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Richard C. Sha. *Perverse Romanticism: Aesthetics and Sexuality in Britain, 1750-1832.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xi + 359 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9041-3.

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The Function of Functionlessness: Uniting Romanticism, Sexuality, and Aesthetic Theory

Richard C. Sha's ambitious new book, *Perverse Romanticism*, attempts to bridge the gap between three scholarly disciplines: literary criticism, the history of sexuality, and aesthetic theory. The result is an impressive display of Sha's masterful grasp of a wide range of scholarly literature, and a provocative thesis that will be of interest to academics in all three fields. Sha's primary argument in *Perverse Romanticism* is that scholars need to reevaluate the Romantics' understanding of sexuality and the body to fully comprehend these authors' emphasis on "perverse" sex. By integrating Romantic literature with contemporary medical discourses and the Kantian notion of "purposiveness," scholars will find that the Romantics advocated for social equality based on a particularly fluid notion of sex and the sexed body.

Romantic-era medical professionals found increasing resonance in the concept of function, but they were also faced with its inverse epistemological category: functionlessness. Sha reclaims the term "perversion" to embody a wide range of acts and behaviors that were seemingly without function, and argues that "a resistance to function can be the basis of a meaningful critique of society" (p. 4). In light of changing understandings of the sexed body, the Romantics emphasized the perverse–and especially perverse sexuality–in order to question normative cultural structures, including gender hierarchy and heteronormativity. Here, Sha applies the Kantian concept of "purposiveness with purpose" to argue that it is precisely where function is not explanatory that Romantic sexuality and aesthetics both found resonance.

For Sha, making perversity central to Romanticism has multiple, if interconnected, payoffs. Most simply, Sha demonstrates the extent to which the Romantics carefully considered scientific knowledge and a sexualized understanding of the body. By contextualizing the Romantic quest for sexual liberation within these medical and scientific discourses, Sha wishes to complicate the standard narrative about Romantic attitudes toward gender. More broadly, however, he argues that the Romantics were actively engaged in a radical politics that completely reimagined society: "Hardly quietest or escapist, Romanticism's interest in perversion suggests a far more radical politics, one that had the capacity to challenge religious orthodoxies and societal hierarchies" (p. 6). The Romantics' skepticism about function, and particularly their emphasis on sexual perversity, created possibilities for sexual liberation, which was part of their attempt to exchange heteronormative structures for freedom and mutuality.

The first half of *Perverse Romanticism* focuses on medical discourses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and argues that this era constituted a time of transition for understandings of human biology and sexuality. In so doing, Sha pushes back against the conventional timetable for the invention of "sexuality" proposed by canonical thinkers like Michel Foucault and Thomas Lacquer. On the one hand, Sha finds evidence for a nascent notion of fixed sexual identity earlier than those scholars who locate this epistemic shift in the Victorian period. He argues that over this period, the medical establishment became increasingly invested in the notion of function, therefore emphasizing anatomical difference and the fixity of sexual identity. On the other hand, Sha also finds significant continuity with older models of sexual difference, particularly in the continuing relevance of the "one-sex" model of human physiology. In chapter 1, he explores the ways in which Romantic-era scientists were unable to completely understand human behavior through anatomy and biological fixity; they particularly struggled with the meaning of sexual pleasure given that it was not correlated with sexual reproduction. He suggests that Romantic authors emphasized nonreproductive (or "perverse") sex and sexual pleasure as part of their attempt to claim sexual liberation. The second chapter

looks at scientific discourses about localization, the attempt to ground specific functions in physical structures and organs. However, many Romantic-era writers were skeptical about localization, tending to focus instead on instinct, therefore resisting a tight correlation between anatomy and identity. In the third chapter, Sha argues that the Romantics continued to draw on a one-sex model of sexual difference in their understandings of puberty and sexual maturity. To this end, he considers the way that Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and other female Romantics deployed medical knowledge to undermine gender hierarchy. In his careful readings of medical and scientific texts, Sha convincingly demonstrates that despite the increasing emphasis on function in understanding human anatomy, sex remained unstable and mutable in the Romantic era. The lack of a stable norm gave Romantic authors traction to discuss the perverse, and its related emancipatory potential.

In the second half of the book, Sha explores more fully the deployment of the "perverse" in Romantic-era writings. He claims that Romantics repeatedly turned toward contemporary understandings of the sexed body, and particularly to eroticized sexuality, in their quest for "liberation" (p. 14). The fourth chapter argues that Romantic authors, ranging from Thomas Burke to Longinus, emphasized perversity in both sexuality and aesthetics. Sexual satisfaction and aesthetic appreciation stem from a common physical reaction, and, insofar as both are fully achieved when they transcend "crude purpose," both have liberating potential (p. 181). The final two chapters of the book are case studies of William Blake and Lord Byron, considering how each author used perverse sexuality to justify non-heteronormativity. Sha argues that "perversion" was a key concept for Blake, who used the term to underscore the need for self-annihilation as part of redemption. Blake is thus a prime example of how the Romantics understood perverse sexuality as a form of Kantian "purposiveness with purpose." The final chapter considers Lord Byron's epic poem *Don Juan* (1824). Sha contends that Byron deployed Romantic-era conceptions of puberty throughout the poem in an attempt to destabilize gender categories and ultimately "liberate human beings from the normalizing force of these categories" (p. 241).

Sha's ambitions do not stop with merely inviting the reader to reimagine Romanticism. Indeed, Sha aims at nothing less than a wholesale revision to the history of sexuality: "a new approach to the acts versus identity debate in the historiography of sexuality" (p. 287). He suggests that by using aesthetic theory, we can move beyond a binary of sexual identity and sexual acts: "By recognizing the aesthetic dimensions of sexuality, dimensions occluded by identity, Romantic writers and scientists enabled sexuality to become a means to apprehending if liberation has occurred and for whom, even when their own practices fell short" (p. 14). Rather than dismissing liberation, as Foucault and others have, as a false emancipation from the power structures that inherently encompass sexual activity, Sha argues that sexual liberation can be a meaningful measure of true freedom and social equality. This is in contrast to what Sha sees as a contemporary theoretical fixation on sexual identities, which he points out can lend themselves to policing and limitation, rather than true liberation. By moving beyond function, and embracing "perversity" in sexuality as we do in aesthetics, Sha suggests that sexuality can indeed be a powerful method of societal critique

The ambitious scope of *Perverse Romanticism* means that it is likely to appeal to scholars in a variety of disciplines. Its interdisciplinary nature, however, means that while it offers something for everyone, it also cannot be everything to everyone. In particular, some of Sha's readings of the poetry, particularly in the last two chapters, may leave historians wishing for more empirical evidence. However, generally speaking, the book offers incisive readings of a wide variety of texts, ranging from the Romantic poets themselves to contemporaneous medical texts to current theory. Sha's own impressive grasp of the various theorists and secondary literatures in varying disciplines means that he may alienate readers who do not possess equally deep knowledge. The addition of a conclusion would have especially helped to distill Sha's provocative insights for a more general readership. Dedicated readers, however, will find much to think about in this rich and innovate study.

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