The Dead Christ” in a different light. “Behind the Veil” asserts some unknown order to events that Howe cannot see: “The secret of man’s life disclosed/Would cause him strange confusion/Should God the cloud of fear remove/Or veil of sweet illusion” (Howe 86, 1-4). One must look for “the balm that comes with tears/The bane that lurks in kisses” (19-20), for either way, God’s plan seems to be at work. The poem does not necessarily advocate blithe optimism in the good beneath evil or unwanted

events. Howe asks her reader to distrust any event, it seems, to both look for the “higher joy” (22) in suffering, but also to remain wary of “kisses,” and “sweet illusion.”

“Mother Mind” asserts a similar thesis, but one perhaps more in line with *Passion-flowers* poems as a whole. Howe’s writing emanates from her struggle, a thought

...I bear within my breast
That greatens from my growth of soul,
And waits, and will not be expressed.

It greatens, till its hour has come,
Not without pain, it sees the light;
‘Twixt smiles and tears I view it o’er,
And dare not deem it perfect, quite

These children of my soul I keep
Where scarce a mortal man may see,
Yet not unconsecrated, dear friend,
Baptismal rites they claim of thee. (Howe 92, 21-32)

Her poems are the “children of her soul,” thoughts that grow until, like Rafael’s “golden seed,” they see the light and “break the chest” of Howe’s soul (but not, of course, without some perfecting). The act of writing is linked not with weaving, as in her manuscript poems, or with a fraught relation between mind and body, but with pregnancy and birth. Poems gestate in the soul. They are borne of the poet, created through her “thought,” rather than spontaneously created through an outpouring. There is labor involved, both in the sense of work and of childbirth. Such an image of the poet is quite a transition from Howe’s previous poems, which deal in tropes of the Poetess, or in justifications of the female poet as holy. The poems of “Mother Mind” are not holy by virtue of their being written by a virtuous Poetess, whose creative process is surprisingly divorced from the act of birth, even as it is tied up in her gender and sexuality. Howe’s methods are both intellectual and distinctly feminine. Although the poem is a product of an inexpressible thought (instead of a deep emotion), the poet is made a maternal figure. Hence the title, “Mother

Mind,” appears almost literal. Her mind is the mother of her poetry, the children of her soul, baptized and made holy by the reader.

The intended project of *Passion-flowers* might be summarized by this poem, an acknowledgement of Howe’s own desire to write, and the need for the creative act she bears, a thought that “greatens,” and cannot be expressed otherwise. Here, instead of a masculine productivity, she is reproductive, her poems are “children,” a product of her own need to create (a veiled sexual metaphor, it seems). They are the children of her “soul” made physical, public, and consecrate by reading. Her life is “consumed in verse” (19), the “baptismal rites” she asks her reader to legitimate and consecrate her writing, but the need cannot be stemmed. Paradoxically, given the context of her previous work, her productivity is made legitimate by her feminine identification, the body not a burden but an integrated force that gives rises to her tremendous work.

Conclusion

The themes and continuing strands of thought that compose *Passion-flowers* are numerous, and as such *Passion-flowers* is a various and complex collection, its subjects ranging from politics, literary figures, and Howe herself. Yet *Passion-flowers* represents a fundamental shift in Howe's conception of poetic creation. Rather than a means to a greater end (wrapping oneself in God, or more accurately, ridding oneself of the troublesome corporeal body), writing is an end of itself, a birth of a child rather than a burial rite. Howe's own desires are made various in the text. An overwhelming desire to transcend her body becomes multifaceted, a desire to transcend, but also to remain embodied, a desire to write, but also to retain a feminine identity. That *Passion-flowers* is so complex seems to only reflect Howe's intricate themes and complicated resolutions.

Her previous work is by no means simple, tying various threads of death, destruction, monstrosity, and spiritual rebirth into a whole that ultimately questions the underlying meaning of gender identification, particularly as it comes to the amorphous gender policing figure of the Poetess. *Passion-flowers* is perhaps largely owed its thematic existence to the Laurence manuscript, which appears to be one of the first of Howe's works to directly interrogate the nature of feminine productivity in the mid-nineteenth century, and the potential for a feminine person to retain some aspect of their personhood under the objectifying eye of the critic. Laurence acts as an authorial proxy for Howe, a metaphorical autobiographical character, but his state is more perfect than Howe's own, partially due to his extreme, "perfect" androgynous beauty, but also due to his masculine identification. He is still pinioned by his "crossed" state however, and for his androgyny and beauty, he is made into an object of lust, his personhood problematic at best. This conflict is more often than not made feminine by Howe. The significant

turns of the text occur at points where Laurence is gendered female, or seen as otherwise feminine appearing. In other words, his subjectivity is most problematic when it is presented or perceived as potentially feminine, and it seems uncertain, both in Howe's early poems and the Laurence text, whether or not the feminine can be imbued with some semblance of the intellect and personhood that Howe has. Thus Howe makes the image of womanhood and feminine performance (or at least, her own incarnation of it) grotesque, unholy, and disturbing, involving either disturbing self-negation, misery, or complete subjugation of the body under the masculine mind. The feminine, it seems, cannot be contained in the Laurence text, as it cannot be contained in her own life, and the only solution appear to be complete subjugation, or a resuscitation through Laurence and his "monstrosity."

Passion-flowers then appears to be a move Howe's first initial attempt at revitalization, and given her work in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it seems a productive and tentatively successful one. Femininity and productivity no longer necessarily "unsex" Howe as they do Laurence. Though some critics of the nineteenth century might still dismissively categorize her poetry as predominantly Poetess poems for their distinctly feminine themes, the complexity, darkness, and defiance in *Passion-flowers* seems to defy any definitive label, openly mocking the Poetess genre in some poems and passionately revealing herself and her suffering in others. She is a woman, and she is creative, not a figure, but a subject whose experiences cannot be contained under any one label. *Passion-flowers* completes what the Laurence text began. They are both projects of resuscitation, but also ones of healing, opening feminine identity in literature and poetry to allow for the real, individual woman subject.

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