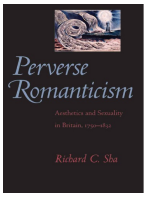
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Editorial
Authors' Responses
Guidelines For Reviewers
About Us
Masthead
Feedback

Search Every Field
Search

PERVERSE ROMANTICISM: AESTHETICS AND SEXUALITY IN BRITAIN, 1750-1832



By Richard C. Sha
(Johns Hopkins, 2009) xi + 359 pp.
Reviewed by Michael Page on 2009-09-01.

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The jacket copy for this book tells us that it "considers how science shaped notions of sexuality, reproduction, and gender in the Romantic period." At first glance, then, the book seems to join the growing number of critical studies exploring the interactions and engagements of emerging science and literary Romanticism that have sprang up over the last decade and a half. Yet Sha's book does not quite fit comfortably with the two main strands of this growing body of criticism. It certainly doesn't fit with the ecologically centered Green Romanticism represented by critics such as Jonathan Bate, James McKusick, Onno Oerlemans, Ashton Nichols, and Timothy Morton (though there are affinities with Morton in Sha's desire to build opaquely complex theoretical edifices). Nor does it quite fit with other studies that show literary engagements with science in the period that aren't necessarily "green" in orientation, such as recent work by critics Alan Richardson, Nicholas Roe, Sharon Ruston, John Wyatt, and the collaborative work of Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee, and Peter J. Kitson in *Literature, Science and Exploration in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge UP, 2004). With this group we might also profitably include Richard Holmes' new *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (Pantheon, 2009), and the remarkable *The Romantic Conception of Life* (University of Chicago, 2002) by the historian of evolutionary science, Robert J. Richards, a text that Sha himself draws upon a few times for support. Unlike these books, Sha's study situates itself not so much with the growing body of work on the interchanges between Romantic era science and literature as with the growing body of scholarship on gender and sexuality that have recently become hot topics in most areas of literary study. Specifically, this book takes its place with studies such as Dino Felluga's *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (SUNY Press, 2005), Susan J. Wolfson's *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford UP, 2006) and Christopher C. Nagle's *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era* (Palgrave, 2007). And indeed the final remarks on the jacket copy - "*Perverse Romanticism* makes an important contribution to the study of sexuality in the long eighteenth century" - more clearly indicate just exactly what kind of study Sha's is. Yet even with the abovementioned studies Sha's rests uneasy.

"*Perverse Romanticism*," Sha begins, "examines how sexuality and aesthetics - customarily treated as opposed concepts - were actually united in Romanticism by a common distrust of function" (1). This statement must be unpacked and as I do so I'll try to sketch out Sha's central arguments as I understand them. First, though Sha's first footnote in chapter one provides a long list of critics who have written on Romantic sexuality, he largely takes for granted a critical consensus on the opposition between his key terms. Second, what exactly does "a common distrust of function" mean? Sha contends that Romantic era medical science had begun the process of codifying the various functions of the biological organism. Sex, then, was codified in terms of its functionality within the process of reproduction, with pleasure largely ignored. Sexuality, however, is much more than the functionality of reproduction. Like aesthetics, it encompasses feeling, pleasure, and other types of sensibility and apprehension. According to Sha, then, the concept of sexuality, by separating pleasure from mere reproductive function, "became perverse, like aesthetics" (1). Sha thus seems to see two conflicting things happening simultaneously in Romantic era science: 1) science's insistence on observational and empirical evidence showed the diversity - and perversity - of the sexual body and allowed for a reconception of sexuality; 2) at the same time, the encyclopedic ordering and systematizing impulse

of science, leading to a structure of normative codes, what Sha calls the rise of function, limited the individual's likelihood of developing a perverted identity. In other words, science identified, labeled, and codified what is perverse, thereby making it more difficult to maintain and develop a perverse identity, since perversion was now coded as aberrant, even diseased or criminal. According to Sha, literary writers, such as Blake, Byron, and the Shelleys challenged this hegemonic coding in order to liberate us from it. Problematically, *perverse* here comes to encompass all mental acts and experiences that are not strictly explained by biological functionalism. Sha seems to be saying is that to distrust, suspect, to question functionalism, or to contemplate, to enjoy and even to feel anything are in essence acts of perversion. So Sha's notion of perversion ultimately lays claim to the territory formerly carved out by such terms as rebellion, radicalism, liberation, nonconformity, creativity, and so on.

To this end, Sha sees the Romantic literary writers as often insisting on an eroticized and perverse aesthetics as a means toward "the reimagination of human relationships generally" (2). It seems to me that this is just another way to discuss what has often been called the "revolutionary aesthetics" of Romanticism. Yet while "revolutionary" also seems to me a much more comprehensive term, Sha clearly wants to make "perverse" a comprehensive term in itself. In other words, Sha tends to totalize his use of the term, substituting a monolithic perversion for the monolithic terms of the past that critical theory has so rigorously sought to tear down. Rather than serving as just one element of Romantic revolutionary thought, perversity drives *all* revolutionary impulses of the Romantic era, shaping personal and cultural identity, sexuality, art, and politics. This strikes me as an altogether overly robust claim and uncomfortably totalizing in its assertion.

Sha is certainly correct to point out that the modern nexus of science, literature, politics, and identity begins to emerge during the Romantic period, and that Romantic literary writers quite often offered compelling alternatives to the reductive empiricisms of scientific functionality, especially when the new science of biology began to codify the functionality of sex. One of Sha's principal arguments, then, is that "a distrust of function or perversion could form the basis of a meaningful politics, erotics, and aesthetics" (8) for Romantic writers such as Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, the Shelleys, Blake, Byron, Coleridge, and others Sha discusses only in brief. Two problems arise here. The lack of commas for the phrase "or perversion" confusingly suggests a distrust of both function and perversion, and the word *perversion* is overloaded to the breaking point. In other words, Sha here claims that Romantic politics, erotics, and aesthetics, which were all apparently resistant to science's empiricism, hence "meaningful," were for that very reason "perverse." Sha thus slips into the traditionally polarized thinking that pits literature against science and again merely substitutes the negatively charged term perversion for words such as rebellion, radicalism, and so on.

Regardless, in a less than clear-cut fashion science and the emergence of modern scientific discourses and paradigms become central to Sha's argument as he wants to show how "science has made sexuality" (9), but, more importantly, how "science helped to make the Romantics far more reflective about sexual liberation than they are usually given credit for. It helped them to see the human body less in terms of a given materiality and more in terms of processes of materialization, processes subject to change" (9). Problematically, Sha generates his argument from contemporary theories of sexuality and social constructionism and then grafts on to them a set scientific and literary texts from the Romantic period. Which further complicates the task of placing Sha's book within current discussions of Romantic era science and its impact on literature and culture: though Sha draws heavily upon period medical and scientific texts, they clearly count for less than his theoretical posturings and his construction of sexuality within the terms of perversion. Indeed, science (another comprehensive term) is subordinated to sexuality in sentences like this: "the sciences of sexuality and of sexual pleasure (neurology, botany, natural history, biology, and anatomy) acknowledged the perverseness of human sexuality... (16). Here, biology itself - which in fact encompasses the four fields it is surrounded by - is merely a "science" of sexuality and sexual pleasure. This approach differs strikingly from that of books such as James McKusick's *Green Writing* (St. Martin's, 2000), Onno Oerlemans' *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature* (University of Toronto, 2002), or John Wyatt's *Wordsworth and the Geologists* (Cambridge, 1995), which center their arguments and explorations on period literary texts and their engagements with science from which our own theories and insights might emerge. Further, the density of Sha's medical and scientific readings can be rather opaque and his highly specialized line of argument is often hard to follow because of a tendency toward an overly convoluted prose style. For some, the sheer amount of Sha's evidence from Romantic era medicine and science will likely enrich the context from which the Romantic literary writers negotiated their own ideas about sexuality and liberation. Yet for those not specifically embedded in the discourses of queer and sexuality theory, Sha's presentation of the evidence can be rather perplexing. It is also not helped by the fact that the book is haphazardly indexed. Curiously, most contemporary critics that Sha mentions, such as Judith Butler, Arnold Davidson, Jonathan Dollimore,

Dino Felluga, Robert J. Richards, Alan Richardson, and many others, are not included in the index. This may have been an editorial decision, but it would still be helpful for the reader to be able to easily refer to instances when Sha engages with contemporary studies. For this reader at least, these issues led more to frustration and befuddlement rather than to insight and illumination.

The first three chapters examine the intersections between science and Romanticism and explain how science shaped Romantic thinking about human sexuality. Sha's theoretical focus is primarily Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian, and it's taken for granted that Foucault is central to critical inquiry in general - even though Sha sometimes chafes at his influence. On the one hand, he wants to reclaim and reorient Romantic poetics and science from the sometimes excessive and reductive claims of Foucauldian theory, to "remind us of how science in the Romantic era was about so much more than a monolithic discourse of Foucauldian 'biopower'" (16-17). On the other hand, Sha seems unable to free himself from the Foucauldian High-Theory yolk which leads to a rather obscurationist argument. Even though he assumes that all arguments must answer to Foucault rather than Foucault (and his followers) must answer to science and the evidence of history, ideas, and discourse, Sha claims to challenge Foucault's skepticism regarding sexual liberation by demonstrating that Romantic era medical texts laid the grounds "for why sexuality could become coupled with liberation during Romanticism" (43). Though the Romantics anticipated and shared some of Foucault's skepticism, Sha writes, "yet they still held onto the possibility of sexual liberation" (44). Unlike Foucault, the Romantics "could perceive the sciences to be helpful to liberation" because they "(1) repeatedly showed the resistance of sexual pleasure to reproductive function, a resistance that made it difficult to consolidate heterosexual sex into heteronormativity; (2) had more nuanced and flexible understanding of ontology and ontological narratives than we now do; and (3) demonstrated that historical constructions could facilitate both resistance as well as power/knowledge" (46).

To support these claims, and specifically to show how science was defining and codifying sex, gender, and sexuality during the Romantic period, Sha draws from an extensive library of period medical and scientific texts. He scrutinizes the work of Albrecht von Haller, who contended that the genitals were connected to sensibility and consciousness (25-26); John Hunter, who detailed the potentially perverse consequences of conscious sexuality (26-28); Lazzaro Spallazani, whose studies of the semen unwittingly divorced sexual pleasure from reproduction (28-33); the phrenologists Franz Gall and J.G. Spurzheim, who relocated sexual desire from the testicles to the brain (35-38); and, finally, Erasmus Darwin, whose introduction of Linnaean botany in *The Botanic Garden* provided a lens through which literary writers and natural philosophers could begin to question normative European sexual customs and attitudes (39-41). For one example, Sha suggests that "it is no accident that Byron and his circle code their homosexuality in botanical terms" (43), meaning that Byron and others were well-attuned to the discourses that were beginning to shape modern science. This particular example illustrates that Erasmus Darwin and other medical writers of the era provided scientific and theoretical lenses on questions of sex and sexuality (and, of course, on many other questions) through which the poets could configure new aesthetic paradigms, liberatory political philosophies, and their own sexual identities. A fair enough contention, considering that Desmond King-Hele has repeatedly explored Darwin's impact on the Romantic poets (most notably in *Erasmus Darwin and the Romantic Poets* (Macmillan, 1986)); and others, including those I've mentioned above, have shown the extent to which Romantic writers were engaged with the science and medicine of the day. But Sha's new contribution is to read period science in terms of sexuality.

In chapter two, Sha traces the development of such concepts as localization of sexual desire, instinct, functionality (sex as reproduction, among other things), and monstrosity through the work of such medical and scientific writers as James Hamilton, Matthew Baillie, J. P. Tupper, Philip Bury Duncan, Thomas Hancock, Georges Cuvier, and Geoffrey St. Hilaire, in order to show that the rise of function in Romantic period science and medicine "made it more difficult to conceive of a perverted identity" (77). Function reached its apex when Cuvier made the functional integrity of the organism the very basis of biological science, what Sha later deems "the gold standard of biological knowledge" (141). In chapter three, these medical considerations lead to an analysis of the radical potential of a two-sex model of mutality and complementarity that begins to replace a dominant sex model in which women were seen as less-developed than males. First Sha examines Romantic era neurological texts on the reciprocity of brain and mind and puts them into play with Mary Wollstonecraft's and Mary Robinson's ideas on gender construction from *Vindications of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), with lesser explorations of the works of the Shelleys. Sha then moves through another range of medical writers who were fascinated with the variations of the human sexual body, as they provided a framework by which "normativity" could be codified, while also leaving room for literary and theoretical writers to imagine and develop perverse identities. He exuberantly reads a

number of texts from the period on testicles, ovaries, the penis and the clitoris (asking the question, "When is the clitoris a penis?"), puberty, and pederasty, and includes a number of period anatomical renderings of genitalia and the reproductive organs (see pages 101, 113, 115, 132), which finally leads him to the astonishing conclusion that "we are all potential hermaphrodites" (128-40), meaning, I suppose, that the variation in sexual characteristics that Romantic era anatomists and physiologists were cataloging made fissures in a clear-cut sexual distinction ("the body's plasticity and mobility" (140)) and provided for an "instability of heterosexual desire" (128). It is not always clear what Sha means here in what is perhaps the most blatant instance of grafting period texts onto his theoretical paradigm. But in his own words, what I think he is trying to suggest, is simply that "perversion and normalcy are part of a continuum, not a binary opposition" (140). In other words, not in a hierarchy of good and bad, right and wrong, normal and deviant, higher and lower. How this makes us all potential hermaphrodites is up to another reader to decide.

After supporting his theoretical foundation through these idiosyncratic readings of scientific texts Sha makes his case for the perversity of Romantic aesthetics. Aesthetics itself, Sha claims, "has often been another name for perversion - given its usual distrust of function, interest and purpose - and as such it provides a useful lens for thinking about and revaluing sexuality without function or reproduction" (142). Acting on this principle, Sha finally begins to use the concepts and theoretical claims he has teased out from the medical texts in the first three chapters: to apply them to more traditional documents of literary study, namely the aesthetic theories of Kant and of the central Romantic poets from Blake to Wordsworth and Coleridge to Shelley, Byron and Keats, all of which he reads as "perverse aesthetics" which are "legion" (145). Though Kant distinguished aesthetic pleasure from physical stimulation, Sha argues that Kant, by disengaging pleasure from mere function, provided Romantic writers with a model from which to develop a perverse aesthetics of sexuality - a sexuality beyond the reproductive model being adopted by science. Applying the concept of perversity to aesthetics, Sha considers Coleridge's way of reading and filtering Kant, Longinus's reading of Sappho in *On the Sublime* and its influence on Blake, Winckelmann's "perverse aesthetics" in *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1765) and its impact on Blake and Shelley, and what Sha sees as Burke's unwitting recognition of perverse desire in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Sha ends his aesthetic inquiry by examining Richard Payne Knight's exploration of the sexual symbolism present in ancient Greek artifacts in his *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus* (1786), including provocative reproductions depicting cunnilingus and bestiality (see pages 180 and 181). As Sha compellingly observes, Knight's presentation and analysis of the Priapian symbols, "take the viewer outside of his or her present society and force him or her to imagine long-cherished beliefs and customs as merely artificial prejudices" (174), thus making eroticism an act of subjective apprehension, or an act of the sublime, and therefore complicating the notion that sex is mere function. Sha's reading of Knight is one of the more engaging sections of his study, partially because it is the most straightforwardly presented. In the end, Sha sees perversion and aesthetics as "allies rather than enemies" in "their mutual distrust of function" (182). This is softer than the claim he makes earlier, when he describes aesthetics as "another name for perversion." Alliance differs sharply from equivalency.

In the final two chapters on Blake and Byron, respectively, Sha reads each writer within the context of sexuality, perversion, and liberation he's constructed throughout the book. Arguing that "perversion came to occupy a central position as a concept and technique for Blake" (184), Sha seeks to "situate Blake in the medical literature of his day to show that he could not have understood the body as a fixed sign" and to remind us that "our understanding of the body and language in Blake runs the considerable risk of saying more about our own postmodern fascination with textualism as a form of liberation and materiality as that which resists change than it does about Blake" (186-87). The Blake chapter is a mixed bag. While deadened by the same tendencies toward critical opacity that marred the previous chapters, it nonetheless shows how Blake deflates some of the very theoretical paradigms that Sha has evoked throughout this study. Among other things, he notes, "Blake's emphasis on consequences offers a sobering warning to queer theorists at once intent on celebrating the disruptiveness of desire without allowing their own identities to be disrupted by that desire" (193). When concentrating specifically on the close reading of specific texts in the Blake canon, Sha's reading is much more effective. For instance, his reading of *The Book of Thel, Jerusalem,* and *America* within the context of the medical texts he has previously examined, usefully illuminate the interplay between sexuality and Blake's poetic liberatory mythology.

More successful, however, is the final chapter on Byron. By examining the role of puberty in *Don Juan,* Sha aims "to complicate our understanding of the poet's gender attitudes and to revise our understanding of Byron's perversity" (244). Along with an astute close reading of the poem, Sha cites biographical evidence to re-affirm what Byron scholars have lately come to recognize: that he was a complex sexual being. Particularly interesting, I found, are Sha's

discussions of Byron's struggle with body image, his taking up of boxing to help him lose weight, and the way in which "flash" language (i.e. sports' language) was coded for homoeroticism.

In sum, Sha's book is a mixed success. He leaves me unconvinced that *perversity* should be the comprehensive term by which we now read and understand Romanticism and Romantic era aesthetics. Had he presented perversity as just one of many lenses through which we might study Romantic era literature and culture, instead of as a dome covering all modes of personal and cultural experience, I might have found his arguments more compelling, rather than befuddling. Furthermore, scholars and general readers interested in other aspects of Romantic era science and ecology, (and for that matter Romanticism in general), might find Sha's study too often speaking in a highly specialized and opaque critical language, which might at times appear as a different language altogether, and making unpalatable assumptions and claims that beg credulity more than illuminate. Nonetheless, for the current conversation on the social construction of sexuality and gender, Sha's mining of the Romantic era medical archives and his readings of Blake and Byron might provide ample fodder for theorists of Romantic queerness, sex, and gender.

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RICHARD SHA RESPONDS (29 July 2009):

Michael Page was unpersuaded by much of my book. It is true that authors have a stake in making their key terms as expansive as possible, and there are costs to such expansiveness. I want to respond briefly to a few of his points.

The decision to index only primary authors with the exception of Foucault was the press's. This index of primary authors already ran to 30 single-spaced pages in typescript.

He finds that my book does not fit the critical contexts he outlines. But the critical context my book does respond to-work in the history of sexuality and the aesthetic concept of purposiveness-he deems obscure. His cancelling out of the critical contexts of my book under obscurity perhaps explains its misfit. This leads me to ask if this review says more about his relation to certain kinds of theory than it does my book.

Page objects to my reading of Kant, claiming that Kant distinguished aesthetics from physical stimulation. Page here reduces sexuality to physical stimulation, a reduction that my book and, more importantly, Romantic writers stubbornly resist. This is also to ignore why Kant allows for an analogy between generation and purpose, a point I make on page 149.

I find most troubling Page's largely unsupported charge that I have simply imposed my own agenda on the material. He claims, "Sha generates his argument from contemporary theories of sexuality and social constructionism and then grafts on to them a set scientific and literary texts from the Romantic period." On page 17, I provide this rationale: "even though desire masks itself as pre-social, it is actually antisocial, which means desire is constructed but also functions against construction." I demonstrate time and time again that much of the Romantic scientific literature actually anticipates our "modern" socially-constructed understanding of sexuality. Given that the very methodology of the book uses aesthetic purposiveness to interrupt various kinds of purpose-driven arguments, his claim seems like a willful misreading. I quote dozens of actual passages, many at great length, but I leave it to other readers to decide if Page has this right. I also fail to see how the texts I write about are "set." A number of the passages are from manuscript lectures that so far as I know have, until my book, not yet been read by critics. Previous studies of Romantic sexuality neglect how sexuality moves from the genitals to the brain, how the period witnessed the first human artificial insemination, John Hunter's transplantation of a cock testis into a hen, and the rise of biological functionalism. I show, moreover, how much of this material actually troubles our current understanding of Romantic sexuality. My relationship to the material I discuss is thus at very least far more complicated than Page recognizes. Finally, I explain the claim about hermaphrodites that Page most objects to on page 138.

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