Perverse Romanticism
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Introduction

*Perverse Romanticism* examines how sexuality and aesthetics—customarily treated as opposed concepts—were actually united in Romanticism by a common distrust of function. Aesthetics has long held the notion that works of art should avoid function (purpose, interest). In this book, I ask why functionlessness or perversity has been so valued in aesthetics and so lambasted in sexuality.¹ I also ask why Romantic writers such as Blake, Percy Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Byron thought that sexual liberation was possible, and I turn to the then contemporary scientific separation of sexual pleasure from function to think about how sexuality could then become a kind of Kantian purposiveness without purpose.² That is, rather than assuming that sex was necessarily a selfish pleasure, writers linked eroticism with a mutuality that had the form of purposiveness instead of with reproductive function.³ To the extent that sexuality then separated pleasure from reproductive function, it became perverse, like aesthetics. The Romantics thus often insisted upon an eroticized aesthetics precisely to engage readers otherwise put off by an overly rational aesthetics, one that tried to give it an explicit purpose. Like the “prodigious pippin” Byron dangles in front of his reader—the one which “perversely clung / To its own bough” (DJ
Romantic writers use eroticism to engage readers otherwise stupefied by the “savage torpor” of industrialism or encrusted by the weight of custom. By distancing sexual and aesthetic pleasure from purpose, moreover, the Romantics could make eroticism a site for thinking about mutuality rather than hierarchy. Perversity thus demands nothing less than the reimagining of human relationships generally.

Kant bracketed purpose outside aesthetics because purpose spoke merely to personal satisfaction and to interest. Such pleasures were “not brought about by the concept of freedom (i.e., by the prior determination of the higher power of desire by pure reason)” (Pluhar 30). Despite their inescapable subjectivity, aesthetic judgments could thereby claim “to be valid for everyone” (Pluhar 31) as long as one did not consider the causes of the beautiful form “in a will, and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will” (Pluhar 65). Aesthetics claims that pleasure without function (perversion) yields disinterested judgments or judgments brought about by the concept of freedom. When applied to sexuality, this positive stance toward perversion allows us to revalue sexual perversion as a form of purposiveness: to see how sexual perversion obviates reproduction and the interests that reproduction serves, and to see the ways in which sexual acts never quite speak for themselves and resist being reduced to brute instinct. Insofar as Kant models a way of recognizing the essential and inescapable subjective origin of aesthetics—it is about the apprehension of beauty—and yet moving beyond that subjectivity toward something that can be understood as universal through an understanding of the purposiveness of form, he enables the imagination of sexuality as something more than personal satisfaction. Indeed, he makes 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. To the extent that reproductive function confers upon sexual acts heteronormativity, it also impoverishes sex by limiting it to function and animal instinct. Kant’s concept of purposiveness furthermore unhooks aesthetics from the argument by design thereby helping to pave the way to understanding life itself in terms of purposiveness rather than in terms of Godly design: since purposiveness occurs in the mind of the perceiver who resists purpose for cognitive and ethical gains, aesthetics becomes a means to apprehension instead of an act of transcendence. Hence, I am interested in how purposiveness is form of perversity and vice versa.

Where aesthetics gains from sexuality the possibility of a concrete mode of engagement in the world, sexuality can profit from the aesthetic distrust of pur-
pose, as well as by the legitimating pedigree of this aesthetic distrust of purpose. Because the body was increasingly subsumed by a nervous physiology during the Romantic period, it was difficult to separate sexual from aesthetic sensation. Furthermore, this inability to separate clearly aesthetic from sexual sensation lent the ineffable potentiality of aesthetics some much needed empirical grounding. Where scientists found purposiveness to be such a useful concept because it did away with the need to deal with final causes, and confined science to the domain of the empirical by replacing divine purpose with the concept of the objective purposiveness of nature, aestheticians resisted purpose so that art could lead to universal apprehension instead of mere subjectivity and freedom instead of determinism. Biologists could thereby equate life with purposiveness and, as a result, could imagine a plan for an organism without having to specify one (R. Richards 71). Likewise, aestheticians could judge an artwork without having to specify the plan by which beauty is produced (R. Richards 71). Biology literally informs aesthetics: when they equated poems with organic beings, Romantic poets suffused their work with the purposiveness of life, suspending purpose. In the process, they made tradition and convention the organic building blocks of poetic form, transforming tradition into creative expressiveness.

Our sense of a binary opposition between sexuality and aesthetics has blinded us to a shared wariness of purpose between aesthetics and sexuality in Romanticism generally. Under the aegis of purpose, the body is denied free will, sexuality becomes subsumed under brute instinct, and aesthetics becomes selfish and determined. In a word, ideology. Thinking about sexuality without regard to purpose enables reflection about the forms that sexuality takes, along with skepticism about any claims that link forms to purpose. Thus, if heteronormativity is form, rather than a naturalizing of function or purpose, one can see it as ideology. Moreover, one can see it as a form of impoverishment: the reduction of sexuality to reproduction and animal instinct. However, despite this wariness of purpose, both scientists and aestheticians wanted this resistance to purpose to achieve apprehension: all stated hostility to purpose aside, purposiveness had a purpose. Even for Kant, aesthetic apprehension has a purpose, regardless of how it apprehends objects: it shows us how to look at the world as ethically meaningful without making the philosophically untenable claim that any transcendent force created that meaning.

Aesthetics cannot reject purpose completely because, as Marc Redfield reminds us, aesthetics is about Bildung, or cultivation. The fact that Coleridge’s teacher, Blumenbach, defined the “first cause of all generation, nutrition, and
“reproduction” (R. Richards 218–19) as Bildungstrieb further aligned organic purposiveness with aesthetics, making it easier to imagine an aesthetics that bracketed purpose. Whereas Blumenbach thought that Bildungstrieb actually existed, Kant considered it to be a useful idea, one that enabled the comprehension of how “organisms achieved species-specific goals” (R. Richards 19, 232).

Aesthetics thus keeps purpose at bay at the risk of its own fecklessness, its own need to encourage Bildung. Of course, such declared hostility to purpose might in fact enhance its educative role in that readers were not generally receptive to works that had what Keats called “palpable designs” upon them (Rollins 1:224). Sexuality, too, as Foucault reminds us in The Care of the Self, is an exceptionally powerful form of stylistics: it is about the subjection of the body to an aesthetic regime, one assisted by medical notions of good health. The Romantics could thus profit from the ancient Greek argument that the self-mastery of the body and its pleasures paradoxically leads to liberation. Desire, of course, cannot be liberating when one is enslaved to desire: this is the problem with libertinism. Nor can inclination lead to freedom. Romantic sexuality and aesthetics are, then, best seen as forms of purposiveness with purpose because form enables the apprehension of liberation and mutuality even when self-mastery is the form of that liberation. The fact that Romantic writers linked sexual perversity with liberation meant that this purposiveness had a purpose: to imagine what mutuality and equality might look like.

Another key reason why aesthetics and sexuality seem to have so little to say to one another is an identity politics that narrowly construes perversions in terms of identity and simultaneously rejects the pervert as a legitimate identity since presumably no one would willingly subscribe to it. Clearly, in reclaiming the term “perversion,” I do not wish to validate the “damning diagnostic power” (de Lauretis 61) of this term. Instead, I mean to remind us of how a resistance to function can be the basis of a meaningful critique of society, and that aesthetics has long been helpful for thinking about the limits of interest, purpose, and function. In giving up perversion, then, critics have given up not only pathology, but also a sense of how perversion works both for and against political change. Wishing away perversion, moreover, does not let us understand how we got to where we are today. The Romantic period is the one when function became central to the nascent science of biology, and this meant that perversion had important scientific, political, and aesthetic implications. I will show in my first chapter how the condom could not serve unambiguously as a contraceptive device as long as conception was thought to occur through an immaterial sem-
inal aura. Barriers, after all, were no obstacle to auras. The Catholic scientist Spallanzani disproved the notion of seminal aura in the 1780s. And if, for example, reproduction could no longer justify sexual pleasure because such pleasure was merely ancillary to conception, then sexual acts that led to reproduction could no longer logically be elevated over others simply on the basis of function.

That the history of perversión—“turning aside from what is true or right” (OED)—is entangled within the history of subversion—“turning upside down” (OED)—further makes it rife for critical recovery. Jonathan Dollimore suggests that the “perversion not only departs from, but actively contradicts the dominant in the act of deviating from it, and it does so from within” (Dissidence 125). Lord Byron’s “perversely cling[ing]” apple, for instance, suggests that God is the great seducer, and that He is not unlike Don Juan. Dollimore thus reminds us of the lost histories of subversion that are buried under perversion.

As a form of “internal deviation” (Dissidence 124), the perverse thus has a unique destabilizing potential, one rendered ever more vexing given the role of the abnormal in eighteenth-century science. Medical and scientific knowledge were beholden to perversion insofar as anomalies were critical to the discovery of any knowledge. Without diseased or nonfunctioning organs, one could not know an organ’s function in the first place. Indeed, the OED defines the medical application of perversion to be “an alteration of physiological function such that it becomes abnormal in kind rather than in degree; (also) distortion of a body part,” and it dates this application of the term to as early as 1834. Although literary critics have embraced the term subversion, “perversion” has proven less popular and key studies of the idea have avoided using the term in their titles. What has enabled the elevation of one kind of turning over the other? The answer stems from the fact that perversion names as its enemy certain notions of the truth, notions that often condense around nature. Because contemporary critics have tarred Romanticism with the brush of ideological escapism, making it a purveyor of untruths, it is crucial to understand that writers of the period so often made war against notions of nature that attempted to justify hierarchy. Coleridge wondered how the “Crime against Nature” could be in other countries “a bagatelle, a fashionable levity.” One of these notions was that sexual pleasure was connected to function. Hence William Blake insists “Love seeketh not Itself to please,/Nor for itself hath any care” (E 19): for Blake’s clod, at least, love as disinterest resists re-production of the self. Another was that aesthetics had to support the argument by design (Loesberg, chap-
Hardly quietist or escapist, Romanticism’s interest in perversion suggests a far more radical politics, one that simultaneously had the capacity to challenge religious orthodoxies and societal hierarchies. Blake’s “pebble,” by contrast, reminds us that love is not automatically a form of selflessness, and thus we must work to equate love and disinterest. Read in this light, perversion in the Romantic period gains the possibility of fomenting meaningful social change especially when it recognizes that pleasure does not in itself necessarily amount to meaningful change.

Even marriage and the family were open to debate. Building upon Volney’s claim that fathers were liable to become absolute despots in their own homes (1:75), Mary Wollstonecraft not only considered friendship a more durable ethic of care than marriage, but also considered parental affection as “the blindest modification of perverse self-love” (VRW 264). Parental affection became perverse when it was a “pretext to tyrannise where it can be done with impunity” (VRW 264). She did not, however, give up on sexual intimacy. Julie Carlson has shown how Wollstonecraft weaved together textual and sexual intimacy, infusing both with mutuality rather than hierarchy (Carlson 2007 27). Byron lamented the power of “wealthier lust” to buy women in marriage (DJ 2:200), and he rued even more the day when criminal conversation allowed husbands to sue their wives’ lovers for damage to their sexual property. Coleridge not only urged women friends to stay single so as to retain control over their property, but he also took umbrage at the fact that women bore the brunt of punishment for adultery. In the end which was more perverse: the alternate forms of affection imagined by the likes of the Romantics? Or the norms celebrated by society? Indeed, Percy Shelley in The Cenci shows how patriarchal power and its demand for absolute obedience logically lends itself to father/daughter incest. Because the Count twice figures his incestuous rape of his daughter in terms of consent—“tis her stubborn will/Which by its own consent shall stoop” (iv, i. 9) and “her coming is consent” (iv. i.101)—all forms of consent, especially sexual consent, are rendered meaningless. Leigh Hunt responded in his review of The Cenci that “we have thousands of Cenci’s among us in a lesser way—petty home tyrants” (Romantics Reviewed C:II: 472). Because patriarchy threatened to make women’s consent meaningless, and because Shelley believed women were sold into marriage, intergenerational incest was for him merely a logical outcome of marriage. As Wollstonecraft pointed out, the fact that women were being raised to be like children did not help matters.

The Romantic period understood what sexuality might gain from aesthetics...
and vice versa. The suspension or disregard of reproductive purpose allowed sexuality to rise above brute instinct and become idealized in terms of love, monogamy, equality, and mutuality. Heteronormativity thus has its price: the reduction of sex to reproduction and the consequent reduction of human beings to beasts. Hence, Coleridge thought that Malthus had reduced sexuality to an appetite, thereby eliminating free will along with the spiritual dimensions of sexuality. Although sexual desire is usually understood as a personal satisfaction or for the purposes of reproduction, and therefore the very antithesis to aesthetics, Byron considered his sexual generosity more virtuous than a selfish regard for one’s one sexual virtue (Gross 107). Shelley figures sibling incest as an ideal form of love, equating sibling incest with aesthetic disinterested or selflessness, thereby uniting aesthetic and sexual perversity. Distinguishing between what he calls the “love of pleasure,” a love he designates as “self-centered self devoted self-interested; it desires it’s [sic] own interest,” and the “desiring of happiness of others not from the obligation of fearing Hell or desiring Heaven,” which he equates with “Virtue Heaven disinterestedness” (Jones 1:173), Shelley collapses love and aesthetic disinterest to the end of warding off selfishness. Again in an 1812 letter to Godwin, the poet argued that “wholly to abstract our views from self undoubtedly requires unparalleled disinterestedness” (Jones 1:277). He can do so because he understands human sexuality ideally to be inextricable from selfless love. In our efforts to historicize sexuality we have encouraged a separation of sexual acts from affect, and thus made it more difficult to think of love, especially sexual love, in terms of aesthetic disinterest. Shelley’s problem is then how to make the immediacy of sexual passion disinterested without emptying it of passion.

Finally, since the term “perversion” in the Romantic period was not yet cemented into a distinct kind of medical personage, it had wide applicability and even wider potential leverage. Because perversion was not subsumed by identity, the challenge was in making the charge of perversion stick. How to mobilize the destabilizing force of perversion? Hence, William Blake suggests that the Ten Commandments were themselves a perversion of the art of writing; for Blake, no God of forgiveness would have issued so many prohibitions. And Blake therefore considered a morality that subjected sex to the constraints of a law as being most detrimental to imaginative liberty. Precisely because even the idea of the normal was under construction during this period, perversion could not rely upon an unquestioned norm against which to measure itself. As biology attempted to stake out why living matter was different from dead matter
into a specialized domain of knowledge, it struggled to name the normal constituents of life. And as I will show, the transition from a one-sex model to a two-sex model meant that sexual difference was itself open to debate.\textsuperscript{16}

This book will demonstrate how a distrust of function or perversion could form the basis of a meaningful politics, erotics, and aesthetics. Skepticism about declared function enables Shelley, Hazlitt, Blake, Byron, and Coleridge to resist Malthus and the general effort of population to reduce human sexuality to reproduction and mathematics. Byron warned that Malthus “conducts to lives ascetic,/Or turning marriage into arithmetic” (\textit{DJ} 15:38). Coleridge explicitly stated that Malthus’s authority came “not from Human Nature, but Human Folly & inhuman prejudice” (\textit{SW} 2:1374). At the same time, they had to resist Malthus’s reduction of working-class sexuality to mere reproductivity, and consequent aestheticization of middle-class sexuality, or else sexuality would become an engine of class hierarchy instead of a means to liberation.\textsuperscript{17} By depriving the poor of the “soothing, elevating, and harmonious gentleness of the sexual intercourse” (D. Clark 247), Shelley feared that Malthus would in fact degrade the poor to below the beasts.\textsuperscript{18} And if Linnaeus and Erasmus Darwin made the erotic diversity of plants clear, their descriptions of plant wives turning to multiple husbands underscored that sexuality exceeds function. Blake and Shelley knew that when perverse desire became too comfortably ensconced within identity, the disruptive force of desire was necessarily contained. Hence, they were wary of any cementing of perversity and identity because that would limit change. Thus, for Blake, ultimately “Sexes must vanish & cease/To be” (\textit{Jerusalem} 92:14 E. 252). Moreover, their mutual distrust of selfhood, especially in the form of self-righteousness, further made them loath to think of identity as a container for the disruptiveness of desire. Yet this distrust of function could also prove therapeutic. In making function the enemy, one could contain anxieties about the value and importance of one’s own poetry.

\textit{Perverse Romanticism} further revisits the politics of Romanticism by asking how science has made sexuality—here encompassing desire and sexed bodies—a site for thinking about liberation. Science has always influenced the way in which we think about sexuality; moreover, to the extent that scientists then had to cope with the perversity of sexual pleasure itself since pleasure had no function, science then made it possible to think about sex in terms of mutuality instead of hierarchy. The anatomist John Hunter’s first successful human artificial insemination, completed in 1776, demonstrated that pleasure was ancillary to function because syringes “could not meet with or communicate joy” (R. Couper
More recently, in *Evolution’s Rainbow*, Joan Roughgarden has argued that same-sex sexuality is quite common in the animal kingdom, putting pressure on heterosexuality as the unquestioned norm, and that mating is less about sperm transfer than it is about the creation and maintenance of relationships, a point long anticipated by Percy Shelley when he insisted that “the act itself is nothing” (D. Clark 221). His resistance to the ontology of sexual intercourse empties it of Mathusian purpose. He elaborates, “The act . . . ought always to be the link and type of the highest emotions of our nature” (D. Clark 222). I suggest that the act only becomes meaningful for Shelley when it takes on the form of purposive mutuality: both “link” and “type” insist upon an aesthetic dimension to sexuality.

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. They recognized to varying degrees that although liberation helped to define one’s enemies, the mere elimination of one’s enemies is not the same thing as liberty. In Romanticism, liberation does not simply amount to power extending its grasp. Only when Prometheus takes back his curse upon Jupiter will he become unbound; liberation goes hand in hand with forgiveness. More to the point, resistance need not be total to be effective. Prometheus cannot take back his curse until he recognizes that he himself is not unlike the tyrant Jupiter. That act of imaginative sympathy paradoxically enables a rejection of the cycle of power and destruction that Jupiter represents.

Above all, the Romantic poet’s ability to stand inside and outside of desire enables a vantage point from where to gauge the extent to which mutuality or the dissolution of hierarchy has been achieved. To achieve such a stance, these writers must see sexuality without reference to reproduction. In Romantic studies of sexuality, too often the very possibility of such a vantage point has been lost to the immediacy of desire. Hence, for Blake, getting rid of sex under moral law does not entail liberty if sex is still selfish. One of the goals of this study is to show how self-conscious Romantic writers were when they turned to sexuality informed by science as a site for liberation. So attuned to negation is Prometheus at the outset of *Prometheus Unbound* that he cannot see love as a physical force in the world, whether manifested in terms of ether, or chemical attraction between particles, or magnetism, or infrared light.

Two brief examples may begin to suggest the surprising degree of reflexive-
ness within Romantic accounts of perversity and sexual liberation. Shelley explicitly turned away from marriage because it furthered selfishness and the idea of women as property, and perversely turned toward the idea of sibling incest as a way of linking lasting eroticism with disinterest. If the unbreakable sibling bond meant that such eroticism could be lasting, the problem was that disinterest was not only antithetical to sexual passion but also that incest threatened to eradicate difference in the name of disinterestedness. Shelley claims, on the one hand, that “the conviction that wedlock is indissoluble holds out the strongest of all temptations to the perverse” (Reiman and Fraistat 2:253). Here Shelley aligns heterosexual marriage with the perverse and he can do so because marriage cannot achieve disinterest. Thus, although Annette Wheeler Cafarelli rightly takes Shelley to task for refusing to imagine that female prostitutes might be motivated by economics rather than desire, she is mistaken when she refuses to think about why Shelley gave up on marriage. Shelley’s rejection of marriage is not simply an inability to comprehend the condition of women; it is a principled refusal based on the fact that the form of marriage cannot lead to disinterest. On the other hand, he embraces erotic love, especially the love between siblings, as a paradigmatic and lasting relationship of equality. The poet therefore has Laon and Cythna remain passionate despite having grown up together but he is careful to direct their disinterest outwardly. Laon and Cythna fight for the social revolution of others. “Never will peace and human nature meet/Till free and equal man and woman greet/Domestic peace” (LC 2:37), Shelley trumpets. Furthermore, the poet deliberately turns to sexual sensation to “break the crust of convention” of his readers. When we recall that Shelley thinks marriage fosters patriarchal incest in The Cenci, sibling incest becomes a temporary but necessary corrective to the patriarchal incest that is marriage.

If Shelley suggests one way in which sexuality could become the ground for liberation while aesthetics could be the means of fomenting revolution, Anna Seward suggests another possible configuration of desire as the basis for social change. Seward argues in Llangollen Vale that the fecundity of female friendship outstrips the fecundity of romantic heterosexual love. Juxtaposing the gardening achievements of Miss Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler with the sterile, if heteronormative, love of the Welsh bard Hoel and Petrarch, Seward uses landscape and spatial metaphors to detract attention away from teleology. However, by insisting upon the fecklessness of Hoel’s love—Seward refers to Hoel’s love for Lady Mifwany as “ill-starr’d” (3:74)—Seward suggests that reproduction can hardly grant heterosexual sex blanket normativity. To underscore this steril-
ity, Seward writes, “Tho’ Genius, Love, and Truth inspire the strains,/Thro Hoel’s veins the blood illustrious flows,/Hard as th’Eglwyseg rocks her heart remains,/Her smile a sun-beam playing on their snows” (3:74). Notwithstanding the aid of genius, love, and truth, not to mention poetry, Hoel’s passion has no impact on Lady Mifwany’s heart. By contrast, the female friendship between Ponsonby and Butler results in the “bloom” of “Arcadian bowers” (3:76) and “all the graceful arts their powers combin’d” (3:76). Female friendship, then, is ultimately more fruitful than feckless heterosexual love, and Seward thereby suggests that reproduction is too narrow a criterion for fecundity. Because Seward herself wrote the beginning lines of Erasmus Darwin’s Loves of the Plants, but could not take credit because of the sexual knowledge it would imply, Seward hints through an emphasis on the sexualized “bloom” of the “Arcadian bowers” (3:76), bowers being sites of lush vegetation and wayward sexuality, that female friendship is a closet for lesbian love.24 What looks like an absence of function from the very limited criterion of reproduction, then, is really an opening up of function to include artistic and landscape cultivation for its own sake, purposiveness. Such lesbian purposiveness, then, undermines the very possibility of penis envy insofar as the phallus and heterosexuality have been exposed as lacks.25

My use of Percy Shelley and Anna Seward already suggests that the Romantics were far more perverse than we tend to remember them. As Daniel O’Quinn has perceptively noted, none of the six major male poets was a poster boy for heteronormativity.26 And if, as Andrew Elfenbein has argued, Romantic genius itself came to be defined in terms of gender and sexual experimentation, perversity and genius were intertwined.27 Furthermore, this study not only acknowledges the egregious affectivity of Romanticism, but it also acknowledges the purposive dimension to that excess. Such emotion was a much-needed counter to the otherwise disabling skepticism of the Romantics; without emotion nothing would get done.

In sum, perversion enables us to reimagine Romanticism from the ground up. It lets us appreciate the excessiveness of its aesthetics as a means to affective engagement. It allows us to contest vigorously the charge that the Romantics evaded or denied history even as their quietism gives way to radicalism. If the rewards of perversion were the active contradiction of the dominant from within, the risks were that the Victorians would pathologize Byron and Shelley in particular (Felluga). Nonetheless, the fact that they were pathologized meant that they provoked debate. More important, it enables us to consider how going after versions of nature that underwrote hierarchy was a political strategy. It en-
ables us to see their investments in contemporary scientific debates about the function, if any, of sexual pleasure, and it permits us to rethink our criteria for liberation, especially since liberation is a negation rather than a manifestation of liberty. Although many have lamented the fact that Foucault insists that resistance is always co-opted by power, what would resistance without power achieve?28

Precisely because perversion seems to occur in a vacuum, this study insists upon the primacy of context. In particular, building upon a growing body of work that reminds us just how invested the Romantics were in science, it considers how science shaped the ways in which authors could consider human sexuality as a venue for thinking about social equality. The fact that previous studies of Romanticism and sexual liberation either universalize human sexuality or consider the body devoid of medical and scientific context, makes context all the more important.29 Indeed, the Romantic disregard for reproduction acquires greater weight in light of the growing importance of function to biology. My point is that science’s growing interest in the vitality and dynamism of the human body allowed that body to become a vehicle for liberation and apprehension instead of obstacles to them. Because function ultimately reduces bodies to separate functioning organs, body parts instead of wholes, scientists began to think of life in terms of a purposiveness that enabled holistic understandings of the body. Hence, three chapters focus on the ways in which science shaped human sexuality, showing that science could be used to deny femininity as real otherness and instead subvert the very opposition of masculinity and femininity. Another chapter considers perversion from the vantage point of aesthetics. Because this study is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, it concludes with two chapters on canonical poets, showing how paying attention to perversion has its payoffs.

Chapter 1 considers how science shaped thinking about Romantic sexuality. In particular, I examine how scientists came to terms with an undeniable rift between sexual pleasure and reproduction. Such a gap enabled writers such as Shelley to imagine sex as a kind of purposiveness without purpose. Because he understands sex as a form of purposiveness, Shelley can thus question the uses to which others want to put it. I then historicize the Romantic interest in non-reproductive and antireproductive sex within the rise of function in the biological sciences of this period. Once pleasure is detached from reproduction, reproduction can be shown to be a heterosexual alibi of normativity.30 Although historians of sexuality have argued that sexuality could not develop until the rise
of psychiatry in the Victorian period and that until Victorianism, sexuality was inextricably linked to anatomy as destiny; I show in chapter 2 how this argument underestimates the incoherence of localization, the need to connect functions to organs or to structures like the instinct. The gap between the location of function into organs or instincts allows Romantic writers to resist anatomy as destiny.

Chapter 3 then develops the implications of Thomas Laqueur’s argument that the Romantic period was the one in which a two-sex model of complementarity begins to replace a one-sex model of hierarchy whereby women were inferior men. Throughout, my primary interest is in the conditions of possibility that enabled Romantic writers to imagine the sexed body not as an albatross, but rather as the site of radical potential. Once again competing standards of the norm thus deny perversion a single standard against which to measure departures from the norm. I then turn to Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Robinson’s interest in neurology, because the nervous body had the potential to efface difference instead of underscore it. As a vast system of neural networks connecting mind and body demonstrated, Cartesian dualism obscured a basic similarity between the sexes. Finally, I consider how anxieties about the very facts of sexual difference are rehearsed in then-contemporary treatments of puberty and hermaphroditism.

If the first three chapters emphasize sexual perversity yet argue that sexual perversity was understood in terms of Kantian purposiveness without purpose, chapter 4 examines key treatments of aesthetics in the period by Burke, Coleridge, Longinus, Winckelmann, and Payne-Knight. By calling Romantic aesthetics “perverse,” I aim to capture the reasons why the Romantics turned away from an overly rational aesthetics and turned perversely toward an insistent sexuality within their aesthetics, creating an eroticized aesthetics that sought to blur the lines separating poet and audience through a common nervous physiology. Such blurring demanded readerly engagement rather than disinterest. Once again, Romantic purposiveness therefore has a clear liberating purpose.

My final chapters show how perversion revises our sense of how Blake and Byron imagined sexual desire and difference. For Blake, perversion was a central concept. I trace how he uses the term in his writings, arguing that he uses the term to enhance epistemological uncertainty: how do we know perversion when we see it? Instead of framing perversion as being automatically disruptive, Blake demands that we think about the consequences of perversion since sex must lead to self-annihilation if it is to be truly redemptive. Blake thus under-
stands even perverse sexuality as a form of purposiveness. The purpose of this aesthetic framing of sexuality is to make sexuality a form of liberation without insisting that mere perversity alone indicated liberation had been achieved. Chapter 6 situates Byron in the context of puberty and Brunonian medicine, arguing that the radical instability of the body makes it an insecure foundation for sexual identity and even gendered hierarchy. Byron thus makes the Epic epi-cene, lacking fixed gendered characteristics or violating accepted gender roles.

If this study argues that Romantic writers were more thoughtful about sexual liberation than the critical record shows, it does not attempt to sanitize the record. 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. Becoming a liberator thus did not mean simply the question of being a liberator. The question was not who am I, but what forms of sexual liberation should I encourage and how?31 My point is that these writers know that they need to, on the one hand, suspend the automatic linking of sexuality and reproduction so that sexuality can be a form of liberation. By contrast, that suspension of reproduction is for the express purpose of linking intimacy with freedom. This double movement captures their idealism and skepticism about sexuality’s role in liberation; moreover, this aesthetic vantage point gives them the possibility of seeing the ways in which “the value of sexuality stems from its ability to demean . . . the seriousness of efforts to redeem it” (Bersani “Rectum” 222). When Blake connects Orc, liberation, and rape, for instance, he insists that there is nothing inherently liberating about sexuality. This vantage further allows them to anticipate Elizabeth Povinelli’s powerful charge that “intimate love . . . state[s its] opposition to all other forms of social determination even as it claims to produce a new form of social glue” (190).

As my reference to Orc already suggests, if the history of Romantic sexual liberation is about hope and achievement, it also encompasses loss and failure. As long as such loss and failure act as spurs to further thinking and refinement, they need not remain historical waste products. Indeed, Heather Love has recently urged queer theorists to come to terms with such negative “backward” feelings as loss and failure simply because those feelings can be a much needed reminder of the history of repression that is bound up with and indeed generative of hopes for future liberation.32 Thinking about perversion and its histories is a key part of such a project. Such backwardness, she hopes, will enable us to rethink forms of political agency.
Each Romantic writer had his or her own blindnesses. As Jonathan Gross has pointed out, Lord Byron’s liberalism had its distinct limits: he worried that although libertinism would put an end to patriarchy, it might also lead inevitably to radicalism. While Percy’s Shelley’s equation of sibling incest with a durable form of passion attempted to think through sexual equality, it also threatened to deny difference. That Cythna changes her name to Laone—merely adding an “e” to Laon’s name—highlights this problem. And Helen Bruder reminds us that Blake was aware of the cost of his gender attitudes. Nonetheless, because the notion of sexual liberation is now so often rejected out of hand, I have tried to make the case that the positions of these writers were often more nuanced than we have credited them to be. In much the same way that equality must be approached negatively—that is, in terms of “not taking irrelevant distinctions into account” (Appiah 193)—liberation allows one to see one’s enemies, and needs not be total to be effective. To the extent that perversion and liberation gave the Romantics the possibility of reimagining even the most basic of human relationships, it gave them hope for a better, if not always reproductive, future, one that was neither necessarily escapist nor necessarily “colonizing of the feminine.”