

BOOK REVIEW

Perverse Romanticism: Aesthetics and Sexuality in Britain, 1750–1832. Richard Sha. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. Pp. xi+359.

Until 1856, when R. A. Vaughan wrote about a “virulent fagotty-minded pervert,” the term *pervert* had strictly religious connotations.¹ These perverts—unlike our modern day notions—had forsaken a religious doctrine regarded as true for one thought false. Richard Sha’s *Perverse Romanticism* asks us to reconsider these negative implications of perversion and, instead, view it as a space filled with opportunity. “Perversity,” he explains, “demands nothing less than the reimagination of human relationships generally” (2). The result of Sha’s reimagination is a persuasive, well-researched study of how science shaped notions of perversion and sexuality. Sha “revisits the politics of Romanticism by asking how science has made sexuality . . . a site for thinking about liberation,” as he demonstrates “how a distrust of function or perversion could form the basis of a meaningful politics, erotics, and aesthetics” (8).

In *Perverse Romanticism*, Sha draws attention to the investigation of perverse sexuality using three angles of approach. Sha looks at the sexually perverse through the lens of biological sciences and medicine from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a comparison with Kantian aesthetics, and a closer look at the poets Blake and Byron. In regards to Byron, Sha postulates that “Triangulation also made Byron increasingly resistant to the idea of a sexual identity in part because desire for him did not seem fixed into any one kind of sexual object. Byron’s sense of excitability

1. Robert Alfred Vaughan referenced “the virulent, fagotty-minded pervert Scheffler,” defining *pervert* as a person whose sexual behaviors or inclinations aren’t normative, in his book *Hours with Mystics: A Contribution to the History of Religious Opinion*, pt. 1 (5th ed., London: Gibbings, 1891), 332.

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throughout the body not only undermined the power of anatomical localization to pinpoint sexuality in the body, but it also opened the door to gender equality" (287). Thus, throughout the work, Sha contends that sexual perversity led to personal freedom during the Romantic era, contributing to the liberation of women from a male-dominated society.

Questioning what enabled these Romantic figures to view sex and desire as avenues for liberation allows for a fresh interpretation of these already infamous writers, who, as Sha argues, used science to understand a sexual pleasure that was separate from reproduction and marriage. In this way, desire and pleasure enabled "personal autonomy, meaningful consent based on shared erotic pleasure, the choice of whether or not to reproduce, and conscious opposition to both organized religion and the enemies of democracy" (17). By asking his readers to reconsider perversion as a site for liberation, Sha's contribution to the field of Romanticism is groundbreaking.

Perverse Romanticism clearly demonstrates an admirable level of research into the history of science, employing examples that we would not know otherwise, such as Lazzaro Spallanzani's work on artificial fecundation, which furthered the gap between sexual reproduction and pleasure by speculating that the semen, not the sperm, was responsible for conception and was not an "immediate author of generation," thus carving a space for sexual pleasure (29). T. M. Caton's study of women's "hysterical diseases" being attributed "to their abstraction from active pursuits [rather] than [to] any organic delicacy of structure" is another such example (quoted on 85).² As interesting and abundant as these examples are, at times they feel like a diversion from Sha's overall argument and detract from more useful research. For example, biologist Joan Roughgarden's 2004 study of homosexuality in the animal kingdom is said to corroborate the notion that the Romantic period linked sexual pleasure with purposive mutuality; her arguments regarding secondary sexual characteristics facilitating homosexual matings that result in enhanced cooperation are particularly valuable. However, unlike previous examples that span several pages, Sha relegates his use of Roughgarden to one paragraph and as a transition into an unrelated section, though her work is important enough to be also mentioned within his introduction.

Sha assumes an all-encompassing focus in *Perverse Romanticism*, which may be the reason that certain critical aspects have been understated. Threading the term *purposive mutuality* throughout his argument, Sha draws on theorists such as Kant, Foucault, and Freud to shape his work (53, 143). For readers who are not especially familiar with Kant, Sha's work may seem

2. T. M. Caton, surgeon, *Popular Remarks, Medical and Literary, on Nervous, Hypochondriac, and Hysterical Diseases* (London: Neely, 1815), 25.

exclusionary and hard to follow. Though he gives a very brief summary of Kant and aesthetics within his introduction, where he explains that “Kant bracketed purpose outside aesthetics because purpose spoke merely to personal satisfaction and to interest . . . [making] it possible to see how sexuality must be apprehended without regard to crude reproductive purpose if it is to become idealized as a form of consent or of liberation,” the rest of Sha’s text lacks thorough explanations of this assumption (2). Because Sha relies on the term *purposive mutuality*, which he states stems from Kant, it would be useful for readers to have a larger understanding of such an important term. This is what separates Sha from scholars like Eve Sedgwick, whose theoretical clarifications are so clear that undergraduate students may follow her train of thought.

In a multitiered argument, Sha begins by exploring the knowledge of biological sciences, medicine, and the workings of the human body held by scholars during the Romantic era. In chapter 1, he notes that the scientific method of the day, while rejecting the abnormally functioning organ, nevertheless relied on the abnormal—the perverse—to define normal function, resulting in a cultural fascination with the monstrous, the perverse, and the strange. He continues with the history of medicine along the same lines in chapter 2 and then embarks in chapter 3 on a somewhat more focused line of inquiry. The Romantic era marked a time of transition from viewing the human body as a single gender, where women represented a sort of inverted, less mature male. This concept began to alter into the view that there were indeed two genders, bringing the idea that women could stand on equal footing with men as a distinct, yet not inferior, gender. The thinking of the time put males and females into one category until puberty, when sexuality stood in limbo for a number of years, during which time any number of things could go wrong, causing a perverse sexual identity. Sha makes the point, once again, that such perversion brought about freedom, both for women who became equal partners and for men who were freed from sex as a mere function for reproduction.

In chapter 4, Sha constructs a suggestive rather than a comprehensive study of sexual perversion within the context of the Romantic era. By using the Kantian definition of aesthetics, Sha argues that perversion, once removed from the function of reproduction, actually comes closer to the aesthetic in terms of purposive pleasure, thus liberating the Romantics both socially and politically in ways heretofore unexplored by scholars of the Romantic era. The reason for this disparity, Sha notes, exists in the opposition to the word *perversion* and its neglect in the studies of the Romantic aesthetic and social liberation. By juxtaposing Kantian theory with his previous study of biology and medicine, Sha creates a somewhat problematic definition of the perverse, since the chapters on biology sought to normalize perversity in comparing such issues as sibling incest or homosexual acts

to the animal and plant kingdoms where such examples are easily found. In this chapter, however, he likens sexual perversion with Kant's aesthetic in that it rejects all function or animal instinct, thus elevating perversion to a higher plane of pleasure and human consciousness.

Sha goes on to demonstrate the importance of including perversion in the interpretation of work done during the Romantic period by concluding with a close look at two canonical poets, Blake and Byron. Sha relies upon the well-established perverse histories of the Romantic poets and argues that without including their views on perversion and their uses of sexual ambiguity throughout their works, we cannot hold a clear picture of their intent. He states, "We can now perhaps understand why Blake so insistently stages and restages the battle between sexual pleasure and sex under moral law: there are many levels to his argument self-annihilation occurs in stages, no one character can capture the numerous way in which generation is maintained and regeneration is facilitated and self-annihilation demands that we both reject and accept generation along with the self that is part of generation" (202). Drawing us back to his initial arguments that perversion brought about liberation of the sexes, Sha leads us to the evidence in Byron's work that tackles the nonromantic and nonepic subject of puberty in such a way that we see the sexual ambiguity, "the moment when one feminized sex becomes two," and postulates that "this gap between the two semiotic systems enables Byron to question the role and value of gender and of sex, along with its political investments" (243). In Blake, Sha sees a similar illustration of the poetic use of perversion to express liberation, "To the extent that perversion in Blake would allow him to harness the liberating capacities of text and bodies, not to mention text's multiple bodies, the many twists and turns of perversion could help the reader reclaim and incarnate the divine imagination within the body" (240).

In looking at Romanticism and perversion in this light, Sha explores a topic that has often been neglected by scholars of the Romantic era. In *Perverse Romanticism*, Sha integrates various schools of thought in a way that may exclude some with its vastness but ultimately appeals to many through its expansive revelations.

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