



CRITICISM

VOLUME

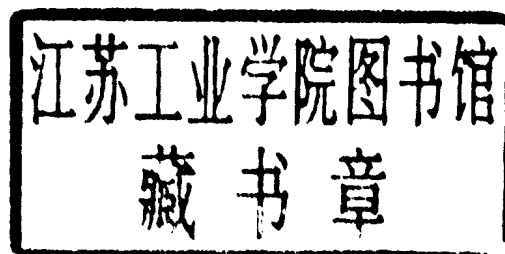
81

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 81

Michelle Lee
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism, Vol. 81

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 91-118494

ISBN-13: 978-0-7876-9878-2
ISBN-10: 0-7876-9878-4
ISSN 1052-4851

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Julia Ward Howe

1819-1910

American poet, playwright, biographer, autobiographer, travel writer, and essayist.

INTRODUCTION

Remembered especially for her inspiring lyrics in the famous American Civil War poem “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” Howe is recognized as a leading voice among women writers and orators during the pre- and post-Civil War period. She struggled to write about and defend her personal beliefs, experiences, and ideas in a society that discouraged women from speaking out publicly or voicing independent thoughts. Throughout her lifetime, Howe was interested in social justice and eventually became a powerful force in the women’s suffrage movement, as well as the driving force behind the Peace Crusade, an endeavor to unite women throughout the world in the cause of peace.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Howe was born on May 27, 1819, in New York City, into one of the country’s richest families. Her father, Samuel Ward, was a partner in a successful banking firm, and her mother, Julia Cutler Ward, was a writer of religious poetry. When Julia was five, her mother died; within the next few years her father sent her to a private school for ladies, where she was instructed in social skills. When she reached the age of sixteen her education was turned over to private tutors, and she received extensive schooling in philosophy, literature, religion, languages, and math. She was encouraged to read by her older brother Sam, whose large library housed books on philosophy, history, and the classics. Howe also developed an avid interest in the Bible, which she read daily. By this time she had already begun to write poetry, and composed some of her earliest verse in response to the devastating deaths of her father in 1839, and her brother Henry less than a year later. In 1843 she married philanthropist and doctor Samuel Gridley Howe, director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind and an influential social reformer.

For the first several years of the couple’s marriage, Howe suffered from severe depression. Her husband opposed Howe’s participation in political, publishing, or reform activities, since he believed that married

women should be restricted to private lives of domesticity. Nonetheless, Howe continued to write poetry despite his opposition, resulting in constant conflict between them. In 1850, Howe traveled to Rome, and remained there for several months forming an association with Horace Binney Wallace, whom she referred to as her best friend. She was devastated when he committed suicide in 1852. Some biographers have speculated that the intense pain Howe experienced over Wallace’s death prompted the poet to publish her first book of poetry, the self-revelatory *Passion Flowers* (1854). Her husband was so distressed over the book’s publication that he asked for a divorce and sought custody of the couple’s children. Howe refused and continued with her writing, publishing a play about the seduction of an innocent young girl, *The World’s Own*, in 1857. It was not well received during its New York City run, as critics considered its subject matter inappropriate for a woman writer. That same year Howe published a second book of poetry, *Words for the Hour* (1857).

In 1861, the Howes traveled to Washington, D.C., where Dr. Howe served as a member of the Sanitary Commission, conducting medical inspections of the Union troops amassed there. Hearing soldiers singing “John Brown’s Body,” Howe was encouraged by friends to write lyrics for the stirring melody. Upon its publication the following year in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” became the most famous and most inspirational work of poetry to come out of the Civil War.

In 1863 the youngest of the Howes’ six children died, and Howe fell into a state of acute depression. She joined the Unitarian Church, and over the objections of her husband and older daughters, she began lecturing and giving sermons and poetry readings. She also contributed essays and poems on social causes to various periodicals, including the *Galaxy* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Although many of these were published anonymously, her identity was well known within her tight-knit, upper-class Boston community. In 1868, she was persuaded to speak at a woman’s suffrage meeting, and subsequently embarked on a new mission—battling for the rights of women. She quickly gained fame as a powerful and persuasive public speaker, cofounded the American Woman’s Suffrage Association, and led several other groups, including the Association for the Advancement of Women (1870) and the American section of the Women’s International Peace Organization.

She also initiated the Peace Crusade, and in 1872 held a Woman's Peace Congress in London and began a worldwide Mother's Day for Peace Movement, which became the precursor of the modern Mother's Day. In 1876 Howe's husband died. Despite their conflicts, the couple had remained married for more than thirty years. Some biographers have claimed that as his health deteriorated in the years before his death, the couple was able to reconcile some of their differences. Howe lectured widely following his death, using the money she earned as a public speaker to support herself well into her eighties. In 1908 she was honored as the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She died on October 17, 1910, in Rhode Island.

MAJOR WORKS

According to many scholars, Howe's first book of poems, *Passion Flowers*, was unique in that it included personal elements from the author's own life. Containing forty-four poems, many of which discuss such themes as maternity, abolitionism, and sexual desire, the volume contains an autobiographical subtext, in which the "I" of the poems has been linked by scholars to Howe herself. At least seven of the poems address a specific person, whom some critics have speculated might be Horace Binney Wallace, her friend and literary mentor. Included in these is "The Fellow Pilgrim," about a deceased companion whose presence is felt through the poetry the speaker had written while he was alive, and "My Sea-ward Window," in which the speaker is lost in memories of her departed friend. The poem "Mind versus Mill-Stream" has been read as a scornful take on Howe's own marriage, with her husband being portrayed as a miller who desperately needs a tame and placid brook in order to accomplish his work.

In the less successful volume *Words for the Hour*, Howe addressed political issues, yet retained her focus on domestic affairs. Recalling English nurse Florence Nightingale's efforts to organize medical services during the Crimean War, "Florence Nightingale and Her Praisers" argues that Nightingale was able to complete her compassionate work because she had access to freedoms not available to most other women. In "The Nursery," the speaker admits that she cannot hide her sadness from her children and that at times she suffers from anguish and grief. "Via Felice," another poem in the volume, names Wallace as the speaker's companion while she was in Rome.

Several critics agree that Howe reached the pinnacle of her poetic career with "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Relying heavily on biblical language and imagery, the ballad uses sentimental rhetoric to

galvanize the Union abolitionists. Howe's final volume, *At Sunset* (1910), centers on public events like the Lincoln centennial and the Peace Congress. Howe was selecting poems for the collection at the time of her death.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have suggested that with *Passion Flowers*, Howe aimed to earn a place within the contemporary male literary circle and to establish a reputation apart from her husband. For a while the volume achieved this purpose. Although the book was published anonymously, little effort was made to hide the author's identity and it quickly became common knowledge. Literary critics responded enthusiastically, pointing out the author's use of direct language and her avoidance of artifice and highly stylized verse. However, the volume was celebrated more for its exposure of personal feelings—especially by such a prominent upper-class woman—than for its poetic cleverness. One twentieth-century critic, Valarie H. Ziegler, suggests that the book "was spectacular because it was tantalizing." Howe revealed enough private details—even though she often muted references or used vague expressions—to attract readers eager for a glimpse into the author's personal life.

Howe's greatest literary popularity followed the publication of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which served to arouse a sense of righteousness and a fervor for universal freedom among soldiers and the public alike. Referred to by many scholars as a masterpiece among Civil War poetry, "The Battle Hymn" has been discussed by many critics for its religious allusions; some scholars, for instance, have focused on the poem's call for a religious crusade, others have detailed the author's recurrent references to Biblical language and imagery, while still others have debated whether the poem's God is vengeful and angry or merciful and just. Jeffrey J. Polizzotto suggests that the poem reveals Howe's transformation from a restrained and stifled wife and mother into a public spokesperson for the rights of women, especially as their roles related to the Civil War. Polizzotto claims, however, that the subtext of the poem reinforces women's long-established roles as peacemakers whose primary duty is to offer religious inspiration to the men/warriors in their battle to conquer the enemy.

Howe's poetic works fell into obscurity after her death, with twentieth-century scholars dismissing what they called her "sentimental" verse. A resurgence of critical interest began, however, in the mid-1990s when critics began examining the historical circumstances that existed during Howe's lifetime, the effect her personal

life had on her writings, and the rhetorical, persuasive style of her writings. Critic Gary Williams, for example, praises the "intensity and audacity" of *Passion Flowers*, calling the author's use of autobiographical material "bold," and contending that it was unheard of in Howe's time for a woman to make public such intensely private feelings. Williams also identifies an "angry self" in *Passion Flowers*, calling the volume Howe's effort to "strike back" at her "oppressive" husband. Commenting on the relationship between *Passion Flowers* and the Howes' marriage, Ziegler proposes that the publication of the book changed the balance of power in the couple's marriage, granting Howe an authoritative voice not only among literary circles but within her own marriage as well. In addition, critic Wendy Dasler Johnson analyzes Howe's work within the context of eighteenth-century codes of rhetoric, pointing out that some of Howe's poetry, especially "The Battle Hymn," can be read as highly charged, rhetorical verse designed to evoke sympathy in readers and inspire them to act.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Passion Flowers 1854
Words for the Hour 1857
 "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" 1862
Later Lyrics 1866
From Sunset Ridge: Poems Old and New 1898
At Sunset 1910

Other Major Works

The World's Own (play) 1857
A Trip to Cuba (travel writing) 1860
From the Oak to the Olive. A Plain Record of a Pleasant Journey (travel writing) 1868
Memoir of Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe . . . With Other Memorial Tributes (biography) 1876
Margaret Fuller (biography) 1883
Is Polite Society Polite? And Other Essays (essays) 1895
Reminiscences, 1819-1899 (autobiography) 1899
Julia Ward Howe and the Woman Suffrage Movement: A Selection from Her Speeches and Essays (speeches and essays) 1913
The Walk with God . . . Extracts from Mrs. Howe's Private Journals (autobiography) 1919

CRITICISM

Judith Mattson Bean (essay date April 1994)

SOURCE: Bean, Judith Mattson. "Margaret Fuller on the Early Poetry of Julia Ward Howe: An Uncollected Letter." *ANQ* 7, no. 2 (April 1994): 76-80.

[In the following essay, Bean reprints a letter written by nineteenth-century literary critic Margaret Fuller in which she responded positively to some of Howe's early poetry.]

As first editor of the *Dial*, Margaret Fuller developed the acumen which led to her being the first literary critic for the *New York Tribune* and one of the outstanding American literary critics before 1850. As literary critic for the *Dial* (1840-42) and the *Tribune* (1844-46), Fuller endeavored to stimulate American literary talent by assessing the work of young authors. One of those young writers was Julia Ward Howe, later the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

The Julia Ward Howe Papers in Schlesinger's Women's Studies Manuscript Collections includes a letter from Margaret Fuller presumed lost until recently.¹ In the letter Fuller appears to be thoughtfully reevaluating her earlier opinion of Julia Ward by considering her poetry and literary potential.² Fuller combines astute critical assessment of several poems with expressions of respect and encouragement for an aspiring writer, assuming the role of literary mentor to Julia Ward.

The occasion for the letter was Julia Ward's submission of poetry (now lost) to Fuller for her advice.³ Although neither date nor addressee is indicated on the autographed manuscript, it is probable that the letter was written in the winter of 1841-42 before Julia married Bostonian Samuel Gridley Howe. At that time Julia Ward (Howe) was making frequent visits to Mary Ward of Boston (Sam Ward's sister) who had been engaged to Julia's brother Henry (Clifford 40).⁴ Ward had been Fuller's student for private lessons since at least December 1841 (Hudspeth 2: 258; 3: 32, 38).⁵ Howe sent Ward some poems for her suggestions about publication; Ward's response (February 26, 1842) is similar to this Fuller assessment (qtd. in Clifford 44).⁶ Ward, at Howe's request, may have also shown the poems to Fuller. Fuller's consistent references to Howe in the third person in the letter suggests the presence of a mutual friend (Mary) who could have submitted the poems and received this response.⁷

The most notable feature of this letter is that it suggests reasons for a shift in Fuller's attitude toward Howe whom she had met earlier. As Robert Hudspeth has

noted, Fuller's response to Howe revealed initial coldness toward the younger woman when they met in June 1839 in Boston's Allston museum (Hudspeth 2: 72, 74 n.8).⁸ By the winter of 1841-42 Howe was beginning to publish her poetry and hoped to persuade Ticknor to bring out a small volume.⁹ Also at this time Howe attended a Fuller Conversation (Richards and Elliott 1: 72).¹⁰ Fuller's surprised and appreciative response to reading Howe's poetry marks what was likely the beginning of a new friendship and Howe's imaginative identification with Fuller as a writer and social critic.

Fuller's letter identifies basic qualities of Howe's early poetry: religious fervor, prophetic spirit, a style combining "Bunyan-like simplicity" with "a soaring sweetness" and "penetrating music throughout." Fuller fostered her aspirations as an artist by approaching the poems with respect for differences in outlook and for the writer's seriousness, and by expressing admiration to the point of envy ("But were I the singer! This would content me well"). Later Howe wrote that the poems Fuller saw were written in the aftermath of her father's death and served as a release for her anguish. She recalled Fuller's advice to publish them but indicated the poems had "never seen the light, and never will" (Howe 61). However, one poem, "**Woman**," appears to have been published in Rufus Griswold's anthology, *The Female Poets of America*.

The letter reveals why Fuller became a model for this aspiring author.¹¹ She provided Howe with both a challenge to live up to high potential and support for her literary ambitions. As Howe moved from private to public discourse, from poetry to essays and lecturing, she drew constant inspiration from Fuller's example. Incorporating Fuller into her mature works, she helped create awareness of Fuller's place in American women's traditions. [Margaret Fuller to Mary or Julia Ward? ca. 1842]¹²

I part from this poem with great regret, and, so far as I am concerned, wish very much that it may be published that I may keep it by me. I think I shall frequently recur to it.

It is the record of days of genuine inspiration,—of days when the soul lay in the light, when the spiritual harmonies were clearly apprehended and great religious symbols reanimated with their original meaning. Its numbers have the fullness and sweetness of young love, young life. Its gifts were great and demand the service of a long day's work to requite and interpret them. I can hardly realize that the Julia Ward I have seen has lived this life. It has not yet pervaded her whole being, though I can recal something of it in the steady light of her eye. May she become all attuned and ennobled by this music. I saw, in her, taste, the capacity for genius, and the utmost delicacy of passionate feeling, but caught no glimpse at the time of this higher mood.

It will always be valuable to me to have seen that the church even now can have an influence so real, and that its rites and signs still bear their mystic significance

to the willing sense. I had thought only those who had turned their backs upon the church could see it in a text for pure worship.

I think, however, this can only be spiritually apprehended by those of a spiritual experience, and that to a superficial reader nothing might be seen in the poem except the technics of Trinitarianism. But were I the singer! this would content me well.

I admire the feeling of the prophetic spirit of the Old Testament as much as that of the purity and infinite love of Jesus. The parts all please me in various ways. One has a Bunyan-like simplicity, others a soaring sweetness, the music of all is penetrating. "**Preaching**"—"Woman"—and "**The Beauty of Holiness**" are rich in thought—shall such a mind ever swerve from its balance?

There are slight inaccuracies. Fire is used in several places as a word of two syllables, the rhythm requiring fi-er. & much is forgiven to who loveth much, which, to be grammatical should be him who loveth much—or give an objective in some way to the to. I am sorry to write such a scrawl, but constant writing spoils my hand just now, and I have no time for elegance. Looking at the neat copy of Miss Ward, I would really copy this, did time permit, so much is my emulation fired!

If she publishes I would not have her omit the lines about the "lonely room." The personal interest with which they stamp that part is slight and delicate.

If the poem be not published I hope it will be sent me again one of these long summer days.

S. Margaret Fuller

I know of many persons in my own circle to whom I think the poem would be especially grateful.

Notes

1. I am grateful for the assistance of Wendy Thomas of Schlesinger Library for information about the letter.
2. See Hudspeth 2:72, 74 n. 8; 3:191-92; 4:168, 169 n. 6, 297 n. 5; 5:191, 192 n. 6. Clues to Howe's relationship with Fuller appear in other letters, but the connection has been obscured in part because of the scarcity of evidence such as this manuscript provides.
3. Hereafter Julia Ward is identified as (Julia Ward) Howe for the sake of clarity; Mary Ward will be identified as Ward.
4. Mary and Julia met in Newport; Henry died of typhoid fever less than one year after his father died in November 1839. Julia's despair over the two deaths in her family were reflected in the poems to which Fuller responded.
5. Fuller first alludes to Mary Ward's lessons in a letter dated December 13, 1841, with others occurring January 1 and 15, 1842.

6. Mary Ward wrote Julia Ward that the poems ". . . would not universally interest, because they express but a very partial view of the truths of our religion and that one of a stern, painful, ascet character to which the whole spirit of time is opposed. . . . [the verses were the] exact impress of the religious views which you entertained one year ago, which were ever painful to behold. . . . This is not your religion; in an excited state of mind you strove to make it so, but nearly lost your reason in the attempt." Fuller likewise comments on the intense religious sentiments which suggest loss of balance.
7. Howe may have transmitted the poems herself; she indicated later that she showed the poems to Fuller who advised her to publish them (*Reminiscences* 61).
8. Fuller alludes to their first meeting in a letter dated June 8, 1839. Fuller thought Julia "aff as she could be." Hudspeth notes that after her marriage to Samuel Gridley Howe and a European honeymoon trip, Howe returned to Boston and gained a closer acquaintance with Fuller (3: 191-92).
9. Julia Ward had also sought the opinion of her brother's friend Longfellow. In a letter to her brother Sam dated November 3, 1841, Longfellow wrote that "Julia's 'Imprisoned Angel' is a very, very beautiful poem, both in design and execution" (Hilen 2: 343).
10. The Conversation Howe attended followed the Dickens lecture in Boston and an Emerson lecture. Fuller alludes to an Emerson lecture and her party afterwards on January 13, 1842, at which the Wards were present (Hudspeth 3: 38).
11. In a letter to James Russell Lowell (likely written 1857), Howe wrote that "Margaret Fuller said she forgave God Almighty her bad constitution—did she so? What Angel whispers me to make her example mine?" (Julia Ward Howe to James Russell Lowell [Boston, n.d.], Julia Ward Howe Papers, quoted by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University).
12. Julia Ward Howe Family Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College.

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Jeffrey J. Polizzotto (essay date 1996)

SOURCE: Polizzotto, Jeffrey J. "Julia Ward Howe, John Brown's Body, and the Coming of the Lord." In *World-making*, edited by William Pencak, pp. 185-91. New York: Peter Lang, 1996.

[In the following essay, Polizzotto studies "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in light of the author's relationship with her husband and her views on the role of women.]

'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' is the most famous poem to emerge from the American Civil War. It transforms the Union war effort from a struggle for national union into a religious crusade for freedom, of cosmic importance in history comparable to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But this powerful text is also about the transfiguration of Julia Ward Howe, the author, from a writer and obscure supporter of reform causes into one of the world's leading advocates of women's rights. Read in the context of its author's life, 'The Battle Hymn' acquires a fascinating subtext that suggests Howe was performing the same task contemporary feminist theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva have been urging late-twentieth-century women to undertake. Her work and life also point to difficulties and problems with their thought.

Born in 1819 in New York City to one of America's wealthiest families, Julia Ward received a superb education and had written unpublished poetry when in 1843 she was swept off her feet by the forty-two-year-old hero of the Greek Revolution, Samuel Gridley Howe. With his combat days nearly two decades behind him, Howe had turned with equal zeal to ameliorating the lot of prisoners, the insane, and the deaf and blind in the United States. After their marriage, the Howes moved to Dorchester, just south of Boston, where Samuel directed the Perkins Institute for the Blind (Clifford 1979:6-84; Howe 1899:3-150).

The marriage was not happy. Julia felt isolated from the high society life she had enjoyed in New York, and Samuel, while espousing reforms and radical causes such as the abolition of slavery, objected to his wife, a married woman and mother, developing a public persona of her own through publications or political

activity. In her letters, Julia described their marriage as 'very unhappy,' termed her husband 'as cold and indifferent to me as a man can well be,' and described her fate in life as a 'living death' (Howe 1854-1865:120-121, 134). They considered separation, but stuck it out. By the mid-1850s, Julia had started to publish—a book of poems, *Passion Flowers*, appeared in 1857—and make the acquaintance of literary types in Boston. She had also begun to assist her husband in turning out an anti-slavery newspaper entitled *The Commonwealth* (Howe 1899:252-253).

A critical turning point in Julia's life occurred in 1859. Samuel had spoken to her of a man who 'intended to devote his life to the redemption of the colored race from slavery, even as Christ had willingly offered his life for the salvation of mankind.' That man was John Brown: Samuel insisted his wife keep this information secret, for Howe belonged to a group of northerners who were covertly furnishing Brown with arms and money to fight pro-slavery forces in Kansas. Now in 1859 Brown physically appeared at the Howe's residence in Dorchester, shortly before he tried to launch the slave uprising in Virginia which led to his capture at Harper's Ferry and subsequent execution. Samuel Gridley Howe was one of the 'Secret Six' who had financed the expedition. He temporarily fled to Canada to avoid possible punishment for his involvement (Howe 1899:253-256; Pickman 1979:130-134).

For Julia Howe, John Brown was thus both a reality and a symbol—of her own work in the abolitionist cause, but also of the activity her husband undertook apart from her, which excluded her from the public role she craved. Thus it is no wonder John Brown's presence remained in her mind, especially when the Howes moved to Washington with the outbreak of the Civil War—Samuel was to assist with the hygiene of the Union Army—and after Northern soldiers began to sing 'John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the ground; His soul is marching on.' It was while Julia and some friends had been singing this song 'to beguile a rather tedious drive' that one of them suggested that she 'write some good words for that stirring tune' (Howe 1899:272-274).

The next morning, minor details aside, '**The Battle Hymn of the Republic**' as we know it was born. The grim, dirge-like cadence of 'John Brown's Body' at eleven syllables to the line had been transfigured into the fourteen or fifteen of the multi-stanza, upbeat hymn which shifts the emphasis from death to resurrection. As originally sung, there were three lines of John Brown's mouldering body to one of his soul marching on: a variant on the first line, 'We'll hang Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree' is also about death. With the '**Battle Hymn**,' John Brown is gone; Jesus Christ stands in his place.

Or does Julia Ward Howe? A careful reading of the poem makes Julia Ward Howe, symbol of the women who took on a more meaningful if by no means equal role in the national life during the Civil War, the real heroine. John Brown, her husband's protege, failed: he was mouldering in the ground. Julia, excluded by Samuel from the public sphere, is at both the Alpha and Omega of her own poem. '*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord*' translates as follows: Julia Ward Howe, the woman hitherto relegated to the sidelines in her husband's projects and the national civic life, has been vouchsafed the vision and purpose denied to her husband, John Brown, and men. 'As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free'—the penultimate line of the '**Battle Hymn**'s final stanza—incorporates 'us,' men and women together, as participants in the divine struggle. In her published *Reminiscences*, Howe states that it was in fact her musing upon the role of women in the war which led her thoughts in the direction of writing the poem: 'I distinctly remember that a feeling of discouragement came over me. . . . I thought of the women of my acquaintance whose sons or husbands were fighting our great battle; the women themselves serving in the hospitals, or busying themselves with the work of the Sanitary Commission.' . . . I could not leave my nursery to follow the march of our armies, neither had I the practical deftness which the preparing and packing of sanitary stores demanded. Something seemed to say to me, "You would be glad to serve, but you cannot help anyone; you have nothing to give, and there is nothing for you to do." Yet, because of my sincere desire, a word was given me to say, which did strengthen the hearts of those who fought in the field and those who languished in prison' (Howe 1899:273-274).

'**The Battle Hymn**,' in other words, gave the insignificant Julia Ward Howe a purpose. And what a purpose it was—'*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!*' The stifled housewife had become the definitive interpreter of the intentions of the Almighty. '*I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps*'; '*I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps*'; '*I have read a fiery gospel, writ in burnished rows of steel*' read following lines. Howe borrows the language of God Himself from Isaiah, chapter 63: '*I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there were none with me; for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury.*' The original words of '*He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored*' were '*He is trampling out the winepress . . .*' (Pickman 1979:144-147). As the poem progresses, Howe becomes even more bold. Jesus is referred to as '*the Hero born of woman*' who will '*crush the serpent with His heel.*' Although she was yet to embrace women's suffrage and equal rights, Howe here adopted, perhaps unconsciously, the rhetoric of the women's movement. She emphasizes that Jesus

was born of a woman and was the Son of God. Man had nothing to do with it.

The role of women appears most prominently in the final verse of 'The Battle Hymn.' 'In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea' creates an image of Jesus being conveyed amidst feminine flowers from the Old World across the Atlantic to the New to fulfill His mission in the American Civil War. 'The beauty of the lilies' or women make this possible. Christ possesses a 'glory in his bosom that transfigures you *and* me'—'me' being Julia Ward Howe, who has found a purpose apart from a husband whom she once complained 'takes away my voice.' Finally, 'as he died to make men holy, let *us* die to make men free' is an almost blasphemous conclusion. For the first time in the poem, perhaps unintentionally, the pronoun referring to Christ is not capitalized: 'he' is placed on a level with 'us.' And 'us'—men and women, Julia Ward Howe and everyone else participating in this crusade, are improving on the work of God, transfiguring and transcending poor John Brown, who is absent from the hymn.

One may legitimately complain Howe is getting all worked up about very little. *She*, after all, is not dying to make anyone free or even putting herself at minimal risk. Aside from writing poetry, she is rejecting the war effort for the traditional role of mother and homemaker as she sends men off to die. There is a subtext to her subtext: far from opening a new era in history and fulfilling the will of God, her poem can be read as woman performing her traditional Victorian function of providing religious inspiration to men who do the real job.

Howe, of course, did not see it that way. In the *Reminiscences* she published in her eightieth year, she begins by calling attention to the nineteenth century as having 'eminently deserved a record among those which have been great landmarks of human history.' She presents the usual lists of technological and political achievements. But she begins and ends with items that point to her own contribution. The century 'has been the culmination of prophecies'—such as those she made in the 'Battle Hymn.' And it has led to 'the advancement of woman to dignity in the household and efficiency in the state' (Howe 1899:2-3). In the years following the Civil War, Howe swept aside her aging husband's objections and turned her great energy to the struggle for women's rights. Once again, she fused a political movement which gave her greater personal freedom with a cosmic, transcendent purpose.

'When I turn my face toward the enfranchised women of today, I seem to have an apocalyptic vision of a great multitude, praising God for the new and wonderful revelations of His spirit,' Howe wrote in an essay (Howe 1868-1910:19). Like the Civil War, the American

women's movement was nothing less than the opening of a new chapter in God's cosmic blueprint for humanity. Connections between the two crusades appear in the martial metaphors Howe employed to describe women on the march: 'The prophetess of a barbarous age, Deborah, judge of Israel, praised as blessed among women, the wife of the Kenite who slew with her own hand the enemy of her people,' was a model for the 'wives and mothers of America,' who must 'deal with the deadly enemies of the human race' and 'war against vice and frivolity in every shape' (Howe 1868-1910:240).

Ironically, much of Howe's militant prophesying was channeled into a new *peace* movement, the Mothers' Day for Peace, which she publicized all over the western world. A response to the war veterans' Memorial Days springing up after the Civil War, this forerunner of what is now the present commercialized Mothers' Day paralleled the 'Battle Hymn' in that Howe once again attempted to take away the right to interpret the Civil War from the men who fought it. We would commemorate mothers, not veterans; men destroy, women work to realize the millennial dream of peace using their moral influence. 'Arise . . . Christian women of this day. As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel' (Howe 1870: 1:302-303).

Women's need to assume roles as political activists and agents of historical change was an important part of Howe's message. Urging suffragists to work as did Jesus for 'the redemption of mankind'—women's moral influence will save men as well as women—Howe preached that 'the weapon of Christian warfare is the ballot. . . . Adopt it, O you women, with clean hands and a pure heart! Verify the best word written by the apostle: "In Christ Jesus there is neither bond nor free, neither male nor female, but a new creature," the harbinger of a new creation!' (Howe 1868-1910:229).

Once again, it is possible to criticize Howe for making much ado about very little, for generalizing her own marginality into overblown visions of transcendental significance. That women are morally better than men and that their entry into politics would purify a corrupt process was an appeal not to women's equality, but to the very stereotype which men used to keep women at home: that women were pure creatures untainted by the evils of society. And while it is possible to point to innumerable reforms generated by the American women's movement for the betterment of society, especially in the fields of health and public welfare, the nation's political life did not appreciably improve once women obtained the right to vote. The decade after the passage of the Women's Suffrage Amendment, the 1920s, was in fact one of the most corrupt and free-wheeling in the nation's history.