

### The Civil Wars Of Julia Ward Howe, A Biography

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## Review

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**Showalter, Elaine** *The Civil Wars of Julia Ward Howe, A Biography*. Simon & Schuster, \$28.00 ISBN 9781451645903

### The Battle Hymn of a Marriage

Feminist literary critic and biographer Elaine Showalter has written a harrowing book about the appalling marriage that compels readers from page to page in an effort to make sense of the complex emotional life, and marital and professional negotiations made by a woman known to American public school students as author of the Civil War anthem, “Battle Hymn of the Republic”. Born in 1819 to Julia Cutler Ward and Samuel Ward, a wealthy New York banker, Julia Ward married Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, known as “Chev”, in 1843 at the age of twenty-four. She bore and reared their six children, grieving deeply for the death of their youngest, Sammy (Samuel Gridley Howe, Jr.) of diphtheria at the age of four in 1863. She wrote and published plays, and several books of poetry, including *Passion-Flowers*, in 1853, a deeply personal book of which her husband greatly disapproved. A serious depression forced Howe to examine her life, her marriage, and her work. As she looked forward, she saw only “the weary, tasteless life, without a single point of interest in it!” She saw a wasteland crossed and re-crossed in endless battle with Chev. She feared the closing off of a life as a public bard, shunted aside by such men as Walt Whitman, and losing a valued public commission to Annie Fields for her first published poem. Howe’s scathing review hurt her reputation among the very New England poets and intellectuals whom she courted for approval, and forced her to apologize.

During the war years, Fields turned to public lecturing, a challenge to Chev’s passionate opposition. Showalter views these years as a turning point in a deteriorating marriage that, while rarely easy, grew ever more conflicted. From April 1865, Showalter argues, the relationship fundamentally changed. While Julia retained some loyalty to Chev, she no longer depended upon his approval

or support for her activities. Writes Showalter, on page 174, “The national conflict had enabled her to resolve the personal one.” She observed that the War had challenged women to broaden the scope of their concerns, engage in new activities, and develop new abilities.

Widowed in January 1876, Howe returned to Europe the following year and spent two years traveling about there and in the Middle East. Reliant upon her brother financially, due to her husband’s control over her inheritance from her father and his rejection of her in his own will, Howe returned to Boston and took up writing about the lives of famous women and speaking before women’s groups. In 1884, she undertook a paid job heading up the Woman’s Department for the New Orleans Cotton Centennial, an awkward fit and extraordinary choice for an abolitionist, and a controversial selection in the eyes of the white southern women it was her job to celebrate. Howe spent much of the rest of her life working toward woman’s suffrage as the foreign corresponding secretary of the American Woman Suffrage Association.

In her 1899 *Reminiscences*, Howe weighed her life and labors. She made the remarkable assessment that it had been a great “distinction for me when the foremost philanthropist of the age chose me for his wife.” This important man had selected her for her money and class connections, and erroneously viewed her as malleable. She may truly have appreciated the “distinction”, that is the visibility and entrée into intellectual society that his position and connections offered her. However, it seems unlikely that this peon offered more than cover for her dead husband’s reputation and her own disturbing marriage. Howe struggled with his need to dominate her body and soul, his rejection of her talents, and the enormous emotional pain he inflicted on her and, tellingly, on his protégé, the blind and deaf Laura Bridgman.

Showalter’s biography focuses on the private life of Julia Ward Howe and her marriage to Samuel Gridley Howe, physician and director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts. A judgmental, domineering, cold man, Howe found much to criticize in his wife. Despite their many children, he seems to have had little interest in sex with Julia, and it seemed more a product of his need to dominate his wife or demonstrate his masculinity, rather than to express a physical need or the emotion of love. Men drew Chev’s affections, particularly Charles Sumner who stood as best man to Howe at his wedding to Julia. She believed herself an “object of [his] disgust,” physically as well as emotionally. He seemed not to value, and certainly offered, her little in

the way of companionship, whether intellectual, physical, or social.

How are we to understand this passionate woman, whose marital life was so full of strain and woe? In the mid-to-late 1840s, but a few years into her marriage, Howe authored an extraordinary manuscript that, although neither finished nor published in her lifetime, may have given voice to her sense of confusion about her marriage and her husband's, her gender and/or sexuality and his. The manuscript told the story of a hermaphrodite whose body carried both male and female sexual organs. Named Lawrence, this character was raised as a boy. Showalter argues on page 88 that, in providing "both a metaphor for her own feelings of androgyny and a meditation on her husband's emotional and sexual absence, the story reveals a wildly unconventional side of her imagination, with hidden depths of sexual fantasy, anger, and protest." And so it does.

While the first half of Howe's life and marriage suggests something of a feminist morality tale, the death in life of a married woman of talent, smothered by her husband's selfishness, greed, vanity, sexism and, possibly, unacknowledged homosexuality, Howe's second act offers a different story. Howe devoted herself to the political rights of women, to her economic self-support and social independence. Showalter has given us not the common story of a woman who simply endured an embattled marriage by practicing her craft however modestly, but that of a passionate woman who challenged herself to grow intellectually, to pursue adventure abroad, to explore new social relationships, to undertake political leadership at home, even in the face of sectional antagonism, and to imagine unconventionally.

*An historian of nineteenth-century American women and gender, Lee V. Chambers is a Professor of History at the University of Colorado, Boulder, currently working on her third book, a study of abolitionist Maria Weston Chapman and the paradox of public womanhood in nineteenth-century America.*